

Association of Social Support and Academic Achievement among Veterans in College

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Abstract

The focus of this study was to examine the association of social support and Student Military Veterans (SMV) achieving academic success in higher education. The researcher conducted a systematic review comprised of 12 articles. The selected articles were relevant to emotional support, financial stability, social ties, and social integration as it relates to SMV achieving academic success. The target population for this study consisted of Operation Iraqi Freedom, Operation Enduring Freedom, and Operation New Dawn veterans. In conducting the systematic review and synthesizing the results from each of the 12 articles, the researcher concluded that more research examining the effects of social support and veterans achieving academic success is needed. Every article included in the synthesis falls short of fully examining potential correlation between social support and SMV achieving academic success. However, most articles included in the synthesis explore a single aspect of social support and correlated the effects with academic persistence or academic success.

Keywords: student veterans, higher education, academic success, social support, OEF, OIF

Nature of the Problem

According to the Post-9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Act of 2008 Primer and Issues, by fiscal year 2010, the Post 9/11 GI Bill had the largest numbers of participants and the highest total obligations compared to the other GI Bills (Dortch, 2014). And as of 2012 at least one-half million veterans have used their post-9/11 GI bill benefits (Sander, 2012). Consequently, from the dates of August 2009 to December 2013 there was a total of 1.8 million unique claimants who applied for Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits (Veterans Economic Report, 2015). Since September 11, 2001, approximately 2.1 million service members have been deployed to serve in combat in support of OEF, OIF, and OND (Cassidy, 2015). While serving in one of the five branches of the Armed Forces, active duty service members receive mandatory, preventive medical and dental care on a consistent basis. Service members are also afforded the opportunity to seek counseling services ranging from financial assistance to marriage counseling, all at no additional cost to the service member. Additionally, service members receive free or subsidized meals, housing and childcare while serving in the armed forces. Moreover, it can be concluded that while service members are serving on active duty in the military, there are multiple preventive factors put in place to prevent service members from ignoring health concerns or experiencing homelessness. Additionally, with the preventive factors put in place, it is mandatory that service members are informed and up to date on their healthcare, dental care, and are afforded opportunities which create a conducive environment for the service member to focus on daily duties.

Based on the data gathered by Cassidy (2015), there is a gap in services for members discharging from the military and entering into the civilian sector. The prevalence of the problem is being exacerbated by the number of transitioning service members. The government estimates

that over one million service members will leave the military and attempt to reintegrate back into civilian life during the next six years (Cassidy, 2015). And yet, service members will be separating at a point in American history when society may have lost the will to support the troops. Recent polls, including those during the presidential campaign, suggest that Americans' concerns have shifted sharply to domestic issues such as economic progress and immigration (Riffkin, 2014).

Upon discharging from the military, many veterans are faced with employment issues. In 2014, 5.3% of veterans (573,000) were unemployed (Cassidy, 2015). Unemployment is just one aspect of the multitude of challenges with which veterans are faced upon discharging from the military and attempting to reintegrate back into civilian life. The seemingly abrupt change in lifestyle can leave the veteran without the services once afforded while serving in the military. Every branch of the military does have a transition program in place to assist the transitioning service member. The Transition Assistance Program (TAP) provides information and training to ensure Service members separating from Active Duty are prepared for their next step in life - whether pursuing additional education, finding a job in the public or private sector, or starting their own business ("About DOD TAP," n.d.). The TAP curriculum is designed to provide service members with the skills-building training, services, resources and tools they need in order to initiate a successful transition for the military to civilian life ("About DOD TAP," n.d.). Additionally, it is a top priority of the Department of Defense (DOD) to ensure veterans are receiving adequate healthcare services after discharge from the military (Cassidy, 2015, p. 848). In March 2015, the Veterans Benefits Administration reported a total of 464, 897 pending benefits claims and 193,662 backlogged claims, which are characterized as claims pending

longer than 125 days. According to Cassidy (2015), the DOD facilitates this priority goal by providing programs that include:

- Care to wounded and injured service members during their recovery,
- Mental health counseling and suicide prevention efforts.
- Support for military families, and
- Assistance to service members who are transitioning out of the military.

Furthermore, the Department of Labor (DOL), DOD and Veterans Affairs (VA) and other federal and state agency partners offer the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) as one of the principle programs to further the DOD's transition goals (Cassidy, 2015). With the aforementioned programs put in place to assist the population of transitioning veterans, there is still a need to connect services to the veteran population. More specifically, there is a need for assistance for the veteran population in the higher education setting as it pertains to veterans achieving academic success (Cate, 2014). Although every institution of higher education differs with the amount of SMV support on campuses across the U.S, most college campuses offer support that is inclusive to all students. Formal support includes tutoring services, writing centers, and various groups and organizations focused on creating a conducive environment for students achieving academic success. When discussing formal supports put in place for assisting the SMV population, the services and types of support vary from campus to campus. In a study conducted by DiRamio, Ackerman & Mitchell (2008) SMV expressed a want for specific veteran services to assist in the transition process from the military. The SMV reported using a socialization strategy best described as "blending in" which involves the SMV integrating into sororities and fraternities as a way of re-establishing social and peer support (DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2008). According to the Million Records Report (Cate, 2014), the VA

processed education benefit claims for 4,067,476 between the years 2002 and 2010. However, this number encompasses not only veterans utilizing education benefits, but also dependents which the veterans can pass their benefits to. In 2012, more than 5% of all U.S. postsecondary students were veterans or were serving in the military, with approximately 43% attending community colleges, equating to over 1 million military personnel and veterans currently attending postsecondary educational institutions (Radford, 2011).

