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Seth D. Kastle
Fort Hays State University, sdkastle@fhsu.edu

Brendon Fox
bcfox@fhsu.edu

Jeni McRay
Fort Hays State University, vlmcray@fhsu.edu

Haley Moon

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**Supporting the Student Service Member and Veteran Population as
Learners: An Exploratory Study of Academic Motivation and Best Practices
in Student Services at a State Comprehensive University**

Seth D. Kastle

Fort Hays State University

Brendon Fox

Fort Hays State University

Jeni McRay

Fort Hays State University

Haley Moon

Fort Hays State University

Since September 11th, 2001, over 2.77 million United States (U.S.) service members were deployed in support of the Global War on Terror (GWOT) and Overseas Contingency Operations (Garshick et al., 2019). The ranging latitude of these campaigns has caused the size of the U.S. military to ebb and flow for the last twenty years. Due to these operations' size and scope and the Post 9/11 G.I. Bill's legislative passage, many current and former service members have entered the halls of higher education (Niv & Bennett, 2017). This trend is similar to the influx of U.S. service members that attended universities and technical institutions following WWII when the 1944 Serviceman's Readjustment Act passed into legislation (White, 2004). Even though this population approaches the university setting with benefits in hand to cover the cost of education, there is still limited research regarding specific ways to support them, especially given the steep rise in online programs offered in higher education today.

Universities are often welcoming and enthusiastic about supporting the military population but are unsure how best to do so consistently to ensure maximum retention and persistence to degree attainment (O'Herrin, 2011). Higher education as a whole has had a mixed response to the influx of student veterans and their diverse needs (Petri, Jenson, Day, & Gotto, 2016). This population has represented a significant number of students across the country, averaging around 900,000 annually over the last five years (Veteran Benefits Administration, 2019). Therefore, it is a conscientious decision for institutions to pursue research regarding the variables that dictate academic readiness, performance, motivation, and persistence of military and veteran students.

As the two-decade mark of armed conflict worldwide for American service members post-9/11 approaches, the need for supporting the student service member and veteran (SSM/V) subpopulation in higher education has never been greater. Institutions who wish to engage this group must alter their support systems and

infrastructure to help these students succeed in their academic endeavors. Institutions should make a continued and purposeful effort to understand this subpopulation of students. Otherwise, their unique needs could go unaddressed and further differentiate them from other non-traditional degree-seekers. Institutional metrics aside, this failure could result in fewer service members reaching their educational goals or realizing their fullest potential in their military and civilian careers.

By extending programs that widen access to admission and value teaching over research, the state comprehensive university (SCU) increases educational opportunity to SSM/Vs by providing expanded student services and diverse academic programming (Supplee, Orphan, & Moreno, 2017). Assisting service members pursuing educational endeavors also promotes retention/persistence and contributes to fulfilling the SCU mission.

Purpose

Fort Hays State University (FHSU), a SCU located in Kansas, has developed innovative pathways to degree completion and addressing SSM/Vs' needs through the 2020 launch of a dedicated Transfer and Military Center (TMC). The center provides centralized student support services from recruitment through graduation. This endeavor resulted in a suite of military-specific academic programs that maximize collegiate credit service members can receive from prior military training and experience to shorten their path to degree completion.

The challenge of supporting the SSM/V community in a meaningful way is not new (Callahan & Jarrat, 2014; DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2008; O'Herrin, 2011), nor is it isolated to this specific state university. To best support this community, it is vital to understand how SSM/Vs perceive their readiness in being prepared for collegiate study and their motivations in pursuing higher education toward the goal of degree attainment. Borsari et. al., (2017), in their review of over 130 pieces of peer-reviewed and "gray" literature on the SSM/V population, concluded "...the most troubling theme to emerge from the peer-reviewed and gray literatures is the absence of systematic implementation and evaluation of any programs designed to help the SSM/V population" (p. 171).

The primary purpose of this study is to begin just such an effort. Its intent is to inform the TMC about best practices in serving this institution's SSM/V student population by capturing the perceptions of the first cohort of military students recruited into its inaugural AAS in Technology and Leadership degree program. This program is the first of many military-specific programs to be positioned under the umbrella of the TMC.

Who are the students attracted to this program? How do they compare/contrast with their civilian student counterparts? What is their perception of their academic preparedness? What are their opinions about provided services

and campus climate during their first year in the program? What are their primary and secondary motivations for enrollment? Are they experiencing any barriers that might prevent them from meeting their educational goals? Answers to these questions will ideally aid the center in establishing robust and sustainable program evaluation measures that lead to maximizing the students' educational experiences.

