

Institutional Misalignment and Value Disruption: Veteran Transition into Higher Education

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Abstract: This project examines the structural gap between student veterans and higher education institutions by focusing on how higher education institutions continue operating around traditional student models that may not align with nontraditional student realities. When institutional expectations are built around traditional forms of campus engagement, student veterans may experience lower levels of social integration and campus involvement. This study uses a quantitative cross-sectional survey to examine student veterans' perceptions of institutional support, transition experiences, social integration and campus engagement. Initial findings from 40 participants show a positive relationship between perceived institutional support and campus involvement. Respondents rate higher education as highly valuable while reporting low levels of campus engagement, suggesting that student veterans may remain committed to educational attainment while participating less fully in campus life. These findings show that the issue extends beyond individual adaptation and instead reflects a mismatch between institutional expectations and student veteran realities. This project proposes targeted, relationship-based support systems that recognize the distinct position of student veterans within higher education and aim to reduce this gap.

Keywords: Student Veterans, Institutional Support, Structural Misalignment, Nontraditional Students, Campus Engagement, Social Integration

Introduction

Higher education institutions continue increasing veteran enrollment through programs such as the Post-9/11 GI Bill. Access to higher education for veterans has expanded, but access itself does not necessarily mean integration into the institution. Student veterans enter college environments that are still organized around traditional students entering directly from high school. The gap between access and integration matters because institutions may enroll student veterans without fully accounting for how they experience higher education. Ideas surrounding campus engagement, involvement, social integration and participation are often built into higher education itself. However, these expectations assume students have flexibility, time for campus immersion and identities that are still developing within the institution.

Student veterans often enter higher education older, with prior professional experience, financial obligations, families or identities already established outside of school. These responsibilities change how student veterans approach and experience higher education. Education may become tied more toward completion, stability or long-term security rather than campus immersion itself. Lower levels of campus involvement may therefore reflect institutional fit rather than simple disengagement. The structural gap is not only about whether student veterans value education but whether higher education is organized in ways that make integration realistic for them.

Existing research surrounding student veterans frequently focuses on transition difficulties such as mental health, identity adjustment and academic barriers. While these explanations hold valuable truth, much of the research continues focusing on how veterans adapt to higher education institutions rather than questioning how institutions themselves may contribute to this disengagement. Framing the issue only through individual adaptation shifts responsibility toward the student veteran while leaving institutional structures relatively unquestioned.

This study examines perceived institutional support, social integration and campus engagement among student veterans in higher education. Using survey responses organized

around these key constructs, this study examines how student veterans experience and navigate higher education environments. Rather than understanding disengagement purely at the individual level, this study examines how institutional expectations and veteran realities interact in ways that shape engagement and social integration.

Literature Review

Existing research surrounding student veterans in higher education consistently identifies difficulties tied to transition, social integration and institutional navigation. Veterans move from highly structured systems into college environments that often assume flexibility and self-navigation (DiRamio et al., 2008; Vacchi, 2012). Higher education institutions continue to operate around expectations tied to traditional students entering directly from high school. The divide between military structure and higher education matters because student veterans enter an institutional environment that may not recognize the structure, responsibilities and forms of experience they bring with them. National survey data also reflects this gap with student veterans reporting lower levels of belonging compared to traditional students (Healthy Minds Network, 2021).

The divide between military structure and higher education reflects more than a difference in background or experience. It reflects differences in what institutions recognize as normal, expected forms of participation. Bourdieu (1986) argues institutions privilege forms of cultural capital and habitus that align with dominant institutional groups. In higher education, students are often expected to already understand the institution's language, social behavior and academic systems. Student veterans frequently enter with experiences and forms of capital shaped by military structures that do not fully align with traditional campus expectations. The result is an environment where veterans are expected to adapt to institutional norms even when those norms remain built around traditional student experiences.

Institutional support matters because support existing inside the institution does not necessarily mean veterans feel connected to it. Universities may provide resources or support services that do not match the realities of navigating systems that rely heavily on student initiative and institutional familiarity. This can create additional barriers for veterans who are balancing work, commuting, and familial responsibilities alongside academics (Griffin & Gilbert, 2015). Access to support therefore does not automatically translate into institutional integration.