In order to gain a more comprehensive understanding of how to better prepare and equip the SMV for academic success, it is vital to examine the variables positively influencing the outcome, specifically social support for the individual SMV. Less is known about the effect that social support have on the Student Military Veteran (SMV) achieving academic success. Social support includes social ties, social integration, emotional support and financial support. A more detailed explanation of social support is provided in the Figure 1 Category Scheme. Currently, there are not enough data to suggest social support have a direct correlation on the SMV achieving academic success. As mentioned in Cassidy's (2015) study, veterans were able to identify a broad scope of barriers that may impede successful transition from military to civilian life. The barriers include financial stability, employment, relationship issues, legal difficulties, homelessness, and substance abuse (Cassidy, 2015). However, strategies for assessing indirect effects suggested that non-labor income and informational social support, not the GI Bill, mediate the effects of disability on educational attainment among this population, while larger numbers of dependents may have a suppressor effect (Smith-Osborne, 2009a). To fully understand the context of the SMV in higher education, it is necessary to explain what the GI Bill is and how it effects the SMV population.

Historical Background of the GI Bill

The establishment of the GI Bill of Rights was signed into law by President Franklin D. Roosevelt on June 22, 1944. At the time, the GI Bill of Rights was referred to as “The Servicemen’s Readjustment Act of 1944”, more commonly known as the GI Bill (“Education and Training”, 2013). The process leading to the establishment of the GI Bill of Rights began after Veterans returned from their service after World War I. After World War I, Veterans who were discharged from their branch of service were awarded a one-time \$60 allowance and a train ticket to their destination of choice (“Education and Training”, 2013”). During the Great Depression Congress attempted to assist the Veteran population by intervening and passing the World War Adjusted Act of 1924, more commonly known as the Bonus Act (“Education and Training”, 2013”). The Bonus Act provided a bonus based on the number of days served. A stipulation of receiving the bonus was having to wait 20 years after completion of service. The stipulation was met with a negative backlash from the Veterans which resulted in a group of Veterans marching on Washington, D.C in 1932 to demand full payment of their bonuses. The efforts of the Veterans were met with no success and produced a standoff with U.S. Troops (“Education and Training”, 2013”). The return of millions of Veterans from World War II afforded Congress an opportunity to succeed where they had previously failed in terms of Veterans assistance. Harry W. Colmery, a former national commander of the American Legion and former Republican National Chairman, is credited with producing the first draft of the GI Bill. The GI Bill was introduced in the House on January 10, 1944, and in the Senate on January 11, 1944. Both chambers approved their own versions of the bill (“Education and Training”, 2013). In 1984 the GI Bill was restructured. Former Mississippi Congressman Gillespie Montgomery is credited with refurbishing the GI Bill, which has since been known as the

"Montgomery GI Bill. In 2008 the Post-9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Act of 2008 was signed into law. Adding on to the original GI Bill the new law grants Veterans with active duty service on, or after, Sept. 11 2001, enhanced educational benefits that cover more educational expenses, provide a basic allowance for housing, stipend of \$1000 each calendar year for books and supplies as well as the ability to transfer unused educational benefits to spouses or children ("Education and Training", 2013").

Literature Review

To date, research has largely failed to consider how the development of social support (especially from peers) may relate to mental health and adjustment during the college years, as most previous work has relied on cross-sectional studies or prospective designs in which social support was only measured once (Whiteman, Barry, Mroczek & Wadsworth, 2013). The associations between social support and achieving academic success for SMV who have graduated with a Baccalaureate degree has not been consistently examined. Consequently, it cannot be concluded whether or not social support plays a role in effectively influencing the outcome of academic success for veterans. Additionally, there is not enough literature exploring what effect, if any, self-perceived social capital has on the SMV pursuing academic success. Social capital is defined as the features of social organization such as networks, norms, and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit (Putnam, 1995).

SMV enrolling into higher education are more likely to encounter circumstances which traditional college students do not encounter. The SMV experiences and perspectives, coupled with battling stereotypes and entering an unstructured college setting, contribute toward what can be a difficult transition (Kirchner, 2015). Most SMV entering higher education are coming from a culturally different way of life which may not resemble the current culture of higher education.

While they were in the military, veterans' decision making involved following rules supported by outside forces; in a higher education environment, self-regulation is the key to a successful transition (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011). Generally, SMV are more likely to display attributes such as self-sufficiency and a resistance to seek assistance. Veterans who pursue college face further potential stressors, such as juggling school with work and family, and adapting to academic culture, which in many ways clashes with the culture of the military (Glasser, Powers, & Zywiak, 2009). Additionally, many SMV feel that there is a lack of knowledge on the education side when examining the SMV general situation. According to the Pew Research Center (2011), 84% of post-9/11 veterans report the public does not understand the problems they and their families face, and 71% of the general public agrees. Furthermore, veterans are transitioning into a post-secondary environment that often does not understand them and can at times be unsupportive (DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2008). In addition, 30–40% of student veterans do not complete their postsecondary programs (Cate, 2013), and they tend to have lower grade point averages (GPAs) than their nonveteran student counterparts (Durdella & Kim, 2012). However, more current research suggests that student veterans graduate at significantly higher rates than their nontraditional student peers and perform at a level comparable to traditional students (Cates, 2014). The *Million Records Report* (Cate, 2014) represents one of the most comprehensive examinations of student veterans' postsecondary academic success in decades.

