



A Psychosociocultural Exploration of SSM/V Well-Being in Higher Education: The Role of Mattering, Dedicated SSM/V Space, and Combat Deployment

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ABSTRACT

This study explored well-being in the context of higher education for 104 student service members/veterans (SSM/V) using a psychosociocultural framework to examine psychological (mattering), social (connectedness), and cultural (view of self as student in the context of military background) dimensions. Successive mediation analyses demonstrated that mattering to instructors, social connectedness, and positive view of self were positive predictors of well-being. Participants reporting combat deployments had significantly higher negative views of self than those who had not deployed or had experienced non-combat deployments. Mattering to instructors fully mediated the relationships of both positive and negative cultural view with well-being, respectively. Mattering to instructors also partially mediated the relationship of connectedness and well-being, while mattering to students neither fully nor partially mediated the relationships. The relationships of connectedness and positive and negative view of cultural self with mattering to instructors were each dependent on deployment type. This study's findings encourage educators, policy-makers, and SSM/V support personnel to provide programming and support to this population with consideration for individual deployment history and facilitation of meaningful connections between SSM/V and instructors.

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In 2009, approximately 500,000 student service members and student veterans (SSM/V) attended US colleges and universities, rising to 900,500 SSM/V in 2017, with more current data yet to be published ([US Department of Veterans Affairs, 2023](#)). The SSM/V population includes students serving on active duty in a branch of the military, the National Guard, or the national Reserves and student veterans who have completed their military service ([Barry et al., 2014](#)). This growing population of college students has been the focus of a dynamic body of research, yet further research is needed to better understand and support the unique challenges and needs of SSM/V attending US colleges and universities.

Transitioning and adjusting from military life to academic life is a critical challenge faced by many SSM/V during their experiences in higher education ([Cook & Kim, 2009](#); [Hoge, 2010](#)). According to the U.S. Department of Education's most recent report, SSM/V comprise approximately six percent of undergraduate students and seven percent of graduate students attending US colleges and universities ([Holian & Adam, 2020](#)). SSM/V differ from other undergraduate students in important ways. In 2018, 85% of SSM/V using military-connected education benefits were older than most undergraduates, were married, had children and were first-generation college students, creating additional demands on their time and resources ([Borsari et al., 2017](#)).

Military service can provide strengths such as discipline, work ethic, comradery, and time management, which can be of great value to SSM/V in academic settings. These students also experience unique challenges from their military service, such as physical and psychological disabilities, mental health disorders, difficulty transitioning from military settings to academic ones, struggles with social interactions with other students, not feeling like they fit in, time commitment to part- or full-time work outside of school, and caring for dependents ([U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2023](#)). Given their experiences, SSM/V often choose not to disclose and/or hide their military affiliation or previous service ([Ackerman et al., 2009](#); [Alexander, 2014](#); [Livingston et al., 2011](#)).

The current body of research on SSM/V in higher education tends to focus on how military-connected physical disabilities and psychological disorders influence academic outcomes and the struggles SSM/V experience from transition and adjustment out of the military and into higher education ([Barry et al., 2014](#); [Bodrog et al., 2018](#)). In contrast, this study explored how social-connectedness, mattering, emic view of self, dedicated SSM/V campus spaces, and individual deployment history collectively interacted and influenced SSM/V well-being in higher education.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study implemented a psychosociocultural (PSC) approach, which was developed as a person-environment approach for Latina/o undergraduates ([Gloria & Rodriguez, 2000](#)). The framework incorporates psychological, social, and cultural dimensions, within the context of higher education. Specifically, the psychological dimension involves beliefs and attitudes that are held by and/or held about the individual. The social dimension includes the connections and relationships that the students hold both on and off campus relative to their roles as students. The cultural dimension includes values based on identities within their university context. The PSC approach has evidenced support with historically underrepresented and underserved students' educational experiences, such as first-generation college students' persistence ([Delgado-Guerrero & Gloria, 2023](#)), Latino male undergraduates' sense of identity ([Sandoval & Gloria, 2023](#)), and SSM/V college adjustment ([Bodrog et al., 2018](#)). For this study, the three PSC dimension variables included mattering (psychological), connectedness (social), and perceptions of being SSM/V (cultural) within the university setting to explore well-being.

