



The Veteran Education to Workforce  
Affinity and Success Study



SEPTEMBER 2020

## RESEARCH BRIEF

Student Military Service  
Member and Veteran University  
Transitions: The Cultural  
Importance of Camaraderie  
and Social Support

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# SUMMARY

With the establishment of wide-ranging post-9/11 state and federal higher education tuition and living benefits, military service member and veteran enrollment in American colleges and universities has increased exponentially over the last decade. Research examining the difficult transition these students make as they move from the military to the university typically does not position these institutions as separate cultural spheres, however, limiting the helpfulness of findings for college educators and others looking to better support these students. Using frelisting interview methods ( $n=54$ ), this qualitative study explores cultural differences between the military and university and how student military service members and veterans believe these differences influence their transitions into college. Results show that students perceive an absence of camaraderie in university life in particular, and that the missing family atmosphere, trust, and deeper relationships of their military experience are an important influence on their university experience. Findings point to the importance of social support networks and community-building efforts to mitigate these students' challenges as they move into university.



## Background and Goals

Due to the passage of post-9/11 higher education state and federal assistance legislation, in recent years student service members and veterans (SSM/Vs) have become one of the fastest growing groups of nontraditional students in American colleges and universities (e.g., American Council on Education, 2014). Data show that increased SSM/V enrollment will help diversify American universities, an important goal of educators and policymakers alike. Aside from the unique and arduous military experiences they endure, SSM/Vs are proportionally older, more racially and ethnically diverse, more often first-generation students from low-income backgrounds, and more often physically or cognitively impaired (Barry et al., 2012; Kim & Cole, 2013; National Survey of Student Engagement [NSSE], 2010). Though research on SSM/V in the post-9/11 era is still growing, existing work suggests that the recent SSM/V influx has tested the supportive capacity of American universities, jeopardizing student integration and retention (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011). From this perspective, SSM/Vs' difficulties moving from the military into college life, in particular, have been a special area of concern (Ackerman et al., 2009; DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011; Griffin & Gilbert, 2015; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010; Schiavone & Gentry, 2014).

**Student service members and veterans have become one of the fastest growing groups of nontraditional students in American colleges and universities, yet few studies use culture to understand their transitions between the military and the university.**

While these and other studies have helped illuminate this complex student experience, few studies use *culture*—defined here as networks of

pervasive and often motivating meanings shared within social groups (Strauss & Quinn, 1997)—as a frame for understanding SSM/V transitions between the military and the university. The practical benefits of empirical, theoretically grounded research documenting how students experience such cultural differences could be substantial, especially for student service professionals and other educators looking for insights into how to better support this marginalized but highly capable population (Ghosh et al., 2020; Ulrich & Freer, 2020).

With the goal of supporting these students in mind, this paper uses a case study approach based on SSM/V interviews ( $n=54$ ) to answer two research questions (RQ):

RQ1. What aspects of military life and culture, if any, do SSM/Vs think are missing from university life and culture?

RQ2. How, if at all, do SSM/Vs connect these cultural differences with the experience of transitioning into the university?

## Concepts

To understand the process that takes place as SSM/Vs move between military and university worlds, the author combines two concepts that help explain social and cultural experience: fields and cultural domains.

A “field” represents a bounded sphere of social and cultural relationships in which individuals interact with one another, such as a family, a bowling league, or a branch of the military (e.g., Fligstein & McAdam, 2012). Viewed as unique cultural constellations with their own history, values, and rules, fields both mold and are molded by the perceptions of people operating within them (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Each field is therefore a continually contested sphere of interaction, on 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 tastes and ways of thinking that influence their perspectives as they move to other fields through life (e.g., Ferrare & Apple, 2015).