An additional aspect to be considered when discussing SMV in higher education, is service-related disabilities. A service-related disability is considered a disability or disabilities that are the result of a disease or injury incurred or aggravated during active military service. A SMV with a service-related disability can add to the already lengthy list of variables that can influence the outcome of the SMV pursuing academic success. Moreover, based on the results

produced by Smith-Osborne (2009b), out of 1,007 veterans surveyed, 955 responded as having a service-related condition. Smith-Osborne (2009b) also found that out of 2,063 veterans surveyed, 129 had been treated for PTSD. The negative association of VA mental illness treatment with educational attainment may show similarities with other studies whose findings suggest that a high proportion of veterans with lower health status and lack of other sources of health benefits may depend almost solely on VA health services (Richardson, Engel, Hunt, McKnight, & McFall, 2002). Consequently, veterans diagnosed with PTSD are more likely to experience higher rates of comorbidity. Up to 88% of those with chronic PTSD report at least one other comorbid psychological disorder, most commonly secondary major depression, and up to 59% report at least two comorbid conditions (Kessler et al., 1995; Ikin et al., 2010). Similarly, comorbidity in veterans is associated with lower social support (Campbell et al., 2007).

According to Elliott (2015), more research is needed to document the problems that student veterans report having on campus, and to examine how these problems might be influenced by their military experiences and its consequences. The prevalence of this issue is emphasized by the number of incoming SMV. Although SMV may feel as if they are transitioning into a post-secondary environment that often does not understand them and can at times be unsupportive (DiRamio et al., 2008), there are resources and programs in place at institutions of higher education specifically designed to assist the college student, but not the SMV population specifically. According to a qualitative study consisting of one on one interviews conducted by Jones (2013), every interviewee expressed a need for increased or improved services for veterans at some level. This could come in the form of a dedicated military admissions representative, or someone in the financial aid office who could walk through the tangled knot of constantly changing regulations related to the Post 9/11 GI Bill, or someone in student affairs who

understands the life-altering effect a school year with combat deployment has on a reservist or National Guardsman. Student veterans are experiencing increased opportunities to directly engage with other veterans on college campuses. These students appreciate the opportunity to meet and interact with others on campus, which helps make the college environment feel less isolating (Rumann, Rivera, & Hernandez, 2011). Additionally, the college campus is not the only setting the SMV will encounter and be faced with the task of re-integration. The SMV will also be faced with integration into the other aspects of the civilian lifestyle, mainly family. In addition, veterans often find it difficult to relate to family and friends who do not seem to understand their military experiences, leading to interpersonal conflict (Basham, 2008). However, the opportunity to connect with other veterans, regardless of the branch of service, can provide the SMV with a familiar context of camaraderie. Student veteran organizations and veteran resource centers are opening nationwide and provide a risk-free atmosphere to interact with peers who have similar experiences and understand military culture (Summerlot, Green, & Parker, 2009). With SMV resource centers available on nearly every campus of higher education in the US, there are a number of resources and supports put in place to assist the SMV with the process of achieving academic success.

Even though there are many published articles describing the transition process for the SMV, as well as the types of support available, there is a limited amount of literature examining the effectiveness of social support as it pertains to the SMV population achieving academic success. Before attempting to determine the correlation between social support and the SMV achieving academic success, it is important to first define the constructs of social support and social capital. To do so, the researcher will rely on aspects of social support theory, acculturation theory and social capital theory.

Associated Theories

Social Support Theory

According to Thoits (2011), social support typically refers to the functions performed for the individual by significant (i.e., primary) others. To further examine the different types of social support, the researcher will rely on the terms and definitions provided by Peggy Thoits (2011). To begin, there are multiple avenues in which social support can be derived. One avenue of social support comes in the form of social ties. Social ties refer to connections to and contacts with other people through membership in primary and secondary groups (Thoits, 2011).

Throughout the SMV academic experience, the SMV will inevitably encounter a number of professors, students, and resource counselors. The opportunity to establish a social network is consistently present throughout the academic experience. Having social ties in place can help alleviate some of the stressors that are accompanied throughout the SMV academic endeavor. Having a social network in place is not an unfamiliar concept to the SMV. While in the military, it is custom to be assigned to a small team consisting of four to five peers, known as a fire-team. The fire-team is connected to a group of three or four other fire-teams, which is called a squad. And there are usually four or five squads comprising a platoon. With the platoon concept in the military, the SMV is provided with a host of social networks. The familiar concept of social ties in the military takes a new form for the SMV in the civilian sector, especially higher education.

Along with Social ties comes social integration. Social integration is the structural aspects of people's relationships, that is, they indicate how those relationships are patterned or organized (Thoits, 2011). Much like the social network the SMV is accustomed to in the military with the platoon concept, there is an aspect of integration and organization within the social network. Utilizing the platoon concept of social networking, the military member has a clear and

concise understanding of what role to play as well as the structure and organization of the relationships within the platoon. For the SMV, the social network and the process for social integration in civilian life is not as identifiable as the process for social integration in the military. Additionally, some SMV may experience feelings of isolation. As a result of their unique experiences (e.g., deployment) and different demographic characteristics, student service members/ veterans often feel disconnected in higher education and desire interactions with other veterans on campus (Whiteman et al., 2013).

