



Wellness Assessment 2020-2021: Military and Veteran Student Sense of Belonging

Center for the Study of Student Life and
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INTRODUCTION

The Student Wellness Center in the Office of Student Life at The Ohio State University uses a holistic wellness model that includes nine key dimensions of wellness, which are: career, creative, emotional, environmental, financial, intellectual, physical, social and spiritual.

The Wellness Assessment was designed to measure these nine dimensions of wellness to give students a better understanding of their own wellness and provide them with resources that they can utilize at Ohio State to improve their wellness. The Wellness Assessment is open year-round to all students. To better understand students' holistic wellness during the COVID-19 pandemic, new items were added to the instrument. A scale to measure students' sense of belonging at Ohio State was added for the 2020-2021 administration, which will be the focus of this report. This report includes a total of 2,141 students, all of whom completed the survey during October 2020. Students had to be complete on all nine dimensions of wellness and the sense of belonging scale to be included in this report.

The purpose of this report is to provide a snapshot of student belongingness and to inform future investigation into why there are differences in sense of belonging between military and veteran students and non-military and veteran students. Caution should be applied when interpreting these results, as the scope of the report is limited to student responses at one point in time and cannot be used to determine why these differences in belonging exist.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Belongingness has been defined as the feeling of security and support arising from a sense of acceptance, inclusion, and identity for a member of a certain group (Cornell University, 2021). Further, psychologists describe belonging as a fundamental human motivation (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). In the college setting, feeling a sense of belonging may motivate students to engage more deeply with their studies, leading to persistence and success (Gopalan & Brady, 2019). In addition, belonging may buffer students from stress, improving mental health outcomes (Baumeister & Leary, 1995).

A lack of belongingness, broadly defined as social isolation, is one of the strongest and most reliable predictors for suicidal ideation within the general population (Joiner, 2005). Research on college student suicidal ideation demonstrates that social connectedness, broadly defined, serves as a protective factor against suicidal ideation. (Clum & Febraro, 1994; Hirsch & Ellis, 1995; Van Orden, Witte, James et al., 2008). Additional empirical studies indicate that low social support is associated with suicidal ideation and risk independent of depressive symptoms for college students (Finch & Graziano, 2001; Finch, Okun, Pool et al., 1999; Paladino & Minton, 2008; Wilcox et al., 2010). Paladino and Minton have also suggested that suicidal ideation can increase when college students perceive a lack of social support (2008).

Research findings have indicated that college students maintain three primary interpersonal connections, which are to their family, peers, and academic institution (Drum, Brownson, Denmark & Smith, 2009). These three unique domains are significantly associated with college students' mental health (Baumeister & Tice, 1990; Ueno, Gayman, Wright, & Quantz, 2009). College students often directly indicate that interpersonal problems associated with romantic partners, family and friends are associated with their suicidal ideation (Drum et al., 2009). While a lack of social bonds or explicit feelings of social exclusion contribute to feelings of anxiety, other mental health outcomes such as depression, loneliness and social anxiety are greatly reduced when college students experience a sense of belonging (O'Keefe, 2013; Stebleton, Soria & Huesman, 2014; Raymond & Sheppard, 2018).

METHODOLOGY

Attitudes and beliefs related to sense of belonging were measured using a Likert scale. The items within the sense of belonging scale were scored on a 4-point Likert scale, ranging from 'strongly disagree' as 1 to 'strongly agree' as 4. An overall sense of belonging score ranging from 1 to 4, with 4 being the most positive, was calculated by averaging together students' responses to five out of the six sense of belonging items. The item, 'I participate in Ohio State traditions', is excluded from the overall sense of belonging score. Students had to have answered all of the other five items to be given an overall sense of belonging score. This report documents differences in sense of belonging between military and veteran students ($n = 49$) and all other students who self-selected into participating in the Wellness Assessment survey during October 2020 ($n = 2,092$).

FINDINGS

The following table compares average belonging scores by question for military and veteran students and non-military and veteran students. T-tests were conducted to investigate whether the differences between these two groups of students were significantly different. Asterisks denote statistically significant differences between the two groups' average scores.

