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We Salute You: Student Servicemembers' and Veterans' Perspective of the University of Southern Mississippi's Support of Military Students

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We Salute You: Student Servicemembers' and Veterans' Perspective of the University of
Southern Mississippi's Support of Military Students

by

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A Thesis
Submitted to the Honors College of
The University of Southern Mississippi
in Partial Fulfillment
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ABSTRACT

There has been an increasing number of veterans and servicemembers attending colleges and universities in the past several years. However, these veterans and servicemembers oftentimes struggle to readjust to civilian life and academia after their years of service. With the increasing number of veterans and servicemembers attending colleges and universities, schools are in a prime position to offer support for this population. However, there has been a lack of research conducted on this growing student population and how to best serve them.

A survey was sent via email by the USM's Center for Military Veterans, Service Members and Families to the veteran and servicemember students registered with the Center to learn about their perception of the support offered by both the Center and the university. Many of the participants agreed that the university supports them as an individual, but the various programs offered for veteran and servicemembers students could be improved. Many of the participants also felt as though more financial help could be beneficial. The Center also had a very strong system of support for this student population, and the participants agreed that the programs offered through the Center were helpful. However, all of the programs offered through the Center had multiple participants who were unaware of their existence. Awareness was found to be the area of support that needs the greatest improvement.

Keywords: veterans, servicemembers, support, academics, military students, colleges

DEDICATION

I would first like to dedicate my thesis to the brave servicemembers, veterans, and their families who have sacrificed so much in service to this country. It is because of this brave, selfless group of people that I and so many others are able to live freely in this country, and I am forever grateful to them. I would also like to dedicate my thesis to my family who has always been there for me and has supported me throughout writing this thesis.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Center	The University of Southern Mississippi's Center for Military Veterans, Service Members, and Families
USM	The University of Southern Mississippi
VA	U.S Department of Veteran Affairs

CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Beginning in 1944, the U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs (VA) has been helping military personnel and veterans, as well as their family members, with educational assistance (Congressional Research Service, 2020). The most well-known form of assistance the VA offers for education is the GI bill. In 2008, the bill known as the Post-9/11 GI bill was signed. Because of the GI bills and other forms of educational assistance offered through the VA, there has been an increasing number of servicemembers and veterans attending colleges and universities across the United States. According to Congressional Research Service (2020), “In FY2021, the program is estimated to benefit over 700,000 individuals.” The number of servicemembers and veterans attending post-secondary education is continuing to grow as more military personnel take advantage of the educational financial support offered by the VA. However, there has been a lack of corresponding support on campuses for this student population and a lack of research being conducted on military and veteran students.

This growing segment of the college and university student population often has unique challenges, and research is not being conducted fast enough to keep up with the growing population. As Whiteman et al. (2013) state, “Despite the upsurge of military personnel into higher education, there has not been a corresponding increase in our understanding of their unique needs or health related issues” (p. 265). Servicemembers and veteran students often feel disconnected from their peers and professors, have difficulties adjusting both in their education and personal lives, and many suffer from some form of traumatic experience or injury related to their years of service (Whiteman et al., 2013). However, progress has been made to support this population of students.

In 2021, the University of Southern Mississippi (USM) in Hattiesburg, Mississippi, was ranked as the third best institution of higher learning for servicemembers and veterans in the United States (Arnold, 2021). This is an incredible achievement, and the university is proud to have earned such a high honor. The university also opened a new facility in February 2022, the Quinlan-Hammond Hall of Honor (Burkes, 2022). This building is dedicated to the military and veteran students who attended the university, and it houses the Center for Military Veterans, Service Members, and Families (Center). These two great achievements were the inspiration for this research. This study sought to answer the questions,

- Why is the University of Southern Mississippi third in the nation for best institution of higher learning for military and veteran students?
- What are the strengths of the Center for Military Veterans, Service Members, and Families in supporting the students at the university?

This study sought to determine the strengths the university and the Center for Military Veterans, Service Members, and Families have in supporting the military and veteran students who attend the university and in what areas they could better support this student population.

Statement of Problem

Service members and veteran college students often have a hard time adjusting to civilian life and college life after their service. Many will also suffer from some form of trauma or injury from their years of service, and it is not uncommon for this trauma or injury to go untreated. Colleges and universities have a unique opportunity to help these service members and veterans reintegrate into civilian life, but oftentimes their system of

support is not efficient. This leaves service members and veterans without the support they need to readjust to civilian life and achieve their educational and personal goals. With more service members and veterans attending secondary education than ever before, it is imperative that colleges and universities have systems of support in place for this unique group of students.