This line of inquiry led to the development and administration of the Military Learner Academic Success Perception Survey (MLASPS). Conducted with a purposely small, bounded population, this exploratory study aimed to capture useful information from a specific and targeted population early in the center's existence to determine baseline data useful for decisions about the type, scope, and degree of student services needed to serve TMC students.

A secondary purpose of this study is to pilot the instrument's usefulness for the TMC's administration and program evaluation efforts. The survey contains three sections. The first measures demographic information of the institution's SSM/Vs. The second contains customized questions specific to the TMC, and the third uses the well-established Academic Motivation Scale—College Version AMS-C28 (Vallerand et al., 1992). Results from the use of this instrument may also help other SCUs evaluate student services for their SSM/V student populations, a tertiary purpose of this study.

Literature Review

To best serve SSM/Vs, it is necessary to determine whether and to what extent non-traditional SSM/V characteristics and key performance indicators like academic preparedness, motivation, and persistence intersect with established best practices in student services. Research in this area is limited, at best. For example, the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA) Research and Policy Institute (2013) stated (p. 1):

- There are no accurate counts of the actual number of active-duty military and student veterans attending U.S. postsecondary institutions.
- There is limited information available regarding the success rates of these individuals.
- Knowledge of the factors affecting these students' success and the institutional practices most likely to enhance their success is sparse.

After administering a multi-institution research project aimed at measuring student success, NASPA found that only 25% of respondent institutions "reported having a detailed understanding of the root causes of stop-out or dropout among undergraduate students who are active-duty military and student veterans" (p. 3). This literature review will focus on military learner characteristics, academic motivation, preparedness, retention, persistence, and recommended best practices for SSM/V populations to provide context to those surveyed for this project (Sponsler, Wesaw, & Jarrat, 2013).

SSM/V Characteristics. SSM/Vs are not new to higher education student bodies. Still, the consistently large number of active duty and veteran students enrolled in higher education has led to a growing level of research regarding what type of people make up this subgroup and how to support them best. First, it is essential to define what, specifically, is meant by SSM/V. Broadly, it means current and former military personnel who are enrolled in college (Eakman et al., 2019). More specifically to the TMC, it means any individual or combination of the following classifications: active duty, guard, reserve, retired, or veteran seeking a formal academic credential. Second, each of these subgroups of SSM/Vs enters the institution with differing levels of experience, maturity, expectations, motivations, and preparedness for study. These factors can impact their persistence to a degree; therefore, understanding these characteristics is vital to an institution's ability to meet their needs.

Those who enter military service come from all socioeconomic classes, ethnicities, religions, and backgrounds (Kane, 2005, 2006; Molina, 2015; Molina & Morse, 2015). Additionally, there is an overlap between some characteristics of SSM/Vs and non-traditional, first-generation learners, e.g., older, delayed entry, parents, financially independent, etc. Ford and Vignare (2015) stated that military-learner demographics are most similar to the non-traditional, first-generation learners, "although military learners face additional challenges associated with service-connected injuries and disabilities" (p. 1). Self-identification is the only tool available to higher education institutions to judge this population's density on their campuses. If these learners are not using educational benefits linked to their military service, there is no other reliable way to track them.

It is also important to identify distinctions between SSM/Vs and other adult, civilian students. According to Bond Hill et al. (2019), SSM/Vs are underrepresented in higher education due to being overrepresented on race and class dimensions in the military. In other words, SSM/Vs come from low-income and racial/ethnic backgrounds to a greater extent than traditional and non-traditional civilian students and estimates of enrollment in 2011-2012 of SSM/Vs were only 4.9 per cent of total undergraduate enrollment (Molina & Morse, 2015).

Additionally, SSM/Vs do not approach higher education completely devoid of formal, structured learning since graduating high school (Nelken, 2009). That distinction applies explicitly to those learners who have extensive military experience and often expect efficiency in pursuit of their goals. These students may carry an expectation of credit for prior learning, defined educational pathways, or clear connections of how each step in the educational process will lead to the attainment of their vocational and personal educational goals (Crissman, 2018).

SSM/Vs enter higher education during a variety of phases in their careers. Some are fresh out of their initial entry training, while others may be transitioning to the civilian workforce after an extensive career or even years after separation.