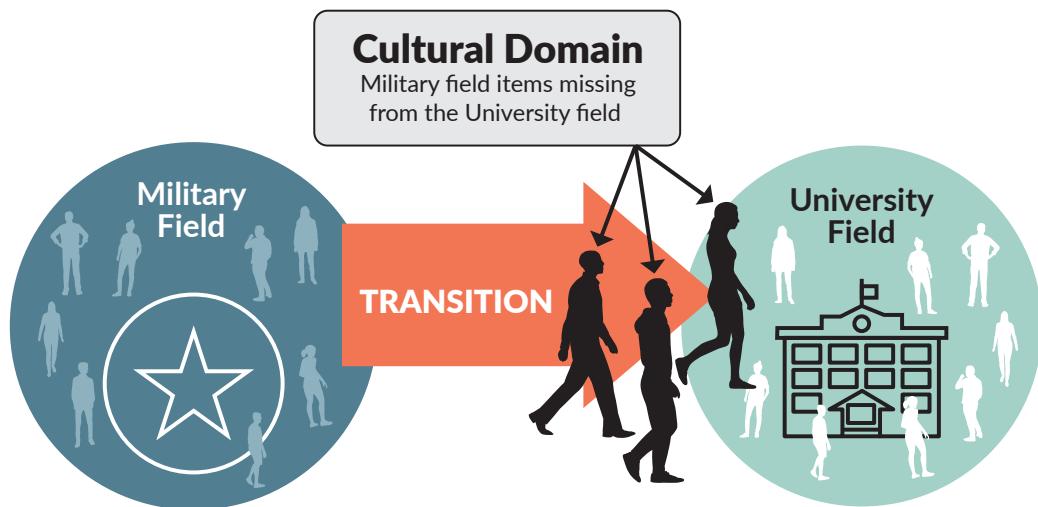
**These concepts help us both demarcate cultural worlds and understand how experiences from one part of a person's life influence others. They also allow a focus on cultural differences between the military and university from the perspective of student service members and veterans in four-year institutions.**

A “cultural domain” is a set of items, such as symbols, beliefs, or values, that are perceived by members of a social or cultural group to be within the same category (Weller & Romney, 1988). In theory, the extent to which people in a group share knowledge of a certain cultural domain—basic training, for example—is an empirical question that can help one better understand the cultural importance, or “salience,” of particular items among members of that specific social or cultural group.

Domains are usually arranged so that there is a limited amount of items within them shared by many group members (called “core” items) and a larger amount shared by only a few members (called “peripheral” items) (Borgatti & Everett, 1999). In this way, cultural domains can be studied as a shared mental category, among a specific group of people, that gives insight into that group’s shared cultural values and viewpoints.

Combining these concepts is useful here for several reasons. Field theory provides a way to ground individuals’ lived experiences in the military and the university, each of which can be seen as a separate field (hereafter referred to as “the military field” and “the university field”) with its own particular values. Field theory also helps account for the way ingrained tastes and habits from the military field stay with someone, often influencing their viewpoints, as they move into the university field. Finally, cultural domain theory allows us to choose a particular cultural group—here SSM/V undergraduates in four-year universities—and figure out what cultural differences (referred to hereafter as “cultural items”) ~are most salient among SSM/Vs with reference to military and university fields. This conceptual model is displayed in Figure 1.

**Figure 1. Field and Cultural Domain Conceptual Framework**



## Methods

The author uses a case study approach (Yin, 2013) to investigate (1) SSM/Vs' perspectives on particular cultural items existing in the military field but not in the university field, and (2) how these items influence SSM/V transitions into the university.

This analysis is part of a larger study of SSM/V pathways through college that focuses on students in five Wisconsin public universities, hereafter referred to as State Colleges 1–5, all purposefully chosen according to their geographic, institutional, and enrollment diversity. Within each university the author used a purposeful, nonprobability procedure to identify undergraduate SSM/Vs, defined as students in the Guard or Reserves or students who had completed military service (Barry et al., 2014), by asking student service coordinators to email information about the study, as well as links to an online survey, to all SSM/Vs at the five institutions. SSM/Vs who completed surveys were asked if they were interested in qualitative participation and those who agreed were contacted by the author. Fifty-four SSM/V interviewees participated in total (Table 1).

Student interviews took place online in March, April, and May 2020 over Zoom and Skype video platforms. Each lasted about an hour and was based on a semi-structured interview protocol. Interviews began with a “freelist” exercise, a method used to determine items that cultural group members categorize in a particular cultural domain (Weller & Romney, 1988). The freelist prompt read as follows: “What facets of military life or culture, if any, are missing from university life or culture? Please type all the words or short phrases that come to mind.” After each student provided a type-written list of cultural items, they were asked to describe each item’s meaning to them, if and how items influenced their university transition, and their overall impressions of their transition. Freelist responses were copied and pasted into a Word document while interviews were audio recorded, transcribed, and uploaded to NVivo 11 software (QSR International, 2016).