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this study was to, from the perspective of the student body, determine the strengths and weaknesses of the programs at the University of Southern Mississippi in supporting its service members and veteran student population. There were three main goals for this project. The first goal was to determine what works well with the programs in place at the university for military and veteran students. The second goal was to determine what areas need improvement in the current programs. The final goal was to determine if there were areas in students' lives in which support was non-existent in the current programs at the university.

Assumptions

One assumption for this study is that both the University of Southern Mississippi and the Center for Military Veterans, Service Members, and Families will be ranked high in support by the participants because of the university's recent ranking for this student population. Another assumption for this study is that there will be areas in which support is lacking. This is assumed because support for students is constantly evolving and needs are constantly changing, and it can be hard for universities to keep up with these changing needs. A third and final assumption is that the university will be rated lower in support than

the Center because the university must provide support for all students whereas the Center can focus its support strictly on this student population.

Limitations

There are a few limitations and challenges for this study. One challenge is that military and veteran students often do not wish to identify themselves as such because of the stigma that can be attached to being a military or veteran college student. This could possibly influence a student's decision to participate for fear of being identified. Another challenge is the lack of available previous research. There is a lack of research that has been conducted on military and veteran student populations. A final limitation for this study was the time available to collect data. There was only a small amount of time to gather data, and this could limit the number of participants.

Conclusion

With the growing number of service members and veterans who are choosing to attend universities, it has become imperative for support to be offered for these students. This student population is non-traditional, and it is important to find ways to support them through their educational journey. Achieving third place in the nation for military members and their families is evidence of the success the University of Southern Mississippi has in supporting this student population. This study will allow the university to see how faculty, staff, and even administration can better support this unique student population and what kind of support these students continue to need.

CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

History

Since the terrorist attacks that took place on September 11, 2001, colleges and universities have seen an increase in the number of servicemembers attending schools using their GI benefits (Ward et al., 2021). It is important that colleges and universities continue to offer supportive, friendly environments for military and veteran students to earn their college degrees and give them the chance at bettering their lives after their years of service. A study by Ward et al. (2021) examined public attitudes towards patriotism and honoring veterans on college campuses, and, although patriotism did have a positive impact on attitudes towards honoring veterans, it had no impact on college support for veterans. However, the study also found that having a positive attitude about honoring veterans did positively affect college support of veterans. This positive attitude towards serving military and veteran students can be seen at colleges and universities such as the University of Southern Mississippi in Hattiesburg, Mississippi.

According to usnews.com (2022), 4.7% of the student population are veterans or active-duty military members at the University of Southern Mississippi. With around 14,600 students, this means there are approximately 686 military and veteran students who attend this university (DataUSA, 2020). In 2021, the university received a high honor; they were ranked third in the nation for military and veteran students (Arnold, 2021).

Academics

Several studies have shown that adjusting to higher education can be difficult for military and veteran students after their years of service. There are many factors that

contribute to their difficulty in transitioning from military life to civilian and student life, all of which make it hard, if not impossible at times, to concentrate in the classroom and focus on homework. One study found that “military unit support during deployment, current social support, anxiety, and posttraumatic symptoms...were significantly associated with academic adjustment” (Campbell & Riggs, 2015, p. 473). One study found that one of the most common problems that veterans report is feeling as though they do not fit in with the college environment, thus lacking social support (Elliot 2015). Another study conducted by Hunter-Johnson (2020) found several challenges that veterans and military students faced in academia. Some of the challenges he identified were mental health disorders such as post-traumatic stress disorder, feeling overwhelmed when not offered needed support, readjustment to civilian life, and possible family issues. He also identified several challenges that student veterans and military students may face within the classroom itself, including passive vs. active student role, the pace of learning, differences with the instructor's role, individualism vs. collectivism, and alienation (Hunter-Johnson, 2020).

One study by Naphan and Elliot (2015), which utilized eleven in-depth, interviews, found five themes that could both help a military student in academics and hinder them: task cohesion, military structure, military responsibilities and release anxiety, combat experience, and social cohesion. Task cohesion was a benefit and a possible hinderance for military students. It helped to motivate military and veteran students to work hard on assignments so they would not disappoint others, but it could also leave them feeling disgusted with civilian students who lacked this social cohesion (Naphan & Elliot, 2015). The lack of structure was also described as being hard for

military students to adjust to. It often left them feeling lost and unsure of how to obtain their GI benefits. The two biggest challenges that military and veteran students faced in this study was feeling as though their time in the service meant nothing in their academic institution and leaving behind the expectations of their former roles in the military, especially if they had been exposed to large amounts of combat (Naphan & Elliot, 2015). Overall, there are many challenges, both socially and interpersonally, that affect military and veteran students' ability to perform in academia.