Research further suggests that the type of support received matters. Veterans who report stronger peer connection, faculty engagement, and institutional support are those who also report stronger feelings of belonging and integration (Benbow & Lee, 2022; Hornor & Brooks, 2024). At the same time, issues such as weak peer connection, inflexible instruction, and lack of institutional recognition are associated with lower engagement. Broader support systems that connect veterans to both peers and educators appear to strengthen integration more effectively than military identity alone (Benbow & Lee, 2022).

Belonging also shapes persistence and engagement outcomes. Student veterans who report stronger institutional support often report stronger academic outcomes and stronger intent to continue their education (Barry et al., 2021; Morgan et al., 2024). Participation in veteran-specific organizations and spaces has also been linked to educational attainment (Cate, 2014). However, engagement with support systems remains inconsistent. Some veterans avoid disclosing veteran identity while others only use institutional support during periods of extreme strain or academic difficulty (Vest et al., 2024; Morris et al., 2024). Validation additionally appears important as student veterans who feel recognized and affirmed within the institution report stronger intent to persist (Tilman, 2018).

Together, prior literature suggests the issue extends beyond simply whether support exists. The issue is also whether institutional structures actually align with the realities student veterans bring into higher education environments. When support systems are visible,

relational, and connected to student experience veterans appear more likely to integrate socially and thrive academically. When institutional expectations continue operating around traditional student models, many student veterans remain peripheral to campus life and engage with higher education in more functional or degree-oriented ways. This study builds on this framework by examining how perceived institutional support, social integration and campus engagement interact within student veteran experiences in higher education.

Methods

Participants

Participants included United States military veterans over the age of 18 who had attended a college, university, or other higher education institution following their military service. Current enrollment was not required, allowing for the inclusion of veterans who had previously withdrawn or discontinued their education. Including formerly enrolled students mattered because disengagement from higher education itself was relevant to the study and limiting participation to currently enrolled students may have excluded veterans with more negative institutional experiences. Participants were recruited primarily through online veteran communities, veteran organizations, and social media platforms. Recruitment originally aimed for approximately 150-200 participants; however, final participation remained substantially lower. Lower participation may itself reflect the broader issue examined in this study: student veterans may be less likely to engage with institutional or research based requests when there is no direct benefit or clear connection to their immediate needs.

Materials

Data were collected through an anonymous online survey administered through Qualtrics. The survey consisted primarily of structured closed-ended items measured on Likert-type scales ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Survey items were designed to examine perceptions of institutional support, transition experiences, social integration, campus involvement, academic behavior and perceived value of higher education.

These measures were intended to capture how student veterans interpreted institutional support and navigated higher education environments following their military service. Demographic items collected information on age, branch of service, and educational background.

Procedure

Participants were recruited through online veteran communities, social media groups including Facebook and Discord, and veteran organizations. Recruitment materials included a digital flyer containing a QR code linking directly to the survey. Upon accessing the survey, participants were presented with an informed consent form and were required to indicate consent prior to participation. Eligibility screening questions were then administered before continuing into the main survey.

The survey was completed anonymously and required approximately 7-10 minutes. Participants were able to skip questions or exit the survey at any time. Data were exported from Qualtrics and analyzed using Jamovi to examine relationships between perceived institutional support, social integration, campus involvement, and academic behavior.

Results

Data were analyzed using Jamovi to identify patterns and relationships across key constructs. Initial findings are based on a sample of 40 participants. Correlation analyses examined relationships between perceived institutional support, social integration, campus involvement, academic behavior and perceived value of education.

Initial findings indicate a strong positive relationship between perceived institutional support and campus involvement, $r = .636, p < .001$. Participants reporting stronger perceptions of institutional support also reported higher levels of campus involvement and engagement. The strength of this relationship suggests institutional support plays an important role in whether student veterans participate within higher education environments. While support systems may exist within institutions, visible and accessible support appears connected to greater willingness to engage within campus life.

