

# Assessing the Social Climate for Veteran and Military Students at Indiana University Bloomington

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## Abstract

This study analyzes the social climate for student veterans at Indiana University Bloomington (IUB) through the lens of the socially constructed environments framework (Strange & Banning, 2015). Research questions seek to understand the ways in which student veterans utilize the Center for Veteran and Military Students (CVMS) as well as examine the center's ability to enhance this population's personal development and sense of self-enhancement. Through a document review, survey, and individual semi-structured interviews, we identify important themes that summarize the experiences of student veterans at IUB and tie them to recommendations that will improve the experiences of student veterans on campus.

## Keywords

Veteran and military students, socially constructed framework, social climate

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## Introduction

Since World War II, veteran and military students have become an increasingly common population on college campuses in the United States (PNPI, 2018). As beneficiaries of government tuition benefits through the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944 (commonly known as the G.I. Bill), these students must follow complex restrictions and regulations in the pursuit of higher education. Veteran and military students represent a diverse population in terms of age, gender, ethnicity, background, and veteran status. Within veteran status, there are veterans utilizing the G.I. Bill, active members of the military, ROTC recruits, the Reserves, and veterans not using G.I. benefits. In terms of other demographics, the average veteran or military student entering college is 25 years of age, 62% are first-generation college students, 47% are married, 47% have children, and 25% are women (PNPI, 2018).

Underneath their shared veteran or military identity, this population has a complex set of needs and challenges as they transition from the social environment experienced in the military to that of a college or university. The number of veteran and military students enrolled in college has increased since September 11, 2001 (Southwell et al., 2016), and further research is needed to examine the ways in which a campus can best support these students. IUB's CVMS works to enhance the experiences of this population. This study will inform the center's staff of their students' perceptions and provide recommendations for improved practice.

## Literature Review

To provide contextual background for this research, we will outline the history of veterans on IUB's campus, the environmental framework influencing the study, and present an overview of available research on veteran and military students. It should be noted that much of the literature surrounding high impact practices with veteran and military students comes from the years 2009-2010, bringing additional urgency to the completion of new research surrounding this population. Within the literature review, we have maintained the integrity of the original authors' lexicons regarding their use of the terms "veteran students," "military students," or "veteran and military students" throughout.

## Historical Background

IUB has a 200-year history marked by veterans. One of the university's founders, David H. Maxwell, fought in the War of 1812 and many of the residence halls on campus hold the names of veterans (Summerlot, 2018). In 2008, the Director of Veteran Support Services position was created, and the population of veterans has since grown by 200% to 506 as of spring 2019 (Operation Hoosier Promise, 2019). This one-person operation occupied a small office in the Indiana Memorial Union before becoming the CVMS and moving to their own house on Woodlawn Avenue in November 2018. With this recent move, it is crucial to study how the population of veteran and military students interact with the new environment.

## Socially Constructed Framework

The framework utilized for this study is Strange and Banning's (2015) socially constructed environments framework. This framework notes that "environments exert their influence on students' expectations, attitudes, and behaviors through the mediated and subjective perceptions or collective social constructions of those who participate in them" (Strange & Banning, 2015, p. 115). The three characteristics of this framework that greatly influence behavior are social climate, environmental press, and campus culture. Social climate is characterized by three social-environmental domains, each with dimensions that contribute to the makeup of the environment. Moos (1979) argues that the three

interconnected domains are: relationships, personal growth and development, and system maintenance and system change. These domains “guide the understanding and assessment of key aspects of any social climate” (Strange & Banning, 2015, p. 120) and will be utilized to organize relevant extant literature on veteran and military students.

Though not utilized in this study, environmental press refers to the particular features or characteristics of an environment as perceived by the individuals who live in the environment (Strange & Banning, 2015). Campus culture, also not utilized, can be interpreted through the four levels of culture: artifacts, perspectives, values, and assumptions (Kuh & Hall, 1993, as cited in Strange & Banning, 2015). The scope of this framework is too large for the study to address all these aspects, so the focus of this study will be on the social climate of the CVMS, which best fits the nature of our study.

### *Relationship Domain*

The relationship domain of social climate assesses “the extent to which people are involved in the setting, the extent to which they support and help one another, and the extent to which they express themselves freely and openly” (Moos, 1979, p. 14). For the purposes of our study, these dimensions will be analyzed through the lens of veteran and military students at colleges and universities in the United States.

The first dimension, involvement, can look different based on the environment in which it is occurring. Moos (1979) argues that involvement in a classroom “refers to the attentiveness of students to class activities and their participation in discussions” (p. 14). Since the classroom is one of many settings veteran and military students interact with while in college, it is best to think of this concept through the lens of student engagement and involvement in general. Astin (1984), who created student involvement theory, defines involvement as the investment of psychological and physical energy into a variety of objects that can be highly specific or generalized. Existing literature on veteran and military students highlight some trends regarding this population’s involvement on college campuses.