PSYCHOLOGICAL DIMENSION—MATTERING

Within academic settings, an individual's sense of mattering and feeling connected to others can be important factors in their overall academic experience, academic outcomes, and sense of well-being ([Barry et al., 2014](#); [Tovar et al., 2009](#)). In the current context, mattering can be described as an individual's sense of being a meaningful and significant part of the world around them ([Elliott et al., 2004](#)). In academic settings, mattering applies to how an individual views themselves within classroom settings, amongst their peers, and when interacting with instructors, advisors, and other university faculty. Mattering influences how individuals evaluate other's interest in and concern for them ([Elliott et al., 2004](#); [Tovar et al., 2009](#)), sense of connection and belonging within peer groups ([Dueñas & Gloria, 2017](#); [France & Finney, 2010](#); [Schlossberg, 1989](#)), and how an individual adjusts to their environment ([Garriott et al., 2010](#)).

SOCIAL DIMENSION—SOCIAL-CONNECTEDNESS

Membership within and connection to peer groups have a vital influence on undergraduate's academic and

psychological adjustment in higher education, particularly for traditionally underserved students who experience additional and unique challenges in these settings (Gloria et al., 2009). Connection and status within peer groups reflect many aspects of military service which SSM/V have typically experienced to some extent, for example, the social dynamics and expectations within different units and organizations in the military hierarchy and a sense of membership within a larger cause or enterprise (Cooper et al., 2018; Siebold, 2007). Some of the unique challenges experienced by SSM/V in higher education are reflected by lower reported sense of belonging, connection on campus, and less engagement with peers who do not share SSM/V status (Durdella & Kim, 2012; Kim & Cole, 2013; Radford, 2011).

CULTURAL DIMENSION—EMIC VIEW OF SELF

Assimilating one's established and developing identities into a more integrated overall identity has been shown to influence college experiences; for example, how student's developing ethnic identities influence their ultimate choice of major (Syed, 2010). The unique experiences and challenges of military service and the complex identities that develop because of these experiences can challenge the assimilation and integration of these identities for SSM/V in academic settings (Bachman et al., 2000). Sources of meaning for individuals in the military can differ greatly from the ways students on campus create meaning for themselves and this contrast can be a major challenge for SSM/V transitioning into higher education (Jones, 2013). Identities that were effective and potentially encouraged in military settings, must be inevitably modified, reframed, and likely expanded or constricted in response to the dynamic and intersecting social domains in university environments, which may be sources of meaning or significant stress (Abes et al., 2007).

The challenge of integrating personal and military-related identities for SSM/V in higher education is further complicated when SSM/V do not feel they can discuss or acknowledge their military status with campus communities. Livingston et al. (2011) found that some SSM/V concealed or downplayed their military status to blend in with campus peers, effectively rendering their military identities invisible, and were less likely to seek outside help or support from peers without military experience and academic resources not affiliated with military educational benefits. SSM/V's perception of how their military service, values, and identity fit within their new academic roles and contexts are a crucial factor in

the cultural congruence between the student and their university experience, for example how well their individual values align with their perception of university values (Gloria & Robinson-Kurpius, 1996).

WELL-BEING

The notion of well-being has been substantively researched as a broad or etic process with general belief of importance; however, a consensus definition is lacking (Douwes et al., 2023). Yet it is clear that well-being is multidimensional and dynamic as scholars have worked to operationalize the concept (Dodge et al., 2012). In particular, well-being within higher education has been broadly-focused to education (Douwes et al., 2023) and more specific to values congruity for diverse undergraduates (e.g., Castellanos et al., 2024; DeVitre et al., 2021). Specific to SSM/V, O'Laughlin and colleagues (2023) operationalized educational well-being as including vocation, work, health, and social well-being across status, functioning, and satisfaction. Similarly, SSM/V well-being has been conceptualized from Seligman's (2011) multidimensional concept which includes positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment. Specifically, well-being for undergraduate SSM/V supports their overall academic performance and success (Weiss et al., 2024). Yet, understanding well-being for SSM/V is an area of continued need (Douwes et al., 2023; O'Laughlin et al., 2023).