Table 1. Interview Sample (n=54)

Measure	N	%
Gender		
Female	17	31.5
Male	36	66.7
Nonbinary	1	1.9
Race/Ethnicity		
White Students	43	79.6
Students of Color	11	20.4
Service Status		
Discharged or Retired Veteran	33	61.1
In Reserves or National Guard	21	38.9
Military Branch <sup>1</sup>		
Air Force	4	7.4
Army	30	55.6
Marine Corps	7	13.0
Navy	16	29.6
First Generation Students <sup>2</sup>	15	27.8
Disability Status		
Cognitive Impairment	6	11.1
Mobility Impairment	7	13.0
Sensory Impairment	4	7.4
Impaired Students	13	24.1
Institution		
State College 1 (undergrad enrollment ~8,000)	9	16.7
State College 2 (~33,000)	14	25.9
State College 3 (~19,000)	13	24.1
State College 4 (~13,000)	6	11.1
State College 5 (~7,000)	12	22.2
Mean Age	29.6	-

<sup>1</sup> “Military Branch” and “Disability Status” categories show the number of students identifying in each subgroup; several students identified in two or more subgroups in each category.

<sup>2</sup> Here, “First Generation” students are student interviewees reporting that parental guardians have not obtained an associate’s level college degree or above.

Data were analyzed in two stages. To answer RQ1, native freelist terms were standardized and loaded into Anthropic software (Borgatti, 1996). Terms were analyzed for their salience in the cultural domain, a measure of how many SSM/Vs listed each term and the order in which each term was reported across the cultural group (Smith & Borgatti, 1997). The higher the salience score, the more important the term was to the students. This score, along with the frequency with which each term was mentioned, is displayed for all shared terms in Table 2 below. Salience is also displayed using a line graph (Figure 3), a common method for gauging “core” cultural items from salience scores (Borgatti & Everett, 1999).

To answer RQ2, student descriptions of each term or “cultural item” were segmented and analyzed in NVivo. The author developed open, “in vivo” codes representing prominent ideas mentioned for each cultural item, grouping similar interviewee statements, and developing notes from each statement to form cohesive thematic definitions (Charmaz, 2006; Ryan & Bernard, 2003). Below, the author summarizes three such themes based on the most salient cultural item.

## Results

### RQ1: What Aspects of Military Life and Culture, If Any, Do SSM/Vs Think Are Missing from University Life and Culture?

#### Results from Freelist Analysis

SSM/V interviewees listed 148 different cultural domain items from the military field that they perceived as missing from the university field. These native terms were grouped into 25 standardized terms, 20 of which were shared by at least two interviewees, as displayed in Table 2. Items are listed in order from top to bottom by salience score, with the frequency of mentions across the sample displayed in columns 3 and 4.