The non-traditional demographics of this population impact the extent of veteran and military students' involvement. Southwell et al. (2018) argue that in comparison to more traditional students, the experience of non-traditional students “are characterized by less involvement with the university environment: less interaction with faculty and peers, less participation in extracurricular activities and use of campus services, and greater interaction with the environment external to institutions of higher education” (p. 397). These claims are supported by data from the 2010 National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE). NSSE’s results led researchers to claim that institutions of higher education need to do a better job of engaging veteran and military students in high-impact practices (Lipka, 2010).

The extent to which individuals support and help one another is the next dimension of the relationship domain. In the context of veteran and military students, this can be assessed through student support services available to veterans. Lipka (2010), citing results from NSSE in 2010, found that veterans consistently perceive lower levels of campus support than non-veteran students. Such low levels of support can be addressed with more direct and nuanced interventions. Livingston et al. (2010) formulated a new model for the academic and social transition of veterans which takes into account their military background along with issues of invisibility, support, and campus culture. The article suggests that to better serve these students, professionals need to develop strategies to identify them as they enroll, create a system of veterans across campus who can be a source of support, and create a network of academic advisors and campus partners to connect students across campus (Livingston et al., 2010). However, because most college administrators today have not had military experience or identify as veterans, there should be an additional emphasis on using outside partnerships such as a veteran’s affairs office (Rumann & Hamrick 2009). Furthermore, creating effective campus support for veteran and

military students requires collaboration across all levels of the university (Pavlik 2019). Offices specifically designed to assist veteran and military students, such as the CVMS, play a key role in this process.

In addition, student affairs professionals need to raise awareness of the experiences and needs of veteran and military students (Rumann & Hamrick 2009). This can be done by designating veteran representatives so that veteran and military students will have a source of guidance and support when on campus (Rumann & Hamrick 2009). Another recommendation is forming committees with the goal of bringing different offices together to promote veteran student success and educating faculty and staff members about problems veterans face (Burnett & Segoria, 2009). Moos (1979) argues that teacher support in the classroom “assesses the personal interest and friendliness the teacher displays toward students” (p. 14). An indicator of this behavior can be how often certain students interact with faculty members. NSSE data from 2010 highlighted that veteran and military students interact with faculty members less than their nonveteran peers (Lipka, 2010).

Further research is needed that specifically discusses how comfortable veteran and military students are expressing themselves openly and freely, which is the third dimension of the relationship domain. A related aspect of this process is balancing both a veteran and a student identity. Borsari et al. (2017) claim that difficulties arise when student service members/veterans (SSM/V) look to be recognized as typical students while also being accepted as an SSM/V. Rumann and Hamrick’s (2009) research on veteran and military students introduces the notion of identity re-negotiation and talks about the role of other individuals’ perceptions of one’s military service. The authors found that “respondents’ statuses as servicemembers and veterans also were associated with different treatment by civilians, including strangers” (p. 448), impacting the veteran and military student's sense of identity.

### *Personal Growth and Goal Orientation Domain*

The next domain of social climate involves the extent to which those in the environment personally grow and develop as a result of their interactions with the environment. Moos (1979) explains that this domain measures the basic goals of the setting and assesses where personal development occurs. Veteran and military students matriculate into the college or university environment with specific needs that vary from the broader student population. In reviewing the literature on veteran and military students and the priorities of the CVMS, three dimensions of personal development are consistent with their unique needs as students: academic progress, professional development, and emotional growth. The research team assessed the extent to which the social climate of the CVMS promotes these areas of growth through their academic and career programs, as well as other support services.

**Dimensions of personal development.** Veteran and military students often face unique barriers and interruptions that can impede their progress towards completing a college degree. Borsari et al., (2017) note that SSM/V may receive degrees at similar rates to other students, but they usually take longer to do so. Veteran and military students may face deficits in their academic preparation for college coursework, particularly in math or science (DiRamio et al., 2008). More than 60% of undergraduates on active duty have at least four risk factors that could cause them to not complete college (Molina & Morse, 2015). These include having at least one dependent, being a single parent, delayed college enrollment, not having a high school diploma, part-time enrollment, working full-time while enrolled, or being financially independent (Molina & Morse, 2015). Support services that assist with overcoming these obstacles in a student’s academic career are needed to ensure success.

Another aspect of personal growth that impacts veteran students is professional and career development. After leaving a highly structured military environment, veteran and military students face challenges adapting to more informal environments such as classrooms and civilian work. Veteran

students may resist seeking help and face difficulty with completing responsibilities on time, which can negatively influence their ability to succeed in jobs (Borsari et al., 2017). In a study by Hayden et al. (2014), veteran and military students perceive their needs associated with career development to be transferring military skills to the workplace, preparing a resume/CV, and negotiating job offers.