Another factor influencing their academic experience is that they have operated in and are shaped by an environment heavily governed by command, control, and structure. This variable can profoundly impact how they respond when asked to function as an autonomous, creative, reflective individual (Naphan & Elliott, 2015). It is also important to note that many enlisted service members and veterans participating in higher education are first-generation college students (Evans et al., 2015), which alone can affect their academic success (Bonura & Lovaald, 2015).

Academic Motivation and Preparedness. Motivation is a multi-dimensional construct (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 1991; Vallerand et al., 1992) that measures and explains causes for action towards a desired goal. Motivation is one of the most critical and complex concepts in education (Mizuno et al., 2008; Waugh, 2002). More specifically, academic motivation relates to cognitive, behavioral, and affective educational factors, such as the decision to attend college, students' reasons for persistence, satisfaction with school, creative thinking skills, and study skills (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Vallerand, Pelletier, & Koestner, 2008).

SSM/Vs are among the most highly motivated groups to enroll in higher education for two reasons: career advancement and personal satisfaction (Hanover Research, 2019). Additionally, they pursue higher education as a means of transitioning back to civilian life and develop new skills that can help them in the labor market (p. 7). According to NASPA, the notion that student soldiers and veterans are less prepared to succeed in college than other adult student populations is a myth (2013). On the contrary, those who work directly with SSM/Vs often find them among the best-prepared students. They cite the challenge student veterans face as translating the skills and attitudes developed through their military service into the academic context. They posit the competencies necessary for degree completion are: set a goal, define steps to achieve it, balance competing priorities, and hold themselves accountable for execution. Those skills need to be honed toward earning a degree and preparing themselves for postgraduate career success.

Rumann and Hamrick (2010) argue that SSM/Vs have heightened feelings of maturity and academic goal commitment. However, Williams-Klotz and Gansemer-Topf (2017) suggest that the source of invalidation of SSM/Vs may originate from civilian students or faculty sharing stereotypes of military experiences with limited knowledge (p. 5). These data provide a basis for approaching successful outcomes for SSM/Vs. The literature indicates that preparedness, retention, and persistence are essential factors for attaining degree completion.

Retention and Persistence. The literature regarding SSM/Vs shows no precise standard measurement involving student retention of this segment of students across institutions. However, the National Veteran Education Success Tracker (NVEST) compiled an exhaustive study on SSM/V completion rates, both Pre-and-Post-9/11 GI Bill (Cate, Lyon, Schmeling, and Bogue, 2017). They argued

that federal and state Departments of Education, local institutions, and postsecondary programs and policies measure progress toward completing degrees and certificates and define and count postsecondary completion as the moment a student has fulfilled all requirements to be conferred a certificate or degree by a college or university (p. 3).

According to the 2010 National Survey of Veterans (Department of Veterans Affairs, 2010), 51.1% of military students serving after 9/11 reported completing their postsecondary educational era vocational training program (Cate, 2014). The NVEST cohort showed a 71.6% success rate. The attrition rate was 28.4%, with 8.6% leaving school entirely (p. 32). A portion of student veterans may withdraw from classes before “end of term,” evidencing that most student veterans are non-traditional students with families and work obligations. Those factors and military orders or deployments may lead to interruptions and breaks in their progress. “Like many other non-traditional postsecondary groups, student veterans may face many obstacles in the path to completion” (p. 41). However, withdrawing from classes before the end of the term did not necessarily negatively affect student veterans’ completion.

The NVEST cohort study also showed that in addition to many having families, being employed, having service-connected disabilities, and facing interruptions in enrollment due to unplanned unit activations, most of these students persist in their academic careers and complete a postsecondary certificate or degree (p. 41). Other studies indicate the need for enhanced support efforts to bolster retention and persistence rates. The Veterans Education Assistance Act of 2008 (The Post 9/11 GI Bill) ushered in a new age of veterans’ benefits, but Bonura & Lovaald (2015) argued that while access to voluntary education programs has significantly increased, it has not resulted in an exact correlation to collegiate retention and persistence of SSM/Vs. Crissman (2018) concluded that increased participation in higher education does not necessarily reflect increased degree completion, and Wilson (2014) referred to the 2012 census, which estimated that 71% of active-duty veterans have not achieved their degrees. All of this indicates conflicting opinions related to SSM/V retention.