Social Support

Social support on campuses is often lacking for military and veteran students. Many of them report difficulties in adjusting to student life, and they often feel isolated in the classroom (Whitemen et al., 2013). In one study on peer support for military and veteran students, Whitemen et al. (2013) found that, although emotional support from peers increased for this population of students, the military and veteran students never reached the same level of emotional support as their non-service peers. In another study, Graf et al. (2015), found that 30% of military and veteran students felt their psychological needs were not being met in the classroom. They reported having trouble with social interactions, instructors, course work, and having PTSD-related problems. In a series of interviews conducted by Gower and Menzfeld (2022), they identified three different themes relating to social support for servicemembers after their discharge: a sense of loss, difficulty connecting in civilian life, and seeking out familiarity. Life in the military often leads to the formation of strong, family-life bonds between the men and women who serve together, and losing those bonds after discharge is often very hard for these men and women. Not only do these men and women lose those strong bonds, but they also

often feel as though they have lost their sense of identity (Gower & Menzfeld, 2022). Some felt this loss immediately while for others it was felt years after discharge. According to Gower and Menzfeld (2022), this loss of companionship and identity was often compounded by a feeling of social isolation. Without the support system they had while in the service, many servicemembers felt isolated and sometimes even abandoned.

Mental Health

Mental health is a major concern within the military and veteran population. Many servicemembers suffer from mental health illnesses or disorders, including post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety, depression, and many more (Bonar et al., 2015). Oftentimes, these servicemembers also do not seek mental health care. In their study, Bonar et al. (2015) surveyed 1,449 National Guard members, and, of those who screened positive for mental health disorders, only about half of them utilized mental health services. Some of the barriers to receiving treatment this study identified included embarrassment, concern with confidentiality, and seeking help being seen as a weakness. In another study, out of 214 participants, 64 reported receiving some kind of mental health services (Ness et al., 2015). This same study found that PTSD symptoms correlated with lower self-regulation and motivation, including lower motivation to complete schoolwork.

One study by Williston and Roemer (2017) found that emotion regulation skills supported the relationship between social support and academic engagement and that social support and emotion regulation supported quality of life. This study utilized 87 participants, most of whom reported being active duty. This study showed the importance

of regulating one's emotions, and many who suffer from some form of mental health illness are unable to regulate their emotions.

A study conducted by Taylor and Edwards (2016) interviewed college administrators to determine if they had seen a change in student veterans' psychological characteristics. Although there was an improvement in the confidence of student veterans, the presence of negative emotions had not changed. The challenges college administrators experienced in supporting this student population was not reported to have changed either. According to this research, the challenges are still very much there.

Overall, despite the growing population size, military and veteran students often still do not receive the support they need. Many of them face challenges both within and outside of the classroom, and many of them face some type of mental illness including PTSD, anxiety, and depression. Oftentimes, they do not seek help or treatment because of the stigma and fear attached to seeking help. In addition to these, military and veteran students may also feel isolated from their peers and instructors and may lack a social support system. All of this can make it extremely difficult for a military or veteran student to attend college and complete their degree program.

CHAPTER III: METHODS

Survey

For this study, a survey was developed by the researcher. It included multiple choice questions, scaling questions, and questions with response boxes in which participants could respond. In total, there were twelve questions divided into three different sections. The first section gathered demographic information about the participants. It asked participants for information about their gender, military status, age, and family status. For the family status, it asked participants what their relationship status was single, divorced, widowed, or partnered, and it questioned if they were parents or guardians.

The second section asked participants about their relationship with the University of Southern Mississippi. These questions focused on how supported the participants felt by the university. It began by asking participants to rate the university on a scale from one to ten, with one being the lowest and ten being the highest. The participants were then asked to rate how strongly they agreed or disagreed with several statements related to how the university did or did not support them. The last question in this section asked the participants to express if there were any areas in their lives in which they felt the university could better support them and, if so, how. This question gave the participants a text box, so they could respond in detail.

The third and final section of the survey asked participants about the Center for Military Veterans, Servicemembers, and Families. Once again, the section began by asking participants to rate, on a scale of one to ten, how supported they felt specifically by the Center for Military Veterans, Service Members, and Families. The survey then

asked participants if they were aware of or had used several different programs for servicemembers and their families offered through the Center and, if they had used them, how helpful they found them to be. The survey concluded by giving participants a chance to write about how they felt supported by the Center and in what ways they felt the Center could better support them as college students.