Emotional support refers to demonstrations of love and caring, esteem and value, encouragement, and sympathy (Thoits, 2011). According to a study conducted by Whiteman et al., (2013), a series of multilevel models revealed that student service members/veterans reported less emotional support from their peers compared with their civilian counterparts. Furthermore, the study conducted by Whiteman et al., (2013), aimed to examine how changes in emotional support related to the changes in mental health and academic adjustment of both military-affiliated and civilian college students over a 1-year period. The within-person effect for peer emotional support revealed that individuals reported greater self- efficacy on occasions on which they received more emotional support from peers than they did on average (Whiteman et al., 2013).

With the four-forementioned social support, the researcher will examine the associations between SMV achieving academic success and social support. As you will see, the following theory, social capital theory, can be tied into social support theory. The researcher deemed it necessary to discuss in detail how the two theories relate to one another, particularly when discussing the SMV population.

Social Capital and Acculturation Theories

The concept of social capital embraces other, similar concepts, such as social networks, social ties, and social integration, and, in many cases, it has been used loosely and interchangeably with such terms (Berkman, Glass, Brissette & Seeman, 2000). Service members may have a heightened sense of social capital due to the clarity of occupational responsibilities and being surrounded by peers with like-minded perceptions towards occupational responsibilities. For the SMV, social capital, in some cases must be reevaluated and re-established due to the change in context and environment. It should be stated that we still do not know how social capital is generated, accumulated, and managed, and what the consequences of social capital are on the welfare of families and their individual members (Bae, 2015). Furthermore, it is inherent to be able to discern the difference between social support theory and social capital theory. Studies of social support ultimately begin with an interest in the dependent variables of physical health and mental state of an individual, and are explicitly designed to search for associated independent variables.

SMV discharging from military service and entering an institution of higher education may be presented with a number of societal variables uncommon in the military. To summarize what the military's organizational culture consists of, the researcher utilized the definition provided by Hill, (2015): "A pattern of basic assumptions—invented, discovered, or developed by a given group as it learns to cope with its problems of external adaptation and internal integration—that has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to these problems." Another example of what a service member may experience can include the service member being accustomed to operating in a team-atmosphere with a clear organization of a chain of

command. The service member may also be accustomed to having a peer group with like-minded goals and a similar perception towards achieving those same goals. Furthermore, military members may have a heightened sense of social capital due to clear roles and responsibilities as well as a consensus of appreciation from the general public. When a service member discharges from the military and enrolls into an institution of higher education, a majority of the societal norms in which the military member was accustomed to, are no longer the baseline for everyday life. As previously stated, the change in culture can present issues for the transitioning SMV in pursuit of academic success. Berry (2001) observed that positive acculturation is achieved when there is interaction between differing groups (minority and majority) and when their cultures become blended. One of the challenges members of the SMV population may be presented with when attending an institution of higher education is blending with a new peer group.

Quantitatively, traditional college students range from ages 18-19 and do not have the amount or type of life experience as the SMV. Higher education has often been thought of as an acculturation process, where students absorb the shared knowledge, mannerisms, and thinking process of the academe, if not fully then certainly in such a way as to increase their cultural capital while gaining valuable academic knowledge and skills (Jones, 2013). Consequently, integration for the SMV into higher education has the potential for presenting challenges when attempting to assimilate into the environment. To ensure successful transition, institutions of higher education must ready themselves and enact holistic approaches to minimize the stress, isolation, and difficulties experienced by student service members/veterans (DiRamio et al., 2008).

Methods

This study is a systematic review of the literature concerning the experiences of a SMV. This study focused on the SMV experience as it relates to student services and resources as well as satisfaction with student services, and use of resources at their university.

Design and Analysis

The purpose of this research was to examine the associations of social support and veterans achieving academic success. To be included in this research, data sources had to: (a) report findings on veterans and social support in higher education, (b) report an effect of social support and academic success for veterans, (c) report data on the target population being OEF and/or OIF veterans, (d) be published in an English language peer-reviewed publication, and (e) be published between the years 2006 and 2016. The participants in the included samples ranged from ages 18-60. The sample of included studies include individuals that have achieved veteran status from serving in the U.S. military from any of the 5 branches of service. The sample consists of both male and female veterans who were considered students enrolled in an institution of higher education. A PRISMA flow chart utilized for the process of choosing articles for the synthesis is provided (see Appendix).

The researcher synthesized cross-study findings with the focus related to social support, the transition process, and social capital, using a pre-determined list of search terms and a data extraction form based on evidence and theory discussed in the previous section.

As previously declared, the researcher has developed a priori category scheme (see Figure 1) explaining how the synthesis of findings of cross studies were interpreted and categorized. The researcher refined the a priori category scheme based on the re evolving search terms explaining how the synthesis of findings of cross studies were interpreted and categorized

associated with the study as it is implemented. Given the paucity of evidence on military transition to student status, the synthesis relied on robust theory, including social support and social capital theory. Descriptive statistics of the sample were used to analyze the data.