While disaggregated data on SSM/V persistence is sparse, some literature is beginning to emerge that offers insights into perceived barriers to success. Gregg, Howell, and Shordike (2016) interviewed 13 veteran students. They found these students confronted several challenges, including a feeling of unpreparedness for academia, failure to graduate or taking longer to graduate than traditional-aged students, struggling with the psychosocial effects of war, fitting in on campus, and difficulty with social connection, among other factors (p. 1). In addition to being underrepresented demographically, many SSM/Vs also face four or more risk factors that exacerbate underrepresentation and contribute to non-completion. These risk factors include but are not limited to delayed college enrollment, lack of

high school diploma, part-time college enrollment, financial independence with dependents, single-parent status, and full-time work while in college (p. 15). These factors, coupled with isolation from their institution and peers, can also result in SSM/Vs feeling more alienated from their school and peers. These feelings have a direct impact on retention and completion rates (Hanover Research, 2019).

Bond Hill et al. (2019) argued for higher enrollments of SSM/Vs at high graduation rate two- and four-year public institutions—those institutions that have at least 70% of students graduate in three to six years; however, they are half as likely to enroll there (p. 5). “The private non-profit and public flagship colleges and universities with more resources and higher graduation rates could do more” (p. 3). A few studies highlight collaboration (knowledge and practice-sharing) as a method to address the retention and persistence of SSM/Vs at colleges and universities (Bond Hill et al., 2019; Molina & Morse, 2015).

This review of the literature reveals inconsistent findings. Some studies draw parallels between the non-traditional nature of SSM/Vs while others acknowledge differences. Williams-Klotz and Gansemer-Topf (2017) explored how several of these studies intersect and how gaps in the literature still exist and explain how colleges and universities have developed programs, offices, and policies to serve this emerging population (Queen & Lewis, 2014). They cited the need for higher education institutions to leverage campus resources to meet these students’ academic needs (p. 3). Since the data involving SSM/Vs is inconsistent, each institution needs to track the data themselves until more uniform multi-institution data collection becomes available.

Best Practices in SSM/V Support Services. A synthesis of SSM/V literature reveals recurring themes around best practices in supporting this population of students. Focus areas include enrollment, community-building (engagement/trust), advising, and accountability (American Council on Education, 2015; Hanover Research, 2019; Kuh et al., 2006; Molina & Morse, 2015). Further, best practices in enrollment management include identification of SSM/Vs, assessment of their preparedness, and providing them with a single point of contact to assist in managing their needs. This could be a peer or a “one-stop-shop” service center to function as a hub for advising, counseling, orientation, transition courses, early warning systems, and intervention (Hanover, 2019).

Also, to support military service members and veterans in their transition from the military to higher education and the civilian workforce, the American Council on Education (ACE, 2015) held a summit in 2014 that identified five emergent themes they recommend institutions urgently implement “to improve the postsecondary outcomes (i.e., college access, persistence, and completion) and employment success for service members and veterans” (p. 8). Those were:

1. Individualized, flexible, and relationship-centered support services;
2. Self-advocacy of service members and veterans;

3. Cross-stakeholder communication and information consolidation;
4. Full-spectrum (military-to-career) navigation; and
5. Capacity, knowledge, and awareness building.

Additional studies also posited that military-friendly institutions can benefit from developing “community college partnerships.” These partnerships allow four-year institutions direct outreach to students who want to eventually earn a bachelor’s degree (Fain, 2017). Other suggestions included campus-wide, military-friendly “student pipelines” (Erisman & Steele, 2015). Other community-building strategies involved veteran-specific transition courses and student veteran organizations consisting of advising, admissions, credit transfer, and financial aid. These strategies are crucial in what is known as “Integrated Adult and Military Student Supports” (Hanover Research, 2019). The literature also pointed to peer networks as an essential aspect of military student connectedness. SSM/Vs disproportionately benefit from working with staff and peers familiar with the challenges of studying as a military service member or veteran (American Council on Education, 2015).

Advising is one of the essential best practices in supporting and retaining SSM/Vs toward success. Schlossberg, Waters, and Goodman (1995) identified four overarching goals of advising: (1) helping students gain a greater sense of control and hopefulness about making academic transitions (situation); (2) develop academic motivation, identity, and skills (self); (3) build, identity, maintain, and utilize support networks (support); and (4) develop and employ effective coping skills (strategies).

