INTRODUCTION

Veteran enrollment in undergraduate higher-education institutions in the U.S. has increased significantly since the passage of the 2009 Post-9/11 GI Bill, which increased tuition benefits and extended the timeline for utilization of benefits from 10 to 15 years. Recognizing this growth in a time of enrollment declines among traditional college students, many colleges and universities began in earnest to recruit student veterans by establishing veteran-led student groups, allocating campus space specifically for student veterans, and assigning specific administrators and staff to tend to the needs of incoming student veterans. In recognition of these efforts, many colleges seek the nationally-recognized designation of having a “Military Friendly” campus and utilize that distinction to continue their recruitment of veterans.

Despite the growing number of Military Friendly campuses, recent research indicates there is significant room for improvement in the provision of services to student veterans, as campus resources are often dictated by institutional limitations rather than veteran needs, such as access to resources and veterans often have their own experiences in the identification, planning, and implementation of services intended to assist in their academic success. Consequently, the present research seeks to understand the needs and wishes of student veterans at Daemen College, a private, liberal arts, college in Western New York.

BACKGROUND

Student Veterans
Since the number of student veterans have increased nationwide, colleges are expanding the number of student veteran organizations on their campuses. Veterans need the most support when it comes to reintegrating back into society and receiving an education. Many student veterans report having a tough time adjusting on college campuses in addition to connecting with other peers. Additionally, student veterans select two-year universities rather than four-year because of their financial benefits. Findings report that institutions should assist student veterans in being a part of peer groups and mentor programs, so that they are less likely to experience a sense of disconnection. Colleges must provide support for student veterans based on their backgrounds involving combat, adjustment, and psychological ailments. The literature is considered the most challenging for veterans because of the shift from living in a structured military life, to living in a less-structured college environment. Support and a sense of belonging are important regarding better health outcomes for students due to college being a stressful and different environment.

Social Connections
Student veterans experience feelings of isolation as they enter college. These feelings occur because of the lack of ability to develop new connections with traditional students and student veterans on campus. Rates of depression in student veterans along with their low sense of belonging are rising in many campuses across the country. Their lives are increasingly different from many of their peers as a majority of student veterans are older than the traditional student, have established families, and full-time jobs. Research shows that these students may use their military training skills to cope with their stress of adjusting. Due to this difference in coping, student veterans are not as likely as traditional students to use support systems from their university to help them handle adjustment. In fact, only 38% of students in the sample of one study utilized support from the university.

College-Based Programs
Social activities are important for students in their first year of college to improve their relationships with peers. Many findings suggest "peer-based veteran-specific programs," such as drop-in student veteran centers and veteran specific orientation programs to target these differences and increase their social support in the educational environment. Self-identification intervention veteran programs could benefit student veterans by increasing their openness to health-related behaviors.

The student veteran program at Daemen College has been selected for nine consecutive years as a military-friendly school. Daemen is part of the Yellow Ribbon Program, which makes it a “devoted veteran university,” that is committed to veterans and service members. Daemen maintains their program guidelines in respect of the Principles of Excellence Program that outlines the promises made by Daemen to support student veterans. The Nancy Haberman Gunicich Center for Veterans provides a safe space for student veterans who are active duty members, have served in the armed services, and are dependents of military service members.

RESEARCH AIMs

Aim 1: To assess the desires regarding educational experiences at Daemen for student veterans. 
Aim 2: To evaluate perceptions that student veterans have of the veteran friendly environment.
Aim 3: To provide evidence-based feedback to the veteran program so that it can be improved for students on campus.

METHODOLOGY

Sampling Method: A convenience sample of student veterans identified by the student veteran coordinator, Alvin Roberts. Roberts, were recruited for this project. The population in this sample consisted of individuals from each class rank and major at Daemen College.
Measurement: Student veterans were defined as active duty, dependents, discharged individuals, and all those currently serving.
Operationalization: For the purposes of this study, college experience was defined as the interconnectedness to resources and peers on campus. The needs of veterans were measured by participation and knowledge of student and veteran services on campus.
Data Collection Procedures: A letter was first sent out to Alvin Roberts to ask for his assistance when collecting data. Survey monkey was used to gather the responses, which consisted of 50 questions. A 4-point Likert-scale was used to measure feelings of participants using both open and closed ended questions. A 50 dollar incentive was offered to student veterans in order to increase response rates. Participants in this study were given a 5 week interval in order to submit their responses.
Ethical Considerations: At the beginning of the survey, students and faculty were ensured that their identities and responses would be anonymous and confidential. This was stated in the letter sent out to recruit each of these populations. Participation in the study was completely voluntary and participants were made aware of this at the beginning of the survey and the recruitment letter.

RESULTS

Importance of Military Experience to Personal Identity

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<thead>
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<th>Importance of Military Experience to Personal Identity</th>
<th>Service Learning Requirements Should Be Waived for Veteran Students</th>
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<tr>
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<tr>
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Twelve (12) student veterans responded to the survey out of 80 total student veterans enrolled at Daemen College as full-time students. This makes a response rate of 15%. Out of the student veterans who responded, the average age of participants was 34 years old. A majority (58%) of participants were juniors and seventy-five percent (75%) were taking 15 credit hours each semester.

When asked why Daemen College was chosen by student veterans, there was an emphasis on its “military friendly” characteristics by approximately 66 percent of participants. Eighty percent (80%) of participants express interests in services such as mandatory training for faculty when working with student veterans and counseling services specifically for student veterans.

DISCUSSION

Consistent with existing research, veterans surveyed reported feeling disconnected from classmates, resulting in a feeling of disconnect from the Daemen campus. Results indicated a general feeling among respondents that Daemen College is not genuinely concerned with the well-being of student veterans, indicating a need to address these concerns.

Foremost, based on these findings and in keeping with best practices among student veteran programs nationally, the implementation of a student veteran advisory board would greatly assist in providing input and direction to the college’s efforts in this regard. With the findings, Daemen should allocate resources to staff the veteran lounge full-time, provide a student veteran orientation, and consider revising policies regarding service learning for veterans.

Although findings provide insight into the student veteran program, there are limitations due to the low response rate, the use of nonrandom sampling, and online surveys. The findings are not generalizable to the entire student veteran population, but are still noteworthy when evaluating the program.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


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