Due to their experience in the military, veteran and military students may be more mature and may have difficulty displaying empathy or understanding the issues other students face (DiRamio et al., 2008). They may perceive themselves as being at a different stage in life and prefer to spend their free time socializing with other veterans (Borsari et al., 2017). In the 2010 NSSE report, one in five veteran and military students reported having a disability, either prior to or as a result of their service, which can impact multiple aspects of their well-being (Lipka, 2010). Additionally, there is a stigma associated with receiving treatment, as former active duty service members may perceive it as weakness or a threat to their future career (Borsari et al., 2017). In considering that the CVMS is an office designed to support this population of students, contributing to the professional and emotional development of their students would be a benefit.

### *System Maintenance and System Change*

The final aspect of Moos's socially constructed environments theory is the system maintenance and system change domain. This domain evaluates how orderly and clear the environment is in its expectations, in addition to how the environment both responds to change and maintains control (Moos, 1979). This dimension deals with how clearly the rules and policies are communicated to students, the organization of the environment, and how polite and considerate the people in the environment are within a group setting. For our study, this refers to the ways in which the CVMS communicates its rules, policies, and expectations to the students through the social interactions of the office.

The clear and straightforward nature of system maintenance and change could be related to the military cultural environment with which veterans are familiar. Redmond et al. (2015) discuss the characteristics of military workplace culture and how they could provide challenges for re-integrating into civilian life. One such aspect is 'good order' which, "refers to the rules and laws required to maintain a society that most people are familiar with, while the discipline aspect gives one service member authority over another" (Redmond et al., 2015, p. 13). In this way, system maintenance is tied to the organization and culture of military ranks. Similarly, military culture emphasizes certain language, values and symbols that become a distinct part of the military experience (Redmond et al., 2015). This emphasis on creating cohesion amongst values, expectations, and order drives the military organization, and upon entering a more disjunctive university environment, could cause dissonance within the veteran or military student.

In discussing the effects of workplace environment on reintegration, Redmond et al. (2015) stress mental health effects while also commenting on the difficulties in job maintenance. One example being that employers become disgruntled when employees must be given clear instructions on each of their tasks. Here, the employer is not understanding the cultural background of the veteran and how this identity affects their work and supervisory style. Overall, there is a disconnect between the military environment and civilian workspace. From the perspectives here, there is a linkage between the system maintenance dimension of Moos's socially constructed environment framework and military workplace culture.

The purpose of this study is to gauge the ways in which veteran students perceive the social climate of the CVMS. As the population of over 500 veteran and military students are being served by a staff of 2.5 people (the Director position is a .5 appointment), it is valuable to determine whether the interactions and perceptions of this environment are achieving the level of support these students need. We have centered this study around a central research question and two sub-questions:

1. How do veteran and military students perceive the social climate of the CVMS at IUB?
  - a. How are veteran and military students at IUB involved with the CVMS?
  - b. How do services and programs offered by the center enhance this population's personal development and sense of self-enhancement?

Through this study, the CVMS will gain an understanding of how students view the interactions occurring in the new office, whether these be aligned with the campus as a whole, staff and students within the center, or the services provided by the CVMS.

## **Methods**

In this study, we used three distinct research methods: document review, survey, and individual semi-structured interviews. Each of these measures were used to provide the research team with data in order to assess the social climate of the CVMS at IUB.

### **Positionality**

Although our research team is dedicated to improving the social experience of veteran and military students at IUB, none of us have served with any branch of the United States military or are military dependents. Lacking a direct shared experience with this population, the research team does not look to trivialize or tokenize the experiences of our research participants and instead look to use this research as a form of practitioner-based social justice through inquiry. We chose this population in order to better our own understanding of the population, and to fulfill a shared passion to better the experiences of this underserved population.

### **Document Review**

Members of the research team had the opportunity to meet with the Director of the CVMS, John Summerlot, who provided researchers with a copy of the primary document Operation Hoosier Promise (OHP) (2019), a three-year initiative recently launched by IUB in partnership with the CVMS. This document showcases the CVMS's goals for the next several semesters. By reviewing this document, the research team gained a better understanding of the future direction of the CVMS and how this initiative supplements the Center's mission and vision. Furthermore, cross-referencing this document allowed researchers to assess how well aligned the results of this study are with the goals of the initiative.

### **Survey**

This study utilized a questionnaire to answer our research questions as "a characteristic of questionnaires is their extensive standardization" (Flick, 2015, p. 131). This fits well with the aim of this method, which is to receive seemingly comparable answers from every individual participating in the study (Flick, 2015). We used a Qualtrics survey to collect demographic information from veteran and military students at IUB, to learn more about how students use the CVMS, and to recruit students to participate in our interview process. The demographic questions consisted mainly of closed questions with one open question.

The survey's final question asked whether or not the student was willing to participate in a follow-up interview about CVMS and the Center's social climate. If the student was interested, the survey asked for the individual's email, and prompted the student to click on a link for them to self-select an interview time. Students who indicated that they were interested in participating in an interview were informed of the confidentiality of the survey and their responses. This included informing the students that demographic information would only be shared in our research findings if it would not result in the

participant being easily identified by readers. Information collected as a result of our survey is summarized in Table 1.