SSM/Vs require advising before and during earning a credential, because, as the literature indicates, they are often unfamiliar or even intimidated by institutional and academic processes. Therefore, they need special assistance in course selection, academic progress, and where to receive academic support. Advisors should know licensing and certification requirements, course availability and formats, and career and life planning (Hanover, 2019). Rans (2016) recommended a one credit-hour transition course for all SSM/Vs to “bring veteran students together, help them determine their academic goals, and ensure that students know where resources are on campus” (p. 13). Otherwise, as Molina and Morse (2015) posited, “many student veterans (44%) report never meeting with faculty or an academic advisor outside of class—networks that help build positive connections to campus support systems” (p. 22).

Accountability is also key to effective administration of programs for SSM/Vs. To gauge institutional effectiveness toward service members, Los Angeles Valley College (LAVC), a public community college, conducts an annual Veterans Satisfaction Survey. The survey contributes to the school’s mission of supporting campus-wide programmatic processes (LAVC, 2019). Their latest survey included 52 participants and was limited to their Office of Veterans Affairs.

The University of Texas-San Antonio (UTSA, 2011) assessed the perceptions and compatibility of transitioning veterans to their institution. In this assessment, 48 of the 210 respondents (22.8%) were knowledgeable of SSM/V-specific programs and services at the institution. In contrast, 45 of the 210 respondents (21.4%) were not aware of programs that were SSM/V-specific. A significant amount of responses from SSM/V students seem to indicate that the UTSA did not identify and actively steer SSM/Vs to their programs upon enrollment (UTSA, 2011).

Ryan, Carlstrom, Hughey, and Harris (2011) recommended that advisors use “S-Factors” to connect veterans to appropriate resources, give guidance (strategies factor), use attentive listening so that veterans will be heard (support factor), and interact with them frequently. They assert that an advisor who has served with an in-depth knowledge of the culture can contribute to the students’ growth.

SSM/Vs are a robust and diverse segment of the national student population that has persisted for decades. An examination of the literature revealed that although many similarities in characteristics between nontraditional, civilian adult learners and SSM/Vs exist, they are unique because of their experiences and training. As such, SSM/Vs require intentional outreach to aid in assimilation. A respondent in the UTSA (2011) survey indicated the university should attempt to treat veterans like any other minority group and come to them with resources rather than making the veteran guess at what is available. Although SSM/Vs may be uniquely suited toward successful outcomes in higher education because of high levels of motivation and persistence, colleges and universities should erect infrastructure to accommodate them and collaborate with other institutions to adequately support this segment of students. The Transfer & Military Center at Fort Hays State University was designed explicitly for this purpose and is committed to intentional, focused, and ongoing study of the SSM/Vs it serves.

Methods

Population and Sample. Following IRB approval, an online survey was made available to 22 students in the spring semester of 2020, which is the entire population enrolled in the TMC’s inaugural program (AAS in Technology and Leadership), designed exclusively for active duty and veteran military students. Twelve students completed the survey, ten reported being virtual students, and two reported taking face-to-face classes on campus. All participants identified themselves as males, with age ranges from 25 to 58, with Caucasian ($n = 7$), African American ($n = 3$), Hispanic ($n = 1$), and other ($n = 1$) ethnicities. While this population is small, the TMC wanted to intentionally begin to collect data from the first cohort of entering students as part of its goal to establish a complete program review and evaluation at its inception. As the center’s academic program offerings grow and enroll more students, the intention is to administer this instrument regularly. This early exploratory project with a small, bounded population provided

an opportunity to refine and revise before collecting data on larger populations across several programs.

Survey Instrument. The Military Learner Academic Success Perception Survey (MLASPS) contains three sections. In Section 1, respondents were asked demographic questions (e.g., gender, age, ethnicity, level of education, employment status, marital status, number of dependents, and physical/mental health challenges) and questions regarding military status, branch of service, and military education benefits.

Section 2 consisted of a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from “strongly disagree” (1) to “strongly agree” (5), assessing participants’ level of agreement to several factors relative to their military and educational journey. Specifically, we asked participants about a variety of resources that may have been helpful to them throughout their education, how welcomed they felt by the institution’s faculty/students, how comfortable they are seeking help, their awareness of services, and their transition into college. This portion of the survey was self-compiled by researchers, with most of the items being specific to that of the institution.