Table 1. *Category Scheme*

Categories	
Social Ties	refers to connections to and contacts with other people through membership in primary and secondary groups
Social Integration	is the structural aspects of people's relationships, that is, they indicate how those relationships are patterned or organized
Emotional Support	refers to demonstrations of love and caring, esteem and value, encouragement, and sympathy
Financial Stability	is a status achieved by an individual or a family where they have a stable adequate income as well as stable adequate resources to cover unexpected expenses affordable and accessible goods and services and safe, affordable housing.

Data Collection

Eight distinct Databases covering a broad range of disciplines were utilized in data collection. Searched databases include: ERIC (education), ProQuest (interdisciplinary historical annual reports), CINAHL Complete (nursing & allied health journals), PsycARTICLES (peer-reviewed scholarly and scientific articles in psychology), Google Scholar, SPORTDiscus (sports & sports medicine journals), Professional Development Collection, Psychology and Behavioral Sciences Collection (concerning topics in emotional and behavioral characteristics, psychiatry & psychology, mental processes, anthropology, and observational & experimental methods). Key search terms included “student veterans”, “higher education”, “academic success”, “social

support”, “OEF”, and “OIF”. The references of the included studies and articles were also examined for the purpose of discovering additional studies relevant to this research.

Data Synthesis and Extraction

Several key findings and demographics from each of the included studies, relevant to the aim of this research, were examined, extracted and synthesized to formulate a more comprehensive understanding. Demographic data included setting, key findings and sample size categorized by gender (see table 1). Key findings of the included articles were determined and categorized according to the Figure 1 Category Scheme (see figure 1).

Findings

Studies’ Characteristics

A total of 10 empirical investigations (5 qualitative and 5 quantitative) and 2 articles discussing the SMV population in higher education were identified and examined. The researcher chose to include 2 articles which were not studies, but discussion and recommendation for best practices, to add an aspect of summarization to the synthesis. Furthermore, of the 10 empirical investigations, 7 were cross-sectional, 1 was longitudinal, 1 was a content analysis, and 1 was exploratory in design. It should be noted that not one of the 10 studies selected for this research fully met the inclusion criteria. However, all of the selected studies do focus on either social support or academic success. Nonetheless, the synthesis of the studies aim to address the correlation between social supports and veterans achieving academic success.

Table 2. Key Characteristics of Reviewed Studies

<i>Source</i>	<i>Sample Size</i>	<i>Setting</i>	<i>Overall Findings</i>
Whiteman, S. D., Barry, A. E., Mroczek, D. K., & MacDermid Wadsworth, S. (2013). The Development and Implications of Peer Emotional Support for Student Service Members/Veterans and Civilian College Students. <i>Journal Of Counseling Psychology</i> , 60(2), 265-278.	n=199	20 Institutions of higher education across one Midwestern State.	This study showed married students reported greater educational self-efficacy. In relation to emotional support, individuals who received more support from their peers in general reported greater self-efficacy. Furthermore, the participants in this study who reported receiving more emotional support from peers, reported greater persistence.
Mentzer, B., Black, E.L., & Spohn, R.T. (2015). An analysis of supports for persistence for the military student population. <i>Online Learning</i> , 19(1), 31-47.	n=294	1 Institution of higher education. Liberty State University	Results from this study showed that only academic support provided a significant contribution to the SMV academic achievement. Social support and financial support were not found to be significant for academic achievement.
Ness, B. M., Middleton, M. J., & Hildebrandt, M. J. (2015). Examining the Effects of Self-Reported Posttraumatic Stress Disorder Symptoms and Positive Relations with Others on Self-Regulated Learning for Student Service Members/Veterans. <i>Journal Of American College Health</i> , 63(7), 448-458.	n=214	5 public postsecondary institutions in New England	The results of this study support the social-cognitive view that perceived positive relations with others is an important factor associated with self-regulation strategy use and academic motivation. A key finding of this study suggests SMV who obtain academic achievement develop positive relations within the classroom and campus communities.
Wisner, B. L., Krugh, M. E., Ausbrooks, A., Russell, A., Chavkin, N. F., & Selber, K. (2015). An Exploratory Study of the Benefits of a Mindfulness Skills Group for Student Veterans. <i>Social Work In Mental Health</i> , 13(2), 128-144. doi:10.1080/15332985.2014.972009	n=9	1 Institution of higher education.	Some beneficial effects of the program discussed in the study, as reported by the SMV participants, included improvements in personal functioning, organization, time management, and academic skills. Furthermore, the SMV participants reported changes in personal qualities such as an enhanced level of self-awareness and sense of successfully integrating into the college setting.