Table 1. Average sense of belonging scores

	Military and Veteran Students ($n = 49$)	Non-Military and Veteran Students ($n = 2,092$)
I feel a sense of belonging at Ohio State	2.78	2.94
I have relationships with students*	2.63	2.99
I have relationships with staff	2.45	2.50
I have relationships with faculty	2.55	2.50
I participate in Ohio State traditions* ¹	2.31	2.63
I feel I am a member of the Ohio State community	2.73	2.89
<i>Overall Sense of Belonging Score</i>	2.63	2.76

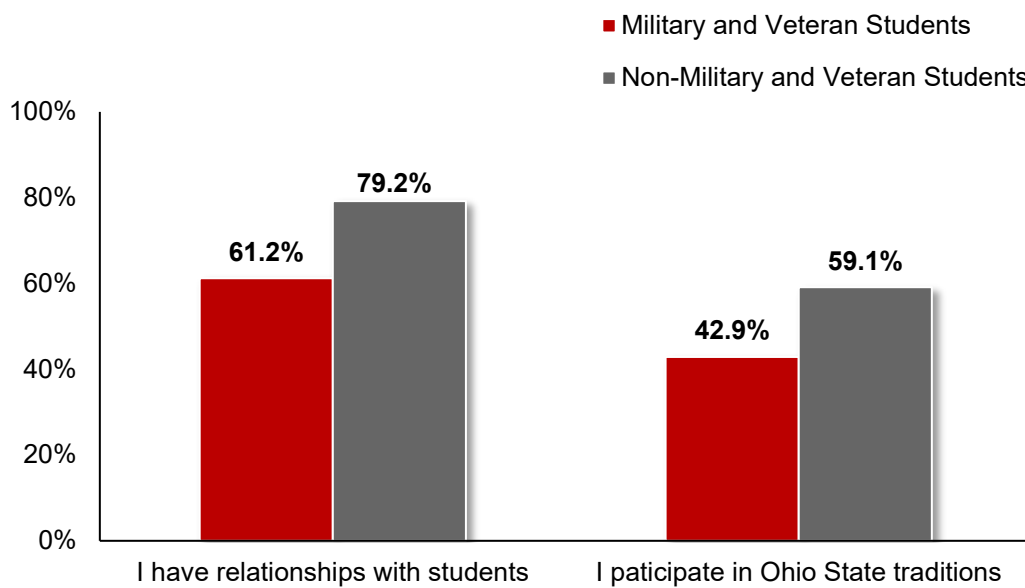
¹This item is excluded from the overall sense of belonging score.

While the difference between the two groups' overall sense of belonging score was not significant, as shown in table 1, military and veteran students reported lower average scores on five of six questions related to sense of belonging. Further, a statistically significant difference was detected on two individual questions related to belonging.

A significantly higher number of non-military and veteran students reported that they have relationships with other students when compared to military and veteran students (2.99* vs. 2.63). Non-military and veteran students also more often reported that they participate in Ohio State traditions when compared to military and veteran students.

As shown below in figure 1, military and veteran students less frequently selected agree or strongly agree when asked if they have relationships with students.

Figure 1. Percentage of students who 'strongly agree' or 'agree' with the following statements by military and veteran status ($n = 2,141$)



CONCLUSION

This report examined belongingness among military and veteran college students and found that overall belonging scale results were similar to non-military and veteran college students. However, our study identified two factors that we believe are related to a feeling of belongingness that differed between military and veteran college students and other college students. First, the results show that military and veteran college students felt that they were not as engaged in campus traditions at Ohio State. Secondly, the military and veteran college students reported more difficulty engaging with other college students when compared to their peers.

While the overall belongingness scale did not show a statistically significant difference, we hypothesize that involvement in campus traditions and effective communication with non-military and veteran college students may have a positive impact on the military and veteran college student experience, as well as potential benefits for academic performance and mental health. One such possibility is programming for campus military and veteran centers to increase military veteran involvement in campus traditions, and skills-based programming to improve communication with non-military and veteran college students. Finally, more research in this area is needed to determine if there is a relationship between such programming and belongingness and to examine whether there are additional positive benefits.

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