**Table 1**  
*Survey Participant Demographic Data*

Demographic Data	Number (n = 41)	Percentage (%)
<b>Age</b>		
18-24	12	29%
25-34	17	41%
35-44	10	24%
45-54	2	5%
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	28	68%
Female	11	27%
Prefer to not answer	2	5%
<b>Race</b>		
White	32	78%
2 or more races	2	5%
Prefer to not answer	5	12%
Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander	1	2%
Black or African American	1	2%
<b>Level of Study</b>		
Undergraduate	15	36%
Graduate	26	63%
<b>Branch of the military*</b>		
Army	17	41%
Navy	7	17%
Marine Corp	8	19%
Air Force	10	24%
<b>How many times have you visited the office?</b>		
0	16	39%
1	5	12%
2	6	15%
3	1	2%
4	4	10%
5+	9	22%

## Interviews

Our research aims to understand the subjective perceptions veteran and military students have about the social climate within the CVMS. With this in mind, a qualitative approach grounded in the belief that “participants perspectives are meaningful, knowable, and can be made explicit” was necessary (NSF, 2002, p. 50). To best understand the perspectives of veteran and military students, semi-structured interviews were conducted. Semi-structured interviews focus on gaining the interviewees’ point of view, covering a broad range of meanings in relation to the issue of the study, increasing depth and personal context, and ensuring interviewees are not directed to answer questions in a particular way (Flick, 2015).

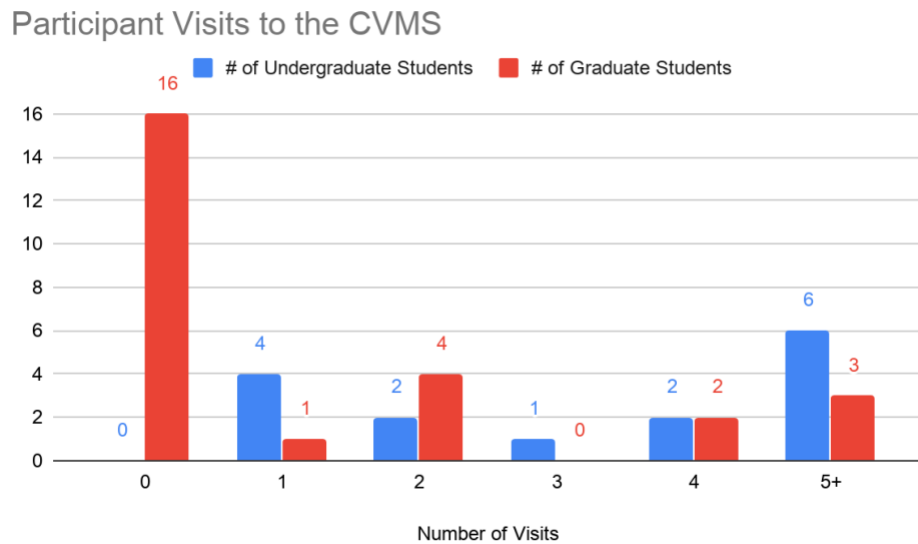
To ensure semi-structured interviews allowed space for personal stories and viewpoints from participants, the research team developed an interview guide. The guide contained open-ended interview questions and suggestions for more focused follow-up questions that highlight areas where interviewers could deviate from assigned questions to encourage participants to engage at a deeper level (Flick, 2015). The interview guide is included in Appendix A.

## Participants

For this research, veteran and military students are defined as students who arrive at college after a period of service with the United States military and are classified as active duty, National Guard, or Reserves (J. Sommerlot, personal communication, September 19, 2019). As of spring 2019, there were 506 veteran and military students enrolled at IUB with more than 300 of these individuals being graduate students (OHP, 2019). Veteran and military students at IUB represent many branches of the military including the Army, Navy, Air Force, and Marines Corps and many of the veteran students at IUB are non-traditional in the context of age, ranging from 18 to 64 (CVMS, 2018).

In recruiting participants for the study, our relationship with the CVMS was utilized to send out an invitation email from their office account. This email was sent to 349 students who are enrolled in on-campus programs. Our sample self-selected to participate by responding to the attached survey, and then subsequently choosing to participate in a follow-up, in-person interview. The email was only sent to students who self-identify as a military or veteran student enrolled at least part-time on campus at IUB. Upon the realization that this email was also sent to students that were enrolled in on-campus programs, but were taking their coursework online, the research team decided to exclude all data gathered from this online population. In total, this study resulted in 41 survey responses and 6 semi-structured interviews. Additional information on participants can be found in Figure 1.

**Figure 1**  
*Participant Visits to the CVMS*



## Data Analysis

For the document review, the team reviewed primary resources like OHP in order to get a better understanding of the office and its function at IUB. For the survey, we utilized univariate quantitative analysis to study demographic information and the similarities and differences among questionnaire answers (Flick, 2015). Themes from interview coding were cross referenced against demographic and survey data to determine if patterns in responses existed.