Table 2 Continued. Key Characteristics of Reviewed Studies

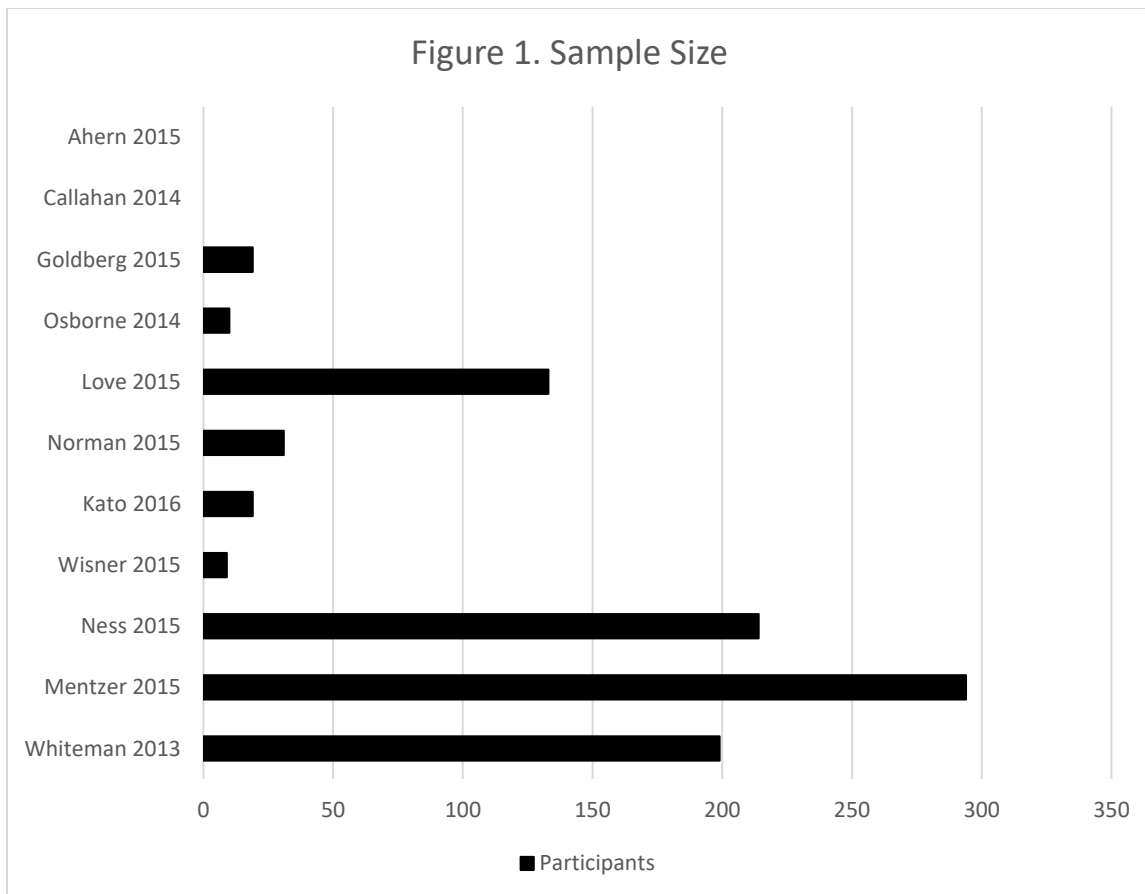
<i>Source</i>	<i>Sample Size</i>	<i>Setting</i>	<i>Overall Findings</i>
Kato, L., Jinkerson, J. D., Holland, S. C., & Soper, H. V. (2016). From combat zones to the classroom: Transitional adjustment in OEF/OIF student veterans. <i>The Qualitative Report</i> , 21(11), 2131.	<i>n</i> =19	1 Southwestern community college.	The data from this study suggests SMV had difficulty interacting with civilian students. SMV reported civilian students were irritating. SMV participants reported significant difficulty with financial support. SMV participants also reported a loss of purpose and social capital after military separation.
Norman, S. B., Rosen, J., Himmerich, S., Myers, U. S., Davis, B., Browne, K. C., & Piland, N. (2015). Student Veteran perceptions of facilitators and barriers to achieving academic goals. <i>Journal Of Rehabilitation Research & Development</i> , 52(6), 701-712. doi:10.1682/JRRD.2015.01.0013	<i>n</i> =31	Multiple Institution of higher education across Southern California	This study suggested that mental/physical health problems for SMV were perceived as barriers to achieving academic success. This study also suggests programs can facilitate the process of getting treatment for SMV, which may also assist with academic achievement. Several SMV participants reported they did not believe they had the skills to succeed academically. Finally, campuses supportive of military culture through a visible presence were positively characterized by SMV.
Osborne, N. J. (2014). Veteran ally: Practical strategies for closing the military-civilian gap on campus. <i>Innovative Higher Education</i> , 39(3), 247-260. doi:10.1007/s10755-013-9274-z	<i>n</i> =14	1 Institution of higher education in the Midwest	SMV in this study described their departure from the service and enrollment as a process characterized by a loss of community and camaraderie followed by isolation. Findings suggest that there is significant difference in terms of the level of support that SMV experience when during the transition process. Most SMV participants stated they were concerned about attending a University based on a perception that it was "liberal" and therefore "anti-military."
Love, S. M., Levin, A., & Park, H. (2015). Exploring student service Members/Veterans social support and campus climate in the context of recovery. <i>Social Sciences</i> , 4(4), 909-924. doi:10.3390/socsci4040909	<i>n</i> =133	1 Institution of higher education.	The SMV participants in this study who reported having good friends were less likely to report stress. Less than half of the SMV participants agreed that the University offered adequate services to help them if they were struggling in their classes. Less than half of the SMV participants agreed that the University offered adequate services to improve their study skills.