Procedure

To maintain confidentiality, the researcher never had direct contact with any of the participants. Instead, the survey was sent in an email to the Center for Military Veterans, Service Members, and Families at the University of Southern Mississippi after IRB approval was obtained. The Center forwarded the survey via email to their list of military and veteran students. The email contained the link for the students to take the survey. All data for this study was collected through Qualtrics. Qualtrics is the survey site approved for use by USM. The email was sent out at two different times, approximately three weeks apart. After the second email was sent out, students at the university were given two weeks to respond before the survey was closed. The data was collected in June and July of 2022.

Data Analysis

Both the qualitative and quantitative data were collected through the survey. After the survey was closed, the researcher studied and examined the qualitative data to find themes in the participants' responses. The quantitative data was examined as well, and both sets of data were used to interpret the results of this study.

Participants

The survey was sent to approximately 1,600 students at the University of Southern Mississippi. However, because the survey was sent by the Center for Military Veterans, Service Members, and Families, it was impossible to obtain an exact number of students and a response rate. In total, there were 52 respondents. However, one respondent did not give consent, and others did not complete the survey, dropping the response rate down to 44 total participants. Of those participants, 21 identified as female and 23 identified as male, resulting in 47.7% of respondents being female and 52.2% as male. When asked about military status, 11 participants identified as active duty, 25 identified as veterans, seven identified as neither, and one participant did not respond to this question. The participants ranged in age from 18 to 65+, with the largest group identifying as 25-34 years of age. There was a total of 18 participants that identified as a parent or guardian. In total, 20 respondents identified they were single, 20 that they were married, two partnered, and two divorced.

CHAPTER IV: RESULTS

Quantitative Results

For the first question, participants were asked to rate on a scale from one to ten, with one being the lowest and ten being the highest, how supported they felt by the University of Southern Mississippi overall. None of the participants gave the school a rating of one or two. However, ten of the participants, 22.7%, gave the school a rating of five or below on level of support. Of these ten, seven gave the school a five-score rating. In total, 18.1% of participants rated the school at a seven, and 11.3% of participants rated the level of support at a nine. On the scale, a ten was the highest with sixteen participants choosing this rating, 36.3% of the total number of participants.

After rating the university, participants were asked how much they agreed or disagreed with several statements. The first statement was “USM supports me as an individual.” For this statement, fourteen (31.82%) participants rated that they strongly agreed, and only one participant rated that they somewhat disagreed with this statement. None of the participants rated that they disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement. For the second statement, participants were asked to rate how much they agreed or disagreed that “USM supports me as a parent/guardian.” The largest number of respondents, 28 participants or 63.64%, stated that they neither agreed nor disagreed with this statement. Given that twenty-six of the respondents stated they were not parents or guardians, this finding was not surprising. Seven of the participants strongly agreed with this statement, and one participant strongly disagreed with this statement. For the third statement, participants were asked to agree or disagree with “USM supports my family

and me.” Some of the participants, 39.53%, neither agreed nor disagreed with this statement. The second highest percent of participants, 23.26%, strongly agreed with this statement. The fourth statement was, “USM can improve the programs they provide for military/veteran students.” Of 44 total responses, 12 (27.27%) strongly agreed with this statement, and only two disagreed. Thirty-four respondents selected that they agreed with this statement, and eight said they neither agreed nor disagreed. The last statement was “USM provides financial advice, scholarships, or aid for applying for grants.” For this statement, 84% of participants agreed to varying degrees, and 14% disagreed with this statement in varying degrees. Only one participant neither agreed nor disagreed with this statement.

Table 1: Agreement/Disagreement with Statements about USM

Statements	Strongly Agree	Agree	Somewhat Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
USM supports me as an individual	14	11	8	10	1	0	0
USM supports me as a parent/guardian	7	6	2	28	0	0	1
USM supports my family and me	10	7	6	17	2	1	0
USM can improve the programs they provide for military/veteran students	12	16	6	8	0	0	2
USM provides financial advice, scholarships, or aid for applying for grants	17	9	11	1	4	1	1

Participants in the study were also asked to rate on a scale from one to ten, with one being the lowest and ten being the highest, how supported they felt by USM's Center for Military Veterans, Servicemembers, and Families. The Center is where all the programs for military and veteran students are housed. It is meant to be the epicenter for military and veteran students, as well as their families, at the university.

For this question, there was a total of 44 responses. The highest rating was a ten, and the lowest rating was a one. However, only one respondent rated the Center at a one. The remaining participants rated the center at a four or higher. The most frequent rating was a ten at 43.18%. The second most frequent rating was an eight (18.18%), and the third most frequent rating was a six (13.34%). None of the participants rated the center at a two or three.