Section 3 included the Academic Motivation Scale – College Version AMS-C28 (Vallerand et al., 1992), which contained 28 items measured on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from “doesn’t correspond at all” (1) to “corresponds exactly” (5). The AMS-C28 was used to measure respondents’ motivations for attending college. Its seven-subscale structure is based on the self-determination theory established by Deci and Ryan in 1985. The seven constructs assessed include: (a) intrinsic motivation towards knowledge, accomplishments, and stimulations; (b) extrinsic motivation towards identified, introjected, and external; and (c) motivation. Subscales come from four items. Despite the relatively small number of constructs, the reliability and validity of the AMS-C 28 established high internal consistency with a Cronbach’s alpha of .81 and test-retest reliability of .79 (Vallerand et al., 1992).

Procedures. We administered the study online via Survey Monkey. In the recruiting email, we asked participants to review the study’s purpose. If interested in participating, they were directed to an embedded link to the instrument. They were then provided with informed consent, which stressed the voluntary nature of the project and the anonymity of responses. That is, individuals could choose not to participate or could leave the study at any time without penalty.

We provided participants with the contact information of all researchers involved and instructed them to reach out if they had questions about the study or their rights as a participant. By surpassing the consent form, participants indicated their voluntary willingness to participate in the study. At the conclusion of the survey, participants were debriefed and thanked for their participation. The debriefing form listed contact information for the faculty sponsor and principal

investigator, the Fort Hays State University ethics committee, and the local mental health center. Completion of this survey via participants took approximately 15 minutes of their time.

Results

The number of participants in this exploratory study was intentionally small and bounded. While this obviously limits inference and generalizability, it does offer some insight for the TMC as it begins program evaluation measures. It may also provide limited usefulness for other institutions designing academic programs and student services for their SSM/V population. Here, we summarize and briefly discuss the results of each section.

Section 1: Demographics. We used standard data-cleaning procedures, including the screening for missing inputs, in which case we used the average instead. We did not use participants who did not complete at least 10% of the survey in the analyses. We ran a traditional descriptive analysis for Section 1 and Section 2. Results indicated consistency with existing literature on adults who are also military students with the notable exception of gender, given that 100% of our participants identified as male. Additionally, 75% of participants indicated that their military benefits eligibility was not an overriding factor for them when deciding to pursue a degree ($n = 9$). Finally, researchers were able to access participants from a variety of military branches, including the Army ($n = 8$), Marines ($n = 2$), Navy ($n = 1$), and Other ($n = 1$). This range of service branches provided the study with various perceptions not limited to one military domain.

There is limited research collected on comparisons or identification relating to a branch of service. Kane (2006) conducted a data analysis of recruits entering military service from 2003-2005 for the Heritage Foundation. In terms of preparedness, this study finds that the Army has the highest number of recruits that scored in Category IV on the Armed Forces Qualification Test (AFQT) (scores of 21% to 15% - the second-lowest) of 4.4% in F.Y. 2005. The Marines had 1.2% in the first three quarters of F.Y. 2006, and the Air Force and Navy had 0%. The Army does not accept recruits below the 21st percentile (p. 7). The data could be an indicator of attitudes toward education as differentiated by a branch of service.

A gap exists in the literature involving how service branch culture impacts academic success, preparedness, and motivation. The branches of service are unique in providing their members an array of incentives for completing postsecondary education to enhance their career progression up to and including promotion to commissioned officer ranks. It will be necessary for the TMC to pay attention to these nuances when establishing partnerships with and programs for the various military branches.

Section 2: Perceptions of Academic Preparedness and Student Success. Data from Section 2 are consistent with the literature regarding attitude, self-

perception, and preparedness toward degree completion. When comparing the Military Learner Academic Success Perception Survey to data from similar research (UTSA, 2011 and LAVC, 2019), our data share thematic similarities in attitudes toward the institutions, educational expectations, and preparedness for higher education.

Participants indicated high desirability to implement a veteran-staff to veteran-student mentorship program to assist in the transition from military to higher education ($M = 4.45$, $SD = .90$). However, when asking participants about their level of agreement with other transitional resources like a military student orientation ($M = 3.50$, $SD = 1.24$) and a one-unit course for military students dedicated to identifying available university resources and meeting other veterans/military students ($M = 2.08$, $SD = 1.44$), participants indicated only neutral levels of agreement. We asked participants about both military and traditional factors that may compromise their degree completion. The overall average indicates factors like class availability ($M = 2.50$, $SD = 1.24$), finances ($M = 2.17$, $SD = 1.53$), and physical/mental health challenges ($M = 2.17$, $SD = 1.59$) do not apply to this sample when it comes to delaying of degree completion.