**Table 2. Missing Military Field Cultural Domain Items by Salience Score (n=54)**

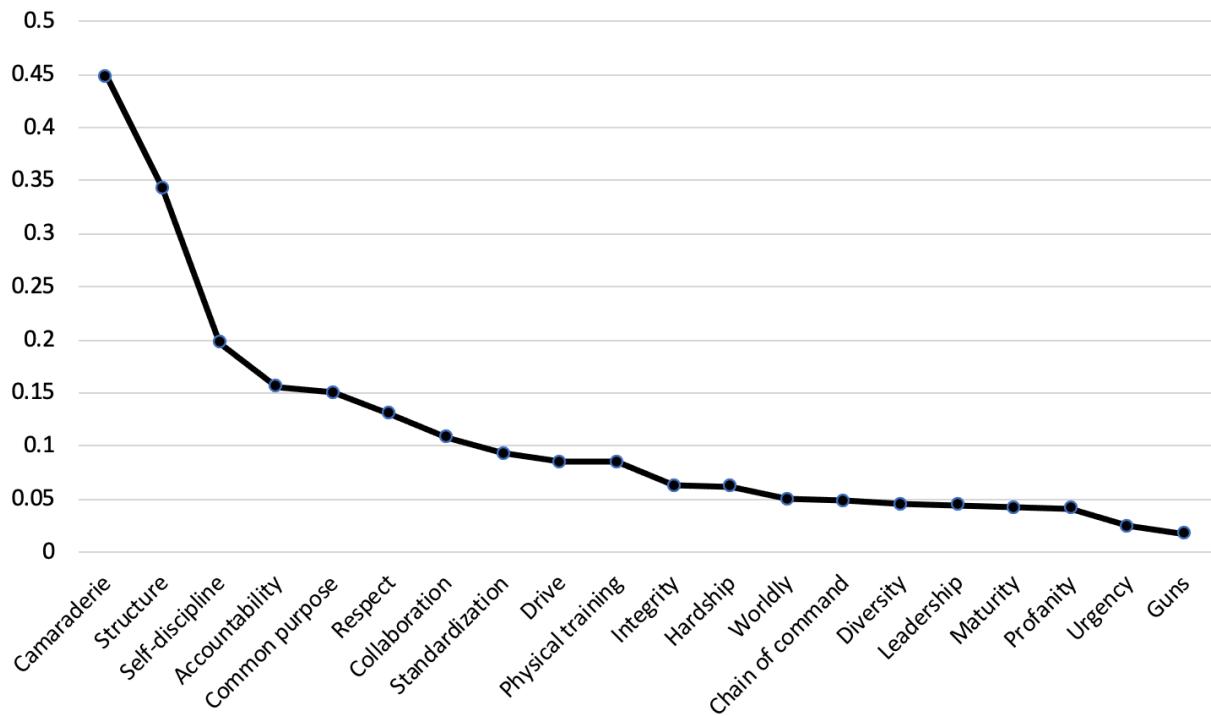
Term	Salience	N	%
Camaraderie	0.448	33	61.1
Structure	0.343	25	46.3
Self-discipline	0.197	15	27.8
Accountability	0.156	15	27.8
Common purpose	0.150	13	24.1
Respect	0.130	13	24.1
Collaboration	0.108	9	16.7
Standardization	0.093	8	14.8
Physical training	0.085	8	14.8
Drive	0.085	7	13.0
Integrity	0.063	6	11.1
Hardship	0.062	6	11.1
Worldly	0.050	4	7.4
Chain of command	0.048	4	7.4
Diversity	0.045	4	7.4
Leadership	0.044	4	7.4
Maturity	0.042	4	7.4
Profanity	0.041	5	9.3
Urgency	0.024	2	3.7
Guns	0.017	2	3.7

When these cultural items are plotted on a line graph by salience score (Figure 2), we see that two core cultural items in particular are shared by a large number of SSM/Vs: “camaraderie” (salience=0.448) and “structure” (0.343). In the degree to which it was shared as well as its early mention across freelists, *camaraderie* stands out as a central military cultural item that group members thought was missing from the university field.

Further, while camaraderie was the most salient cultural item, two other socially oriented items, "common purpose" (0.150) and "collaboration" (0.108), also emerged in the cultural domain, shared by 13 and 9 interviewees respectively. More peripheral military cultural domain items, listed lower and shared by smaller numbers of SSM/Vs, include items like "diversity" (0.045), mentioned by four students, and "urgency" (0.024) and "guns" (0.009), listed by only two students each.

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**Figure 2. Line Graph Showing Salience of Missing Military Field Cultural Domain Items (n=54)**



These findings, especially regarding the social difficulty of transitions, supplement other work indicating that many SSM/Vs have feelings of isolation while on campus, often compounded by misunderstandings held by traditional students and faculty regarding veteran and service member values and experiences (e.g., Rumann & Hamrick, 2010).

## RQ2. How, If at All, Do SSM/Vs Connect Cultural Differences with the Experience of Transitioning into the University?

After completing freelists, interviewees were asked to describe each item and how the item influenced (or not) their transition. The author then used these descriptions to develop themes for each item.

Because of space limitations, here the author details the analysis of student perspectives tied to the

most salient military cultural item missing from the university field.

### **Camaraderie**

Thirty-three SSM/Vs listed “camaraderie” as a cultural item from the military field that was missing in the university field. Three themes, “family,” “trust,” and “acquaintances,” emerged from student descriptions of the connection of camaraderie to their transitions from the military to the university.