Following the transcription of our interviews, data were analyzed using open coding. Open coding is conducted through identifying emergent concepts, events, and situations that are similar across

participants (Blair, 2015). As existing research regarding the CVMS and veteran and military student’s perceptions of the campus social climate is limited, open coding allowed our participants to guide the research through their interview answers. This also prevented our predispositions towards this project from influencing the direction it took.

## Results

All three research methods utilized yielded important information regarding the social climate of the CVMS at IUB. In this section, we will highlight the most significant findings from our document review, survey, and interviews.

### Document Review

OHP offered a wealth of information on all aspects of the CVMS. While this document provided statistics and demographic information, the most useful information came in the description of OHP’s three goals. These goals include increasing the graduation rate of undergraduate veterans, providing coordinated campus-wide support for the population, and reducing the hurdles and barriers commonly experienced by members of this population. This document was useful in coordinating our recommendations with the strategic plan of the office.

### Survey

Of the 25 survey participants who have visited the CVMS, the majority (72 percent) had come to discuss their military education benefits and finances. As one of the primary missions of the office, this is to be expected. Following this result, there are many reasons identified as to why students visit the center ranging from general inquiries to student organization meetings.

### Interviews

The following section discusses the themes found within the qualitative data that aid in answering our research questions. Six participants were interviewed for this study, and their details can be found in Figure 2.

**Figure 2**  
*Interview Participant Demographic Data*

Name	Classification	Branch	Race/Ethnicity	Gender	Age
Sarah	Graduate	Air Force	White/Non-Hispanic	Female	25-35
Veronica	Undergraduate	Navy	2+races/Hispanic	Female	25-34
Lucy	Graduate	Air Force	White/Non-Hispanic	Female	18-24
Brett	Undergraduate	Marines	White/Non-Hispanic	Male	25-34
Todd	Graduate	Army	White/Non-Hispanic	Male	25-34
Reggie	Graduate	Marine Corps	White/Non-Hispanic	Male	35-44

Themes identified are: relationships—both at the CVMS and the challenges to developing relationships with others on campus, a desire to feel supported, a desire to mentor other students, a need

for nontraditional programming, using the CVMS as a resource, representing the veteran community, and connections between military and university life. Figure 3 summarizes the themes.

**Figure 3**  
*Theory and Supporting Themes*

Dimension of Social Climate (Moos, 1979)	Supporting Themes
Relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Shared experiences</li> </ul>
Personal Growth and Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Desire to feel supported in their transition from the military to student life</li> <li>• Desire to mentor other veterans</li> <li>• A need for nontraditional programming</li> </ul>
System Maintenance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Expectation that the CVMS can connect one to other resources</li> <li>• Representing the veteran community</li> <li>• Connection between academic and military life</li> </ul>

### *Relationships*

Entering college at a more advanced age than traditional college students, veteran and military students seek relationships with people who share common experiences. There are opportunities for the development of these relationships but also barriers that pose challenges.

**Where the relationships are developed.** A majority of participants expressed a desire to find others with shared experiences. The CVMS is a space where students can go to meet other veterans, find like-minded people, and share service stories free of judgement. The CVMS is used for various social events where students are able to come share meals and speak with other veteran and military students. Todd expressed that when attending events he often sees students engaging, stating that they would “talk about what their time in the military was like.” The CVMS is a space that students are able to visit in between classes, though the numbers of students that stop by have tapered off since the center’s relocation.

Only one participant discussed developing relationships with traditional students in an environment other than class. Veronica explained how her involvement in a sorority helped her adjust to the new social environment when stating, “I was able to join a sorority and like, even though they are younger than me, they are very mature, so they honestly don’t feel that age difference.” Finding this community had a significant impact on Veronica’s ability to find a sense of belonging outside of the CVMS.

**Challenges to developing relationships.** The center’s relocation to an outer edge of campus is one of the challenges that has made an impact on the relationships students build within the CVMS. Brett expressed that

People were here all the time and they used to have snacks and stuff there and just stop in and wait in between classes like 30 minutes or so. Sometimes there won’t be anybody that stops in, in a day. Like last semester I used to work like a full day on Mondays and there were legitimately days where nobody stopped by. Like we got phone calls and emails and everything, but nobody would stop in.

When the CVMS moved from the Indiana Memorial Union, it is used less frequently as a place to relax between classes.

Age, marital status, and having children pose challenges in connecting with traditional students. One participant, Brett, compared the freshmen in his classes to new recruits in the Marines, stating that they were similar to “new Marines that were always annoying to me.” A few students discussed how political conversations at the CVMS will look different than those they observe in class. Todd expressed that “conservatism is probably much greater in the military than on campus.” Brett felt that the political views shared at the CVMS might not be accepted in class, stating “discussions that were going on while I was there [CVMS] don’t really jive with the political views of a lot of those students on campus.”

### *Personal Growth & Goal Orientation*

Three aspects of personal growth—academic progress, professional development, and emotional development—were highlighted as areas that are discussed throughout the literature on veteran and military students and are also priorities of the CVMS. In analyzing interview data from our study, three themes emerged. Those themes are veteran and military students have a desire to feel supported through their transition from the military to civilian and college student life; veteran and military students demonstrate a desire to mentor other veterans; and veteran and military students have a need for nontraditional programs to facilitate personal growth.