Table 2 Continued. Key Characteristics of Reviewed Studies

<i>Source</i>	<i>Sample Size</i>	<i>Setting</i>	<i>Overall Findings</i>
Ahern, A., Foster, M., & Head, D. (2015). Salt Lake Community College Veterans Services: A Model of Serving Veterans in Higher Education. <i>New Directions For Community Colleges, 2015</i> (172), 77-86.	No sample	Salt Lake Community College, Utah	According to this article, specific to this community college, the creation of a department dedicated to veterans has been very helpful. By developing a veteran services department and providing a center that allows student veterans to receive services in a “one-stop” area, the community college has been able to demonstrate its commitment to veteran success.
Hitt, S., Sternberg, M., Wadsworth, S. M., Vaughan, J., Carlson, R., Dansie, E., & Mohrbacher, M. (2015). The higher education landscape for US student service members and veterans in Indiana. <i>Higher Education, 70</i> (3), 535-550. doi:10.1007/s10734-014-9854-6	n=77	Multiple Institution of higher education across Indiana	This study suggests that institutions appeared to be doing worst in the areas of having a Student Veteran Organization, providing services for family members, continuing support between semesters, and waiving tuition deadlines for students receiving VA educational or rehabilitation benefits.
Callahan, R., & Jarrat, D. (2014). Helping student servicemembers and veterans succeed. <i>Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning, 46</i> (2), 36-41. doi:10.1080/00091383.2014.897189	No sample	1 Institution of higher education in the Midwest	According to this study, proactive support is crucial to assisting SMV successfully transition into higher education. This article draws comparisons from military members and SMV perspective towards fulfilling duties, and how skills valuable in the military can also translate into the classroom. However, some of these skills are not conducive to the SMV pursuing academic achievement.
Goldberg, M., Cooper, R., Milleville, M., Barry, A., & Schein, M. L. (2015). Ensuring success for veterans with disabilities in STEM degree programs: Recommendations from a workshop and case study of an evidence-based transition	n=19	1 Institution of higher education, University of Pittsburgh	Data from this study suggests that SMV do not have the level of support as a student that they felt they received while still on active duty status. SMV entering into institutions of higher education as nontraditional students is also an issue. This article suggest that institutions should offer academic and career advising specific to veterans.

Sample Size and Setting

Of the 10 empirical studies, 9 consisted of a sample size comprised of individual participants. One study (Hitt et al., 2015) consisted of a sample size comprised of institutions of higher education. And one study (Mentzer, Black, & Spohn, 2015) consisted of both veteran and civilian participants with a majority being civilian participants (72.8%). Of the 8 empirical studies, excluding Hitt et al., (2015) and Mentzer et al., (2015), the sample measuring individual participants with veteran status, the average number of participants were 66.75. Further discerning the individual sample size between male and female produced an average of $n=21$ females and $n=67.42$ males. The participants in Mentzer et al., (2015) study were not included in the average due to the lack of information regarding gender in the sample. (See figure 1).



Of the 12 articles included in the synthesis, 8 took place at a single institution of higher education and 4 took place at multiple institutions across a single state. One article (Ahern, Foster, & Head, 2015) focused setting was a community college in Salt Lake City, Utah. Mentzer et al., (2015) consisted of an online setting comprised of only graduate students at Liberty University.

Key Findings

Key findings of the included articles were determined and categorized according to the Figure 1 Category Scheme (see table 1) and then compiled (see figure 2).

Figure 2. Discussion of Social Support as defined by the Category Scheme 1.

	Emotional Support	Social Ties	Social Integration	Financial Stability
Mentzer			X	X
Hitt		X	X	X
Norman			X	X
Kato	X	X	X	X
Whiteman	X			
Love		X	X	
Wisner	X			
Ness		X	X	
Goldberg		X	X	
Osborne			X	
Callahan			X	

Financial Stability

5 articles discussed financial stability and the SMV population in institutions of higher education. 2 articles, Ahern et al., (2015) and Hitt et al., (2015) examines the broad aspect of financial aid and the process the administration plays in processing financial aid for the SMV population, rather than the effects financial aid has on the SMV population. Ahern et al., (2015) places emphasis on best practices for managing the financial aid aspect for the SMV population. In the study conducted by Kato et al., (2016) which focused on qualitative data from the SMV

population, researchers found for many of the veterans, returning to school and collecting Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits provided much-needed financial support in the still-recovering economy. However, there was no correlation examined between financial support and academic success in the study produced by Kato et al., (2016). Even so, in the study produced by Norman et al., (2015), researchers found participants ($n = 14$, 45.2%) self-reported obstacles to academic success included financial strain. On the other hand, Mentzer et al., (2015) produced results showing that social support were not significant nor was financial support found to provide a significant result in academic persistence.

Social Ties

Ness, Middleton, & Hildebrandt, (2015). Found the social-cognitive view that perceived positive relations with others is an important factor associated with self-regulation strategy use and academic motivation. Additionally, all participants ($n=19$) in Kato et al., (2016) described a sense of loss when leaving their military families. In the study conducted by Love et al., (2015), researchers found that participants with a network of social support experience less stress, are less angry and are in fewer conflicts with others. Researchers also found that one of the characteristics of SMV in this study (Love et al., 2015) is seeking out friends. In the study conducted by Hitt et al., (2015) a single question inquiring whether or not the sampled institutions of higher education had a Student Veterans Organization (VSO) was asked. Consequently, institutions appeared to be doing worst in the areas of having an SVO (14.3 %, $n=19$). The articles by Ahern et al., (2015), and Goldberg et al., (2015), focused on best practices and recommendations for institutions of higher education serving the SMV population. In both of the previously mentioned articles, a common theme of social ties are briefly discussed. Ahern et al., (2015) suggests colleges and universities should aid veterans in integrating into student

veteran peer groups and/or meeting with peer mentors. Furthermore, Students do not have the level of support as a veteran that they felt they received while still on active duty status, resulting in mental health issues (Goldberg et al., 2015).