**Family.** When describing camaraderie, students spoke about the tight-knit, intimate relationships they developed in the military, usually with those with whom they most closely lived, worked, and trained. Many interviewees said these bonds were reminiscent of the connections they had with close family members. “In the military you feel you have to have these people’s back,” said a female student at State College 1. “They almost feel more like family than anything.” Several interviewees used the term “brothers and sisters” to explain the strength of their social support networks in the service. Others used the specific example of being able to have a “yelling” fight with a fellow service member on one day but continue being close friends the next. “If we have problems, we’ll yell at each other,” said a student from State College 3, “but then at the end of the day...we’ll hash them out.”

**Trust.** Others prominently used the term “trust,” referring to military comrades as a built-in support system, always on call during times of stress. Friendships developed right away into dependable, durable bonds, according to a male student at State College 1. “I mean, within a day you can become almost best friends and trust each other blindly,” he explained. This level of trust, the student and other interviewees said, often meant one could talk about very personal issues with military comrades. “You train with these people, you go to sleep and wake up next to them, and so the friendships that you make in the military are a lot closer,” explained a

female student at State College 2. “They can help you through some of the stuff that you’re going through.” This was the case not only among veterans who served years-long tours, but also reservists and guards-people who experienced shorter basic/technical training stints or monthly weekend duties.

**“You train with these people, you go to sleep and wake up next to them, and so the friendships that you make in the military are a lot closer...they can help you through some of the stuff that you’re going through.”**

—Female, State College 2

**Acquaintances.** Comparatively, a number of SSM/V interviewees said interpersonal relationships in the university field felt more detached than those in the military. For some, university connections seemed to revolve more around surface-level pleasantries than actual support. “In school,” the female student from State College 1 said, “it feels more like you have a bunch of acquaintances.” Several SSM/Vs reporting on campus friendships agreed. Campus relationships were fine, but usually they were not as deep as those in the military. “I would consider them friends,” a student at State College 3 reported, “but I wouldn’t consider them people I would go to with problems.” From this perspective, many SSM/Vs did not view the lack of camaraderie as a university cultural weakness. Instead, many recognized it was a product of the depth of military bonds as well as a more general disconnection caused by their own age, commuter status, or how long they had been out of school in comparison with most students on campus.

## Implications and Significance

To summarize using field and cultural domain terms, veterans and service members in this study developed a preference for the type of camaraderie and close circle of social support instilled by the military field. This is a predilection many interviewees carried with them into the university field. At university, however, SSM/Vs find less connection with other students than they found among their military peers. This confirms exploratory research showing that social differences between military and university fields can lead to transitions characterized by feelings of loneliness, alienation, and disjoinedness on campus, as well as a more general feeling of disconnection from academics and the institution (Browning, 2015; Schiavone & Gentry, 2014).

**Findings show that veteran-focused affinity groups and community building efforts may improve students' campus integration and feelings of belonging. Future research should explore the social support network characteristics that best help these students overcome transitional challenges.**

These findings suggest that future research should further investigate what kinds of interpersonal connections can help SSM/Vs best overcome challenges as they move into the university.

Findings also indicate that pointed and financially buttressed campus programming—including peer-to-peer mentoring programs, local student veteran groups, and community-building and affinity efforts (see Ghosh et al., 2020; Ulrich & Freer 2020)—may improve SSM/Vs' academic and social integration and increase student feelings of belonging linked to success (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Museus et al., 2017; Rainey et al., 2018). Other studies have documented the cultural aspects of veterans moving into civilian life (Brown et al., 2013 Gregg et al., 2016; Koenig et al., 2014). However, the transition of SSM/Vs from the military to university has rarely been explored with the precision allowed by frelisting, nor guided by cultural theory meant to help higher educational leaders more easily understand transitions as they are experienced by SSM/Vs themselves.

There is an ongoing discussion about the profound isolation of military service members and veterans from civilians; fewer than one-half of 1 percent of the population currently serve in uniform while only about 7 percent are veterans (e.g., Horton, 2017). In a time when gaps are widening between society's affluent and those whose sacrifices make that affluence possible, scholars and educational leaders should not just accept responsibility for their role in promulgating inequality—they should focus their work on inclusive ways to counteract it.

## 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 a growing and increasingly important segment of the U. S. college student population: military service members and veterans.

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This project is supported by National Science Foundation award #1920482. The opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed here are those of the UW-Madison VETWAYS research team and do not necessarily reflect the views of the National Science Foundation.



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