**Academic progress and a desire to feel supported.** With regard to the academic progress aspect of personal growth, veteran and military students often follow strict rules regarding credit hours and the need to navigate complicated government websites in order to access their benefits. For example, Reggie described needing help navigating GI benefits in order to pay for his classes, struggling with math courses since six years had elapsed since his last math class, and feeling isolated during his transition. Brett describes that it took him about a year-and-a-half to fully transition to IUB, citing issues with others in the classroom. Veronica mentions that she would like to see more events or interactions between veteran and military students as they

all have similar experiences coming from the military and then transitioning back into college, so it would be nice to have some kind of support or group interaction so that we could share with each other how we’re feeling or advice on...what we could be doing better.

With difficulty transitioning to the classroom noted by some, and a desire to develop a veteran support network by another, our data demonstrate that veteran students want and need to feel supported as they navigate their transition from the military to the classroom.

**Professional development as mentoring.** In line with the professional development literature, the participants in our study discussed a need to transfer skills acquired in the military to their future work. In addition to understanding how their own skills transfer, participants expressed a desire to help other veterans transition their military skills to the classroom and future careers. Sarah describes that, It can be hard for them [younger veterans] to communicate how that experience they’ve had in the military can transition to other career choices or academic pursuits. Services that help them bridge those gaps and kind of see how those connections can be made is really helpful for them to advocate for themselves and for their fellow service members.

Along these lines, Reggie describes the military as a, hierarchical structure...you’re inundated like too much with mentors, you know? And when you’re out of the military, like, oh, you’re done and that whole structure is gone, so you’re like, what do I do now? And so maybe helping ease people back into that would be really helpful. I like the idea of mentors.

Further exploration is needed to determine whether the desire to mentor others is more closely related to the participants’ identities as veterans, or their identities as graduate students. For the purposes of this study, the participants’ desire to mentor other veterans validates existing literature that emphasizes a need for veterans to understand how their military skills can fit within other contexts. The role of the CVMS in

providing opportunities for mentorship and professional development will be explored in the recommendations section.

**Emotional development and nontraditional programs.** The last aspect of personal growth discussed in the literature is emotional development. Much like the literature suggests, many veterans are older than the typical college student and can perceive themselves to be at a different stage of life (Borsari et al., 2017). Five of our six participants discussed being older than the average IUB student, validating previous research. One participant, Reggie, described that his age was a larger factor impacting his IUB experience than his veteran identity. Additionally, participants mentioned the demands of having children, spouses, and other responsibilities that fill their free time. As veteran students often have different demands than the traditional student, it can be difficult to attend events and programs that do not include family activities or an atmosphere where kids are welcomed. Sarah mentioned that “if they did some sort of a family style event or something where kids were welcomed...Oh yeah, I'd bring them.” Sarah’s suggestion will be expanded upon in the recommendations section, but points to the fact that additional, nontraditional programs are needed to facilitate personal growth and offer emotional support to student veterans.

### *System Maintenance*

System maintenance focuses on an environment’s ability to communicate its expectations to the students within it. This includes how orderly the office is, how clear its rules and policies are, and how polite people in the setting are perceived (Strange & Banning, 2015). The themes that emerged from our research support the belief that the CVMS establishes a strong connection to this aspect of social climate.

**CVMS as a resource.** The CVMS website indicates that one of the goals of the Center is to connect students to various resources (CVMS, n.d.). This goal was referenced multiple times in interviews. Todd mentioned that he thought a major purpose of the Center was to answer questions and be a generalized resource. This includes offering assistance with setting up an email account and paying bills. Another interviewee mentioned that the only expectation they had for the Center was to “serve as that linchpin to help connect folks to the various resources that they may need.” This same participant noted that one day, “I was just walking by, saw the office name and stopped in to see if they could help me with my financial questions and it turned out they were the three people that I needed to talk to.” Participants indicated that they clearly understood this was something the environment offered and did well.

**Representing the veteran community.** Although not explicitly stated in their mission statement, participants reflected on a feeling that the CVMS staff expects them to be a positive representative of the veteran and military community. When asked about these expectations, Todd responded that “they expect us to be good ambassadors of who we are.” He expanded on how students behaving poorly would reflect negatively on the veteran community.

Connection between university and military life. Finally, there is some connection between the orderliness of military service and the academic sphere. Sarah indicated that, “there is a certain amount of structure that is very similar in academic life as you have in military life. That it's a familiar and comforting structure even for me.” Redmond et al. (2015) discuss how the move to civilian life can be difficult for those who have been engaged with military culture for an extended period of time. In this quote, Sarah implies that the similarity between the academic and military structure provided a commonality that made the transition less abrasive.