To assess reliability, we used Cronbach's alpha. Results indicate poor reliability ($\alpha = .58$). When reviewing this measure's reliability, it is important to note that these items were restrictive in that they were specific to an institution and self-compiled by researchers. Thus, the test items could have been too easy or too difficult for the sample producing scores resulting in low reliability.

It is important to note that within this data set, items presented to participants were specific to that of the institution, thus reported findings should not be considered generalizable to all SSM/V populations amongst 4-year SCU's. However, this data helps ensure faculty and staff are meeting our military cohort's needs at an institutional level. When considering other programs similar to that of the studied institution, these findings may apply to other military learners. See Table 1 to review the mean and standard deviation for all items included on the agreement scale.

Table 1. Means and standard deviation for all items included in Section 2 of MLASPS

ITEM	MEAN (M)	STANDARD DEVIATION (S.D.)
"Having a veteran student orientation would have been helpful in transitioning into FHSU"	3.50	1.243
"Having a transitional one-unit course for military students would have assisted me in learning more about available services and meeting other veterans."	3.08	1.443

“I feel welcomed by FHSU faculty/staff.”	4.50	.798
“I feel welcomed by other FHSU students.”	4.17	.937
“I feel that my professors can guide me to the right person if I was in need of services.”	4.50	1.243
“I am comfortable speaking with my professors when I need assistance in areas that may not pertain to course work.”	4.33	.888
“I am aware of other military students at FHSU.”	3.58	1.311
“I feel FHSU was a good choice for me.”	4.67	1.155
“I am aware of the services and programs available to military students at FHSU.”	4.25	.965
“I believe having a veteran staff-to-veteran student mentor program can assist me in my transition to FHSU and/or in my academic success.”	4.42	.900
“FHSU provides me with appropriate resources and services to meet my physical and mental health needs.”	4.08	1.240
“I am confident that I will graduate as planned.”	4.58	1.165
“Class availability may interfere with my degree completion.”	2.50	1.243
“Finances may cause delays in completing my degree.”	2.17	1.528
“Physical and/or mental health challenges may delay my degree completion.”	2.17	1.586
“I feel as if the military prepared me well for my transition into academia.”	3.33	1.557
“I plan to continue my education at FHSU and earn a bachelor’s degree upon graduation of the AAS, Technology Leadership program.”	4.00	1.595

Section 3: AMS-C28. Reliability for the academic motivation measure was assessed using Cronbach’s alpha. Results indicate strong reliability ($\alpha = .94$). When assessing the average of all items on the AMS-C28, results indicated overall participants had high levels of academic motivation ($M = 3.50$, $S.D. = .80$). Results from Section 3’s AMS-C28 indicated high motivation versus low motivation ($M = 3.50$, $S.D. = .80$). When asked whether the ultimate educational goal was to earn a bachelor’s degree upon completing their AAS degree, the average agreement level was considered high ($M = 4.00$, $SD = 1.60$). We included this information because the AAS degree in which respondents are currently enrolled is intended to be a pipeline into a bachelor of science program. Moreover, to determine whether there is a correlation between motivation and goal attainment, researchers performed a bivariate correlation. However, initial results indicated an insignificant correlation, $r(12) = .05$, $p = .870$. See Table 2 to review the mean and standard deviation for all items included on the academic motivation scale.

Table 2. Means and standard deviation for all items included in Section 3 of MLASPS

ITEM	MEAN (M)	STANDARD DEVIATION (S.D.)
“Because with only a high-school degree, I would not find a high-paying job later on.”	3.08	1.38
“Because I experience pleasure and satisfaction while learning new things.”	3.92	1.17
“Because I think that a college education will help me better prepare for the career I have chosen.”	3.83	1.19
“For the intense feelings, I experience when I am communicating my own ideas to others.”	2.75	1.60
“Honestly, I don’t know; I really feel that I am wasting my time in school.”	1.42	1.17
“For the pleasure I experience while surpassing myself in my studies.”	3.5	1.09
“To prove to myself that I am capable of completing my college degree.”	3.92	1.08
“In order to obtain a more prestigious job later on.”	3.42	1.38
“For the pleasure, I experience when I discover new things never seen before.”	3.58	1.24
“Because eventually, it will enable me to enter the job market in a field that I like.”	3.25	1.14
“For the pleasure that I experience when I read interesting authors.”	2.50	1.00
“I once had good reasons for going to college; however, now I wonder whether I should continue.”	1.42	.90
“For the pleasure that I experience while I am surpassing myself in one of my personal accomplishments.”	3.50	1.09
“When I succeed in college I feel important.”	3.00	1.21
“Because I want to have “the good life” later on.”	3.58	1.51
“For the pleasure that I experience in broadening my knowledge about subjects which appeal to me.”	4.25	.87
“Because this will help me make a better choice regarding my career orientation.”	3.33	1.44
“For the pleasure that I experience when I feel completely absorbed by what certain authors have written.”	2.08	.67
“I can’t see why I go to college and frankly, I couldn’t care less.”	1.33	1.16
“For the satisfaction, I feel when I am in the process of accomplishing difficult academic activities.”	2.67	1.16
“To show myself that I am an intelligent person.”	2.75	1.60