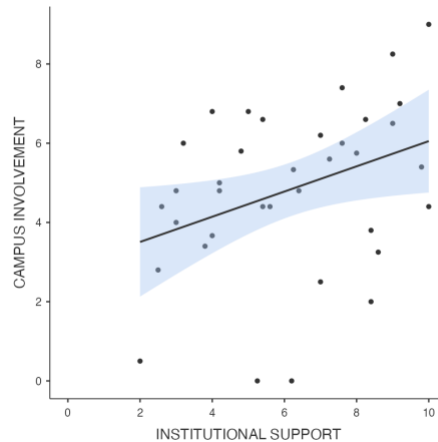


Figure 1. Relationship Between Perceived Institutional Support and Campus Involvement

A positive relationship was also found between perceived value of education and campus involvement, $r = .433, p = .009$. Participants continued reporting higher education as highly valuable even while broader patterns of low campus involvement remained present. This pattern suggests student veterans may remain committed to educational attainment while still experiencing difficulty integrating into broader campus environments. These findings support the idea that disengagement may reflect structural barriers and institutional fit rather than lack of motivation itself.

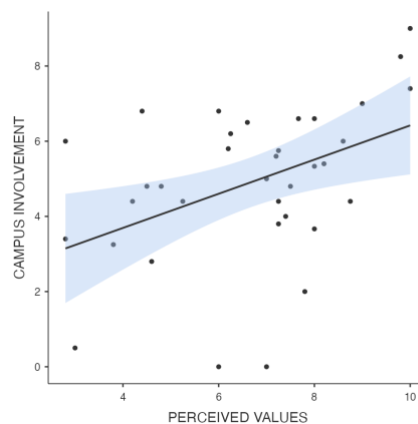


Figure 2. Relationship Between Perceived Value of Education and Campus Involvement

Institutional support and social integration also demonstrated a positive relationship, although the findings did not reach conventional levels of statistical significance, $r = .293, p = .082$. While weaker, the pattern still suggests perceptions of institutional support may contribute to broader feelings of social integration within higher education settings. Given the small sample size, this relationship should be interpreted as an exploratory pattern rather than a conclusive finding.

A negative relationship emerged between academic behavior and social integration, $r = -.392$, $p = .018$. Participants reporting stronger focus on academic behavior also reported lower levels of social integration. This finding may suggest student veterans engage with higher education in a more functional or degree-oriented way where academic completion becomes prioritized over immersion and social participation.

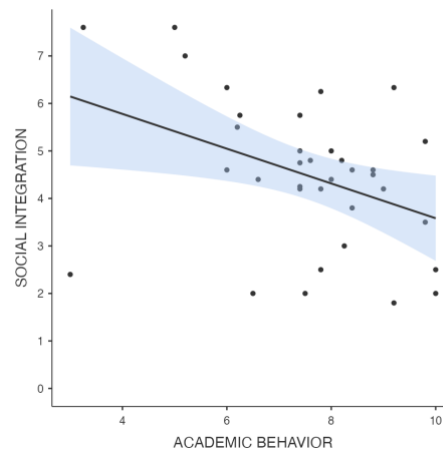


Figure 3. Relationship Between Academic Behavior and Social Integration

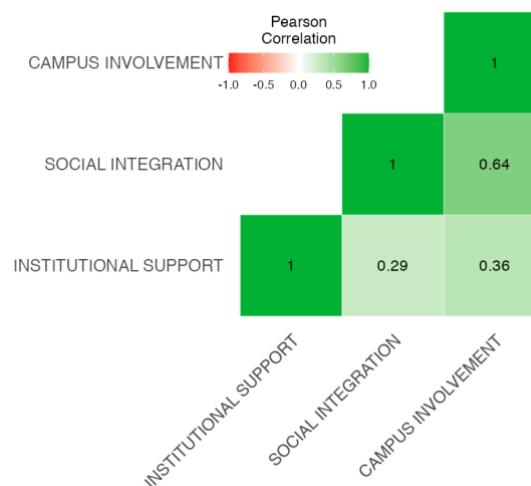


Figure 4. Correlation Heat Map for Institutional Support, Social Integration, and Campus Involvement

Discussion

Initial findings indicate a gap between the high value student veterans place on higher education and their relatively low levels of campus engagement and social integration. Quantitative findings demonstrate a positive relationship between institutional support and campus involvement. This relationship suggests student veteran engagement is not only about individual motivation, but also about whether institutional structures make participation accessible, visible and relevant. Student veterans are not disconnected from the value of education itself, they are disconnected from the institutional forms of engagement higher education expects and rewards.