System maintenance lends itself to the more organized structure that has clear goals and expectations. The students involved in the survey clearly understood the purpose of the space and the

culture of the environment, meaning that the center has done a good job of communicating this aspect of the environment to its students.

## Limitations

The CVMS sent the survey invitation and a follow-up email to 349 students but yielded only 41 responses. Of these responses, few indicated they wished to be interviewed. This relatively low response rate, along with one of the participants serving as a student worker at the CVMS, could result in non-representative data on the experiences of the veteran and military student population at IUB.

A larger limitation is the skew our research took towards graduate students. Moos's theory of social climate originally surveyed on-campus undergraduate students (Moos, 1979), and existing literature on veterans focuses on undergraduates (Burnett & Segoria, 2009; Lipka, 2010; Livingston et al., 2010; Pavlik, 2019; Rumann & Hamrick, 2009; Southwell et al., 2018). As our research drew mostly graduate students, there may be a disconnect between existing literature and our student demographic. Lastly, the fact that no members of the research team are veterans could have limited the types of follow-up questions asked during participant interviews.

## Discussion

Going back to our research questions (available for reference on page 6), it is important to highlight the answers our research has yielded and how they relate to the literature discussed above. When framing our recommendations, we looked to connect the themes from the interviews with the overarching themes from the literature. As for our overarching question of how students perceive the CVMS, it is primarily perceived as a place to go to when there are concerns regarding GI Bill benefits or finances. The office is not perceived as a place to socially interact or attend programs.

In considering how veteran and military students are involved with the CVMS, the center is primarily utilized as a place where veterans can share their common experiences, find campus resources, and receive help navigating their federal benefits. This was evident within the survey when 18 out of the 25 students who had indicated they used the center at least once selected that they used the center for information about their benefits. However, it is also important to note that approximately 40% of those who took the survey indicated they had never used the CVMS. This is in line with existing research from Southwell, et al. (2018) who comment that veterans are less likely than other students to utilize campus resources. Since the CVMS can be considered a central resource for veterans, the survey highlights this phenomenon.

In considering the programs and services offered by the CVMS, we found that most participants did not identify the center as a source for personal development or self-enhancement. This finding was most evident in interviews when our respondents frequently could not identify an academic or personal area in which they developed through the CVMS. Tutoring is an important academic service for this population, as the research of DiRamio et al. (2008) found that math is often an area veterans need additional assistance with upon entering higher education. These findings have important implications when considering our framework, providing a basis upon which we discuss our recommendations.

## Recommendations and Implications for Practice

The themes that emerged from our semi-structured interviews provide a useful foundation of knowledge regarding the experiences of veteran and military students at IUB. We have utilized our data to develop recommendations to improve two domains of social climate:

relationships and personal growth and development. As our interviews indicated that students clearly understood the expectations and rules aligned with the system maintenance.

## Relationships

To improve the relationship domain of the CVMS's social climate, we have two recommendations: a peer mentoring program and consistent programming hosted by the center.

### *Peer mentoring program*

To continue to provide a space and opportunity for veteran and military students to build relationships with each other at IUB, we recommend a peer mentoring program. This once existed within CVMS but has faced recent challenges. PAVE, or Peer Advisors for Veteran Education, "is a grant-funded national program administered through the University of Michigan" (OHP, 2019, p. 12). On a national level, this program is a working partnership between the University of Michigan Depression Center and Student Veterans of America (PAVE, 2019). It is our understanding that the CVMS helped run the PAVE chapter at IUB until recently. PAVE, according to the program website, connects incoming student veterans on college campuses with student veterans who are trained as Peer Advisors who can help them navigate college life, address challenges they may face, refer them to appropriate resources on and off campus, and provide ongoing support (2019, para 1)

According to the OHP document, PAVE was unable to secure funding for the program as of March 2019. Based on this development, we fully support the CVMS's decision to continue a peer mentoring program even if it is not under the umbrella of PAVE.

Using the center's work-study students is a great way for these individuals to gain ownership of the program and to increase their involvement in the CVMS. Additionally, veteran and military students enrolled in graduate programs at IUB are a great resource for undergraduates. Several graduate students interviewed would welcome the opportunity to support other students with whom they have the shared experience of serving in the military. The CVMS can utilize master's and doctoral students to oversee and coordinate the mentoring program. A second option is for the CVMS to work with the Higher Education and Student Affairs program in the School of Education to create a practicum position for a master's student.

The main responsibilities of the student coordinator(s) will be to pair all new veteran and military students with a mentor and serve as a resource for the PAVE mentors. One interviewee who formerly served as a PAVE mentor indicated a lack of support after her initial meeting with her mentee. This resulted in a less meaningful overall experience. In order to alleviate this concern, we believe the student coordinator(s) should meet with each mentor once a month.

The continuation of a peer mentoring program will yield numerous benefits for veteran and military students at IUB. A common theme from our interviews is this population's desire to connect with other individuals with whom they have shared experiences. A structured peer-mentoring program will achieve this goal. Furthermore, a mentoring program will provide incoming veteran students with a specific person they can go to with questions. The benefits of this program extend beyond just the mentees, however. Students who serve as mentors will have a great opportunity to develop and grow while serving as role models.