“In order to have a better salary later on.”	3.33	1.31
“Because my studies allow me to continue to learn about many things that interest me.”	3.92	.90
“Because I believe that a few additional years of education will improve my competence as a worker.”	3.83	.94
“For the “high” feeling that I experience while reading about various interesting subjects.”	2.92	1.51
“I don’t know; I can’t understand what I am doing in school.”	1.33	1.16
“Because college allows me to experience a personal satisfaction in my quest for excellence in my studies.”	3.08	1.17
“Because I want to show myself that I can succeed in my studies.”	3.42	1.24

Discussion

Recommendations for TMC Administrators. It is reasonable to conclude that two things are simultaneously true for serving SSM/Vs in higher education. First, research is often sparse, incomplete, contradictory, or otherwise ungeneralizable. Second, SSM/Vs are not a monolith; they appear as diverse as other adult, non-traditional civilian students regarding proper support and student services necessary for persistence to degree attainment.

Of course, some broad generalizations apply, as evident in the literature review and results. Still, this project intended to study a particular bounded, and an admittedly small population of students at a specific SCU to understand the SSM/Vs we attracted to our program for the express purpose of establishing baseline data of those enrolled in this program, at this institution. If we are to serve the mission of the TMC, which is to provide “prospective transfer and military-connected students with a seamless transition...by developing innovative pathways to degree completion” we must continue to collect data on the motivations, needs, perceptions, and goals of our students. We then should diligently track their progress to degree completion. These actions are not to say we cannot learn from the general literature regarding good student support services for non-traditional SSM/Vs. Still, we should do so by understanding the diversity within the subpopulation of SSM/Vs. There are general guidelines about what we know works for them. We should intentionally implement those best practices, stay current with the literature, and evaluate our SSM/V programs at the department-, institution- and branch-specific levels.

Based on what we learned from the literature review and our exploratory survey, the TMC should adhere to best-practice strategies in enrollment, community-building, advising, and accountability, including the following:

- SSM/Vs should enroll through a single point-of-contact upon entry, and the institutional contact should be a veteran who understands all branches of

service, all available academic programs, and issues related to military-civilian career transition.

- Centralized support services should be offered by veteran-staff and address all aspects of SSM/V needs, including application/admissions assistance; tuition/V.A. and financial aid assistance by dedicated certifying officers; and academic advising services like orientation, scheduling, tutoring, accessibility, and educational technologies.
- TMC staff should establish formal peer support networks for SSM/Vs like the Student Veterans of America (SVA) and informal networks that allow them to take classes with or attend co-curricular events with fellow SSM/Vs.
- The institution should continue to administer the MLASPS, at least bi-annually, to its SSM/Vs and consider conducting interviews of this same population halfway through degree completion, primarily to assess more in-depth aspects of academic motivation and perceived challenges related to their educational programs.
- The TMC should add additional evaluation mechanisms as part of a robust continuous improvement process, including close attention to semester-to-semester retention and overall graduation rates.

Recommendations for Further Study. Future study of issues surrounding SSM/Vs is both compelling and essential. The literature revealed no uniform research or reporting standards for scholars to connect valuable data for determining how educational institutions can best serve these students. We recommend the use of longitudinal studies at universities and technical training schools to assess veteran student success. Of particular interest are schools with large veteran student populations rich in demographic diversity, including race, age, gender, branch of service, and active-duty status.

Current literature endorses the use of support centers as a point of contact to provide advocacy and socialization. Still, these studies have inductively inferred recommendations based on available collected data of students in-process. We recommend research from survey instruments of SSM/Vs who are graduating or have recently graduated. We also recommend meta-data analyses from multiple institutions working in joint research to understand, validate, and better differentiate extant literature about the motivations, preparedness, and retention of veteran students.

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