Emotional Support

Whiteman et al., (2013) reported emotional support from peers increased over time for student service members/veterans, given their initial deficit compared with civilian students, student service members/veterans never reached the same level of emotional support as their civilian counterparts. Furthermore, married students reported greater educational self-efficacy (Whiteman et al., 2015). With the study conducted by Wisner et al., (2015) six of the nine participants (66%) initially reported that stress impacted the quality of their school work. With the mindfulness skills group conducted, researchers identified benefits of participating in the group as providing and improving empowerment, relaxation, improved relationships, and application of mindfulness (Wisner et al., 2015). Lastly, according to responses recorded by Kato et al., (2016) veterans felt different from civilians, so they had difficulty experiencing comfort or feeling understood, even from their families and pre-deployment close friends.

Social Integration

Ten of the articles chosen for the systematic review made mention of SMV and social integration in institutions of higher education. The common finding was the need to integrate the SMV population into the college setting. From the SMV perspective, social integration seemed to be a challenge most faced while attending institutions of higher education. A participant in this study (Kato et al., 2016) stated “You come back, and you are on your own. It’s a very empty feeling; it takes some time to get used to”. As recommended in the article produced by Ahern et al., (2015), colleges and universities should aid veterans in integrating into student veteran peer

groups and/or meeting with peer mentors In the study conducted by Wisner et al., (2015), one of the benefits of participating in skills groups is developing a sense of belonging.

Correlation with Academic Success

In conducting the systematic review and synthesizing the results from each of the 12 articles, it can be concluded that more research examining the effects of social support and veterans achieving academic success is needed. Every article included in this synthesis falls short of fully examining this potential correlation. Most articles included in the synthesis explore a single aspect of social support and correlated the effects with academic persistence or academic success. However, in conducting this synthesis of the data, it can also be concluded that examining the research question in the form of a longitudinal or cross-sectional study is the next step in furthering the knowledgebase of SMV in higher education.

Discussion and Relevance to Social Work

According to the National Association of Social Workers, social workers provide most of the country's mental health services, making up 60% of mental health professional as clinically trained social workers, compared to 10% of psychiatrists, 23% of psychologists and 5% of psychiatric nurses ("National Association of Social Workers", n.d.). Coupled with the data suggesting more than 1 million beneficiaries have used or are currently using the Post-9/11 GI Bill (Cates, 2014), it can be determined that social workers have been closely involved in working with the SMV population and will continue to maintain the same level of involvement, if not more.

The prevalence of the problem is pressing and should be made a priority in the higher education setting due to the increased number of veterans enrolling annually. The Post 9/11 GI Bill is leading an increasing proportion of wounded warriors to enter universities (Smith-

Osborne, 2012). Furthermore, to make progress and arrive at the point when policy can be applied to practice, this exploratory study will help establish research priorities and assist in determining where and how resources should be allocated for the SMV's and ensure this population is afforded resources and information relevant to assisting them in achieving academic success.

To be able to maintain the ability to serve the SMV population, it is important for the social work profession to continue to further the knowledge base on the SMV population, specifically as it relates to achieving academic success. The exploratory research put forth by the researcher will allow social workers to advance their understanding of how to best approach and assist the SMV population, regardless of the results of the research. Social workers will be able to rely on data determining the importance of social support for the SMV which will allow the social worker to broaden the scope of examination when assessing the SMV.

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doi:10.1080/15332985.2014.972009

Appendix

PRISMA standard systematic review flow chart.

Total Number of records indicated in database searches: 1927



of abstracts identified as potentially meeting inclusion criteria through database searching: 22



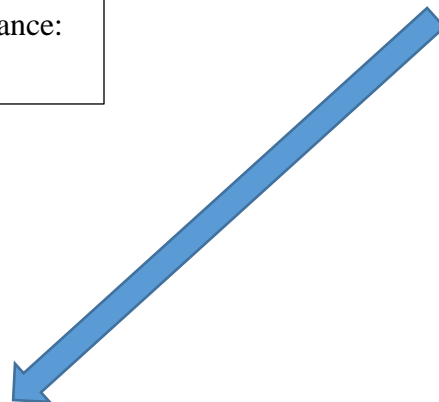
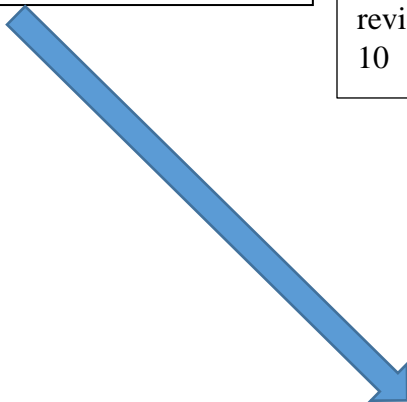
of full-text articles assessed for eligibility: 22



of full text articles meeting some but not all inclusion criteria: 8

of full text articles meeting minimal inclusion criteria, but excluded from the systematic review due to lack of relevance: 10

of full text articles meeting all or most of the inclusion criteria: 4



of full text articles included in systematic review: 12