Student veterans' disengagement is best understood through a structural framework that connects social integration, validation and cultural capital. Tinto's (2012) theory of integration

helps explain why connection to the institution matters for persistence, while Rendon's (1994) theory of validation shows why students need to feel recognized and affirmed within the institution. Bourdieu's (1986) theory of cultural capital deepens this argument by showing how institutions do not reward all forms of experience equally. Higher education rewards forms of participation, language, networking and social behavior that align with traditional student expectations. Student veterans enter with capital shaped by their military service that includes discipline, independence, structure and goal-oriented behavior. The issue is not that student veterans lack capital, but that their capital may not convert easily into the forms of belonging and participation higher education recognizes. Bourdieu and Passeron argue that "an educational system based on a traditional type of pedagogy can fulfil its function of inculcation only so long as it addresses itself to students equipped with the linguistic and cultural capital and the capacity to invest it profitably which the system presupposes and consecrates without ever expressly demanding it and without methodically transmitting it" (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1979, p. 99).

The mismatch between the capital student veterans bring and the capital higher education rewards becomes especially significant within smaller and private institutions where limited staffing, limited oversight and lack of specialized veteran support infrastructure may widen the gap further. Unlike larger universities with dedicated veteran resource centers, retention programs and specialized staff, smaller institutions may enroll student veterans without possessing the structural resources necessary to support long term integration and success. When student veterans are counted in enrollment but not fully supported through institutional structure, they risk becoming retention metrics rather than students whose experiences shape how support is designed.

Higher education therefore functions not simply as an educational environment, but as a system that reproduces institutional norms, expectations and dominant forms of participation. Student veterans are frequently expected to integrate into systems that were not structurally built around their experiences. The expectation to adapt to dominant institutional norms can pressure student veterans to either fit into traditional forms of participation or remain socially peripheral within the institution itself. In this sense, disengagement may reflect institutional mismatch rather than lack of motivation or investment in one's education.

A relationship based support model may help reduce these structural gaps through consistent, low-barrier engagement between student veterans and designated support individuals, ideally those who shared institutional or military understanding. This model is intentionally designed for smaller and mid-sized institutions where large veteran support departments may not exist. The goal is not to create a separate system for veterans, but to create a direct bridge between student veterans and the institution so support becomes visible, accessible and personally connected.

Limitations of this study include the small sample size, reliance on self-reported data and limited ability to generalize findings across all student veteran populations. The internal consistency of some measures also supports treating these findings as exploratory rather than conclusive. Future research should examine how different levels of institutional support shape long-term educational outcomes, retention and social integration among student veterans across different types of higher education institutions. Future work should also compare institutions with formal veteran support structures to those with limited veteran-specific infrastructure to better understand how institutional resources shape student veteran engagement over time.

Conclusions

Higher education institutions continue increasing access for student veterans without always addressing whether institutional structures themselves align with nontraditional student realities. This study found that student veterans continue placing high value on higher education while simultaneously reporting lower levels of campus engagement and social integration.

Findings further suggest that institutional support plays an important role in shaping whether student veterans engage within higher education environments.

Rather than understanding disengagement as an individual deficit, this study argues disengagement may reflect a broader form of institutional mismatch. Higher education institutions continue operating around traditional student expectations that do not always reflect the realities, responsibilities and experiences student veterans bring into academic environments. These gaps become especially important within smaller and private institutions where limited staffing, oversight and veteran-specific infrastructure may make institutional support less visible and less accessible.

Using Bourdieu's cultural capital as an interpretive tool, this study positions higher education as a system that reproduces dominant institutional norms and expectations. Student veterans are often expected to adapt into environments that were not structurally designed around their experiences. In this sense, engagement becomes less about motivation itself and more about whether institutions create structures where student veterans can realistically integrate and participate.

Ultimately, this study suggests improving student veteran engagement requires more than access alone. Institutions must also examine how student support systems, expectations and campus structures either reinforce or reduce barriers to integration. Without this shift, student veterans may remain academically present while still socially peripheral within higher education environments.

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