### *Consistent programming*

A second recommendation involves the creation of consistent programming. Throughout our interviews, research participants mentioned different social events put on by the CVMS throughout the school year including football tailgates and barbecues. While many of the participants enjoyed these events, they mentioned the need for more consistent social programs. Based on these findings, we recommend the CVMS implement a weekly coffee hour.

This event will take place each week in the center and will be a time for any veteran student to stop by, enjoy free coffee, and interact with other students and the CVMS staff. This provides an excellent opportunity for undergraduate and graduate students alike to bond over common experiences, which is something in which many participants expressed a desire. While current one-time events like tailgates and barbecues can serve a similar purpose, a consistent program will allow more students the opportunity to attend.

Another advantage of a weekly coffee hour is that it will encourage veteran students to visit the CVMS at its new location at 823 E. 11th Street. Throughout our interviews, we learned that not all veteran students know where the new location of the CVMS is. This weekly program can serve as a method of outreach for the center.

### **Personal Growth & Development**

To assist veteran and military students in their personal growth and development while at IUB, we have two main recommendations for practice. We recommend that the CVMS focus on building and sustaining collaborative campus partnerships to facilitate professional development programming, rather than implementing programs in-house. Additionally, we recommend the CVMS focuses on veteran-centered, nontraditional programs that are family friendly.

#### *Campus partnerships*

Student veterans face difficulty transitioning from their military experience to the classroom and professional environment and may have issues articulating skills or taking the initiative to seek out information independently. From the interviews, it is clear that student veterans are not utilizing campus resources and support services while still expressing a desire for assistance and social belonging. Student veterans view the CVMS as their primary source of support next to their individual academic advisors and are missing out on opportunities to develop personally and professionally.

We recommend the CVMS designate a liaison for veteran students within other departments in the Division of Student Affairs as well as within each academic college to assist with outreach and support. Rather than the CVMS using time and resources to develop academic, career, and wellness programs, this will encourage veteran and military students to connect with campus resources, while challenging campus partners to make programs relevant and accessible for veteran students. As many faculty and staff members are veterans, cultivating support from these individuals would be a strong place to start.

#### *Spousal and family programming*

The second recommendation is to implement programs or activities that dependents feel comfortable attending. This recommendation is informed by the need for nontraditional programming that emerged during interviews. For many veterans, dependents represent their closest

social relationships, so creating spaces where they also feel welcome will support growth and engagement. Depending on the resources of the CVMS, these events could have a small participant fee. The CVMS could also rely on campus liaisons to assist with coordinating these events or securing seating or tickets for veteran families.

## **Conclusion**

Veteran students are an important population within higher education institutions. Utilizing Moos's (1979) domains of social climate, we conducted quantitative and qualitative research to assess the environment at the CVMS. Themes uncovered through interviews suggest that veterans appreciate having the CVMS on campus as it provides them with a group of people with whom to discuss niche shared experiences. Additionally, veterans expressed a desire to feel supported by the CVMS, a desire to mentor other veterans, and a need for nontraditional programs offered by the center. Finally, we found that veterans believe the CVMS has a responsibility to connect veterans with on and off campus services, in addition to their role in supporting veterans as they discover the parallels between military and academic life.

From our themes, we developed a set of recommendations that may yield positive results for the CVMS and similar centers at other universities. Those recommendations include: the development of a peer mentoring program; consistent program offerings; developing strong partnerships with other campus departments; and spousal and family programming. While these recommendations do not serve as a panacea to solving problems in postsecondary veteran education, they offer a place to start in making positive changes on campus and identifying areas for further research in this area.

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## **Appendix A: Student Utilization of the Center for Veteran and Military Students at Indiana University Bloomington (CVMS) Semi-Structured Interview**

### **Introduction Questions**

1. Are you over the age of 18?
2. How would you describe your experience at IUB as a veteran/military student?
  - a. Academically?
  - b. Socially?
  - c. What other resources on campus do you use?
  - d. With the Center for Veteran & Military Students?

### **Relationship Dimension Questions**

1. Describe the interactions that you see take place in the CVMS
  - a. Personal interactions (with students and staff)
  - b. Interactions between students
  - c. Interactions between students and staff
2. How would you describe the social atmosphere of the Center for Veteran and Military Students?

### **Personal Growth and Development Questions**

Read students the definitions for personal growth and development

1. How do you see personal development and self-enhancement?
  - a. Within the CVMS?
  - b. At IUB?
  - c. What experiences have you had that have facilitated personal growth?
2. In what ways do the services and programs offered by the CVMS impact students?
  - a. Describe the leadership opportunities?

### **System Maintenance and System Change**

1. What, if any, aspects of the CVMS mirror aspects of military life?
  - a. What aspects of university life mirror aspects of military life?
2. What, if any, expectations do you feel the center has for you as a veteran or military student?
  - a. What, if any, expectations do you have of the center?