Programs from the Center

The Center at USM offers nine different programs. The programs are Paws for Patriots, Textbooks for Troops, VA Work Study Program, VA Vet Success on Campus, Golden Eagle Veteran Network, USMEagle Vet, Student Veterans of America (SVA), USM Military and Veteran Student Services, and VA Veterans Service Officer (VSO). Participants were asked to rate how helpful these programs had been for them during their time at USM and if they were unaware of the program, to indicate so. The highest response rate for any of the individual programs was 42 responses, and the lowest was 33 responses. Although it is impossible to know why participants did not respond to all of the programs, it is reasonable to believe that the participants were not aware of the program or did not know what it was and chose not to respond.

The program Paws for Patriots had thirty-three responses, but of those responses, 60.61% selected they were unaware of the program. Five respondents strongly agreed or agreed that the program had been useful for them, and three respondents somewhat disagreed or disagreed. The program Textbooks for Troops had thirty-nine responses. Of those responses, 48.72% were unaware of the program, but 31% strongly agreed or agreed that the program was useful. The VA Work Study Program had thirty-three responses, and 30.30% of those respondents were unaware of the program. Of the respondents who were aware of the program, fifteen strongly agreed, agreed, or somewhat agreed that the program had been useful for them. The VA Vet Success on Campus program had a total of 33 responses, and 39.39% stated they were unaware of the program. Of the remaining responses, 11 (33.33%) strongly agree, agreed, or somewhat agreed that they found the program useful, and seven (21.21%) were neutral. Only one participant disagreed that this program was useful. For the Golden Eagle Veteran Network, there were 35 responses. Just over half of the participants, 18 (51.42%) of them, responded they were unaware of the program. Only seven (2%) participants found it useful, and nine (25.71%) were neutral. Thirty-six participants responded on the program USMEagle Vet, and 14 (38.88%) of these participants were unaware of the program. Fifteen (41.66%) of the participants agreed that the program was useful. The Student Veterans of America (SVA) program had 36 respondents. Of those, 47.22% were unaware of the program, and 30.55% of the respondents found the program useful. The program USM Military and Veteran Student Services had the highest number of respondents, with 42 of the 44 total participants responding to it. It also had the lowest rate of students who were unaware of the program, with only 9.52% stating they were

unaware of the program. For the rest of the participants, 76.19% of the respondents strongly agreed, agreed, or somewhat agreed that this program had been useful for them. The last program, VA Veterans Service Officer (VSO), had 37 respondents. Of those, 40.54% were unaware of this program, while just over half of the respondents agreed they found the program useful.

Qualitative Results

When asked the question, “Are there areas in your life in which USM could better support you?”, participants were given a chance to write their responses. From these responses, six different themes were identified. The first theme was “No.” Fourteen of the participants responded to this question with a simple “no” or “N/A.” One participant even responded, “No, overall, USM instructors supported me during an unexpected event in my life allowing me additional time to complete assignments.” This is a good sign that, at least for the participants in this study, many of the military and veteran students at USM feel they are supported in every aspect of their life by the university. It is this overarching support that has helped to make the university third in the nation for this student population. The second most common theme in these open responses was “Cost.” In total, eight of the participants mentioned the cost of attending the university. Many of the participants mentioned things such as military tuition assistance and lowering the cost of attending the school overall. One participant even mentioned hotel and airfare being a part of the cost of attending USM. Tuition is expensive, and it would appear, based upon this group of participants, that this is a particular concern for military and veteran students. The third most mentioned theme from these responses was “School.” Five of the participants talked about school in their responses. Three of the participants did not

expand what they meant by schooling, and one of the participants stated, “...understanding military transcripts and finding equivalent USM courses that they can serve as substitutes for.” The fifth participant went into great detail with their response. They state,

There are challenges of being a veteran student that maybe teachers and advisors are not wholly aware. Finding time for homework and studying is challenging because I am also a parent and a husband. I have a home that requires maintenance. My family has priority over studying and homework.. Work has priority. What if someone works graveyard? I suspect most veterans do not want special treatment, but maybe a bit of understanding that we are generally older and have families and jobs that take priority over school (despite wanting to really do well in school to secure better employment). I disagree with graded homework for some courses. Who has an hour or two for homework? And homework is sometimes weighted so heavily against your grade. I get it, it's college. But it is challenging to juggle so many things, then add coursework. I wish there were ways for veterans who are in a similar position as mine to be able to take challenging majors and succeed. I don't have study groups. I do not have time to stay after school to get tutored. I get we have to do these things, I just wish there were ways around school work outside of class because the real world doesn't allow for much time for ancillary priorities.

These responses may help to explain why USM is not ranked even higher than it is. Military and veteran students are not traditional students, and many of them have lives outside academia that require much of their attention. It is suggested that these students

may need more support both within and outside of the classroom than is currently offered. The fourth, fifth, and sixth themes were family, work, and spirituality. Although participants mentioned these three areas, none went into detail with their responses.

Participants were asked the question, “Are there areas in your life in which the Center for Military Veterans, Service Members, and Family could better support you.” Out of the responses, two of the participants stated “yes” with no further explanation. After examining the remaining responses, four different themes were discovered. They are “No”, “School”, “Work”, and “Family.” The highest number of responses were “No.” In total, fourteen participants responded to this question with “no” or “N/A”, and this helps to show that one of the Center’s strengths lies in its ability to offer a well-rounded support for many of these students. The second most common theme found in participants’ responses was “School.” Within this theme were several different responses that all pertained to schooling or awareness of school programs. Five of the respondents talked about wanting better communication and understanding of their GI benefits and how to utilize them. Two of the respondents talked about increasing the awareness of the programs offered through the Center. One of the respondents stated that they had not been aware of the programs despite getting numerous emails from the recruiters. Another respondent stated,

Yes, they can provide acknowledgement and services for veteran graduate students that attend the Stennis Space Center campus. For the past 5 years not single member of the Center for Military Veterans has made an appearance to our site. At the very least, someone could show up once a year for our new student orientation and proclaim this center even exists on the USM campus as a whole.

The third most mentioned theme was “Work.” Of the four participants who mentioned work, only one expanded their answer by stating, “Just as a work study: pay us more than 7.25 an hour.” The other three participants only stated “work” and did not expand on their responses. The last theme was “Family.” Two of the participants responded to this question by simply stating, “family.” Neither participant elaborated on what they meant.

The last question participants were asked was, “Are there ways you feel the Center for Military Veterans, Service Members, and Families could better support you and your family, and if so, how?” In total, two different themes emerged from these responses: “No” and “Unaware.” In total, fifteen participants responded to this question with “no” or “N/A,” making this the largest theme found for this question. The second theme from the responses to this question was “Outreach.” Many of the participants responded that they were unaware of the programs offered by the Center or that they would like to see more outreach from the Center overall. One participant responded that, “I feel the veteran administrators are constantly advocating and voicing the concerns of dependents, spouse, family members, and veterans... We are not traditional students as veterans often times...”

It is clear from this participant’s response that the Center is advocating for this student population. As the participant states, veteran students are not traditional students, and more understanding both within and outside of the classroom is needed for this student population.

CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION

Discussion

This study was designed to answer two questions: “Why is the University of Southern Mississippi third in the nation for best institution of higher learning for military and veteran students” and “What are the strengths of the Center for Military Veterans, Service Members, and Families in supporting the students at the university?”

When asked how well the university supported them overall, almost all the participants gave the school a rating of five or above on a ten-point scale. In total, sixteen participants rated USM at a ten in their level of support. This shows that a large portion of the students do feel as though USM supports them fully, and this support clearly has an influence on why USM is third in the nation for military students. However, seven of the forty-four participants gave USM only a five-score rating. This points to the need to continue expanding the network of support given to military and veteran students at the university because the support experienced by some of the participants is not experienced by a sizeable portion of the participants.

The results of this study also reveal that of the forty-four participants, all but one agreed to varying levels that the university supports them as an individual. One participant even stated on the open-response question, “...overall, USM instructors supported me during an unexpected event in my life allowing me additional time to complete assignments.” This shows that USM supports its students as individuals, and this can be considered one reason that the university is ranked third in the nation for this student population.

When participants were asked about the programs offered at USM, thirty-four of the participants agreed that the university could improve its programs. This could also be considered one of the reasons USM ranks third instead of first or second as best institution of higher learning for military and veteran students. Although the university provides many programs that several of the participants agree are helpful, many of the participants believe that these programs could continue to be improved. Financial support was one of the areas that many participants felt the university was lacking. Eight participants mentioned cost in the open-response question, and this could be one thing that is limiting the support the university offers this student population. The cost of everything, including attending school, is rising, and, based upon this group of participants, this is a high concern for this student population. Awareness within the classroom may also be contributing to the university's third place ranking. One participant included in their response, "There are challenges of being a veteran student that maybe teachers and advisors are not wholly aware." Overall, although the feedback from this survey was largely positive about the support the university provides for military and veteran students, there are areas including financial support and awareness, that need to be improved.

The Center for Military Veterans, Service Members, and Families is the main focal point for service members and veteran students at the University of Southern Mississippi. When participants were asked to rate how supported they felt by the Center, with one being the lowest and ten being the highest, a majority of the participants ranked the Center at a ten or an eight. Even with the open-response question, many participants responded "no" when asked if there were areas in their lives in which the Center could

improve their support. This indicates that one of the Center's strengths lies in its ability to support the university's military and veteran students overall. Another strength the Center has is its success with the nine different programs it runs. For all nine programs, none of the participants strongly disagreed that the program was helpful, but every program had more than one participant that strongly agreed that it was helpful. This shows that the programs the Center runs are successful in helping the students they are designed to aid. The Center is fulfilling its mission of helping and supporting service members, military veterans, and their families who attend the University of Southern Mississippi.

However, perhaps the Center's greatest weakness is making these successful programs known. All but one of the programs had ten or more participants who selected that they were unaware of the program's existence, and even this one program had four participants who were unaware of it. For one of the open-response questions, one of the participants even stated, "Yes, they (the Center) can provide acknowledgement and services for the veteran graduate students that attend the Stennis Space Center campus. For the past 5 years not [a] single member of the Center for Military Veterans has made an appearance to our site." Thus, although the Center has strength in its ability to support this student population and success with the various programs it offers, more needs to be done to make these programs known so that their success can continue to help more students at the University of Southern Mississippi.

Limitations

This study had a few challenges and limitations. The first limitation was the number of participants who decided to take part in this study. Only a very small number of the students at the University of Southern Mississippi who received the survey email

chose to participate. This limits the ability of these results to be generalized for the entire military and student population at USM. Another limitation was that the email was sent through the Center, and this limited the participant sample to only the students registered with the Center. Any military or veteran student who was not registered at the Center did not receive the email. A third challenge was the time restraints for this project. Due to a limited time to complete this study, the survey was only active for two months. This may have limited the number of students who chose to participate.

Future Research

One thing future research should do is use a larger number of participants. This study only used a small portion of the total number of military and veteran students who go to the university, and this limits the ability to generalize these findings to the total population at USM. Another thing future research may do is try to reach service members and veteran students who are not registered with the Center. These students may offer a different perspective than the students who utilize the Center at the University of Southern Mississippi. A third suggestion for future research would be to conduct in-depth interviews with this student population. A majority of these questions were quantitative questions, limiting the participants' ability to respond in-depth on a majority of the items covered. A final point future research may consider doing is allowing for more time for a survey to be completed.

Suggestions

Based upon these results, two suggestions for improving support for service members and military veteran students and their families are given. The first suggestion is to try to improve student awareness of the programs offered through the Center for

Military Veterans, Service Members, and Families. As this study shows, many students stated they were unaware of these services, but the students who were aware of them almost always agreed that the programs were helpful for them. One possible way of increasing awareness is to design and hang up a flyer discussing these different programs. These flyers could be placed in high-traffic areas where the likelihood of service members and military veterans seeing them is greatest. Another possible solution to this issue could be an annual or bi-annual email sent to the students registered with the Center that describes the available programs. The second suggestion is that USM try to find ways to improve support within the classroom for service members and military veteran students. One possible solution is to offer classes to professors that help to increase their awareness of the unique challenges faced by this student population and ways to help them. A second possible solution is to offer classes designed specifically to the needs of service members and military veteran students.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is evident that the University of Southern Mississippi and the Center for Military Veterans, Service Members, and Families are purposeful in supporting military and veteran students who attend the university. They work hard to support the students as individuals, and the Center offers nine different programs that have been extremely useful in supporting this student population. As one participant put it, "I feel the veteran administrators are constantly advocating and voicing the concerns of dependents, spouse(s), family members, and veterans...we are not traditional students as veterans often times..." However, there is still work to be done. More needs to be done to make students aware of the programs offered through the Center. The students who do

use these programs find them very supportive, and it is important that these programs reach more students. Overall, the university and the Center have worked hard to provide support for this unique student population, and they have been successful in their mission.

APPENDIX A: IRB APPROVAL LETTER

Office of
Research Integrity



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NOTICE OF INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD ACTION

The project below has been reviewed by The University of Southern Mississippi Institutional Review Board in accordance with Federal Drug Administration regulations (21 CFR 26, 111), Department of Health and Human Services regulations (45 CFR Part 46), and University Policy to ensure:

- The risks to subjects are minimized and reasonable in relation to the anticipated benefits.
- The selection of subjects is equitable.
- Informed consent is adequate and appropriately documented.
- Where appropriate, the research plan makes adequate provisions for monitoring the data collected to ensure the safety of the subjects.
- Where appropriate, there are adequate provisions to protect the privacy of subjects and to maintain the confidentiality of all data.
- Appropriate additional safeguards have been included to protect vulnerable subjects.
- Any unanticipated, serious, or continuing problems encountered involving risks to subjects must be reported immediately. Problems should be reported to ORI via the Incident submission on InfoEd IRB.
- The period of approval is twelve months. An application for renewal must be submitted for projects exceeding twelve months.

PROTOCOL NUMBER: 22-372
PROJECT TITLE: USM Military and Veteran Students: A Case Study
SCHOOL/PROGRAM: Deans Office Honors College
RESEARCHERS: PI: Dianna Couch
Investigators: Couch, Dianna~Foster, Holly~
IRB COMMITTEE ACTION: Approved
CATEGORY: Expedited Category
PERIOD OF APPROVAL: 07-Apr-2022 to 06-Apr-2023

Donald Sacco, Ph.D.
Institutional Review Board Chairperson

APPENDIX B: RECRUITMENT EMAIL

Hello USM students,

My name is Dianna Couch, and I am an undergraduate student in the School of Social Work. I am kindly asking for your participation in my research project by taking this online, anonymous survey about how supported you feel by the university and the Center for Military Veterans, Service Members, and Families. I am seeking military students who are active duty or veterans and are currently enrolled at USM either part-time or full-time. Participation in this survey is confidential and has been approved by the USM Institutional Review Board (protocol number 22-372). If interested, please see the information below.

Recently, USM was ranked 3rd in the nation for military students by the Military Times. The purpose of this survey is to identify in what areas military students feel supported by the university and the Center for Military Veterans, Service Members, and Families, and in what areas they do not feel they are receiving the support they need, there is no support or support could be improved. Your participation will provide useful information for my thesis as well as contribute to the university's knowledge of how they can better support their military and veteran students.

To participate, please complete the brief survey using this link:

https://usmuw.co1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_2bqFT2i8sTIJhR4

Thank you for your time and participation!

APPENDIX C: SURVEY QUESTIONS

1. Please indicate your gender
 - a. Woman
 - b. Man
 - c. Non-Binary
 - d. Prefer not to say
2. Please indicate your current status
 - a. Active duty
 - b. Veteran
 - c. Neither
3. Please indicate your age
 - a. Under 18
 - b. 18-24
 - c. 25-34
 - d. 35-49
 - e. 50-64
 - f. 65+
4. Please indicate if you are a parent or guardian
 - a. Yes, I am a parent or guardian
 - b. No, I am not a parent or guardian
5. Please indicate your relationship status
 - a. Single
 - b. Married

- c. Partnered
- d. Widowed
- e. Divorced
- f. Prefer not to say

The following questions will be addressing how supported you feel by USM as a school.

When answering these questions, please consider USM in its entirety as a university community.

6. On a scale of one to ten, with ten being the highest and one being the lowest, please rate overall how supported you feel by USM

7. Please indicate how much you agree or disagree with the following statements. Please remember that these questions are referring to USM as a whole.

- USM supports me as an individual
- USM supports me as a parent/guardian
- USM supports my family and me
- USM can improve the programs they provide for military/veteran students
- USM provides financial advice, scholarships, or aid for applying for grants

8. Are there areas in your life (etc. schooling, family, work, spiritual, health) in which USM could better support you?

- a. Text box entry

The following questions will refer strictly to the Center for Military Veterans, Service Members and Families. When answering these questions, please consider only this center and how it specifically has or has not supported you.

9. On a scale of one to ten, with ten being the highest and one being the lowest, please rate overall how supported you feel by the Center for Military Veterans, Service Members, and Families.

10. Please indicate how much you agree or disagree that the following programs offered by the Center for Military Veterans, Service Members, and Family have been useful for you. If you were not aware of these programs, please select “Unaware.”

- USMEagle Vet
- VA Work Study Program
- Paws For Patriots
- Golden Eagle Veteran Network
- USM Military and Veteran Student Services
- VA Vet Success on Campus
- Student Veterans of America- SVA
- VA Veterans Service Officer- VSO
- Textbooks for Troops

11. Are there areas in your life (etc. schooling, family, work, spiritual, health) in which the Center for Military Veterans, Service Members, and Family could better support you?

a. Text box entry

12. Are there ways you feel the Center for Military Veterans, Service Members, and Family could better support you and your family, and if so, how?

a. Text box entry

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