STUDY PURPOSE AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

To address our study purpose, our first research question sought to understand SSM/V participants' perspectives on and use of dedicated campus space (i.e., What is use of and perspectives on SSM/V dedicated space on campus?). As this research question was intended as descriptive to contextualize the participants' educational experiences and opportunities for SSM/V-specific connection, we did not propose specific hypotheses. Our second research question assessed differences for the study's variables by gender and deployment type (i.e., Are there differences in sense of mattering, connectedness, view of self, and well-being by SSM/V self-identified gender (men, women) and deployment type (combat, noncombat)?). Given extant research, we anticipated differences in experience by gender (Rumann & Hamrick, 2010) and deployment (Bodrog et al., 2018). Third, we explored whether mattering, connectedness, and cultural view of self collectively and independently predicted SSM/V well-being (i.e., To

what extent do mattering, connectedness, and cultural view of self collectively and independently predict SSM/V well-being?). Based on core tenets of the PSC approach (Gloria & Rodriguez, 2000), we anticipated that the dimensions would collectively and independently account for well-being. Fourth, we examined whether mattering mediated connectedness and view of self with well-being, respectively (i.e., Does mattering mediate the relationship of connectedness and SSM/V view of self with well-being, respectively?). We expected mattering to either fully or partially mediate the relationships, in alignment with previous research (Bodrog et al., 2018). Finally, we assessed whether deployment type or SSM/V space moderated the relationships of mattering with connectedness and view of self (i.e., Does deployment type (combat, noncombat) or SSM/V space (no, yes) moderate the mediated relationship (X to M), respectively?).

METHODS

STUDY SETTING AND PROCEDURES

The study was conducted at six midwestern predominantly White four-year universities, which were part of a state postsecondary school system. Within the Midwest state, the U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs (2023) report 8.62% of the adult population are veterans in comparison to national statistics of 6.6%. Study recruitment emails were sent to SSM/V campus organization leadership, who voluntarily forwarded them to their student listservs and/or social media communications. Campus-wide research emails were also used to announce the study. The emails described the study and included a link to the online platform (Qualtrics), which took approximately 20 minutes to complete. Participants who met study eligibility and completed the survey were provided the opportunity to enter a raffle for one of 10 twenty-dollar gift cards.

PARTICIPANTS

The study was approved by the University of Wisconsin–Madison’s Minimum Risk Research Institutional Review Board and was determined to meet the criteria for exempt human subjects (# 2023–1394). A total of 147 students began and/or completed the survey; however, 104 participants met all study criterion (i.e., 18 years of age or older, undergraduate or graduate student enrolled in one of the identified state colleges/universities, and SSM/V status with a reported military branch and/or rank). Of the 43 participants not meeting study requirements, 42 were not SSM/V (i.e., indicated no military branch affiliation and subsequent rank) and one was not an enrolled student. Participants represented six higher education institutions,

with all sites reported as having a dedicated SSM/V space on campus. The sample was primarily undergraduate ($n = 79$, 76.0%), White ($n = 90$, 86.5%), with approximately equal representation by self-identified gender and generation to college. Students represented a range of races/ethnicities as well as ages ($M = 27.86$, $SD = 8.90$, range = 18 to 56, median = 24.50). Self-reported grade point average ranged from 2.21 to 4.0 ($M = 3.48$, $SD = .42$). Most service branches were represented in the study, with the largest representation from the Army ($n = 32$, 20.8%) and Army National Reserve ($n = 30$, 28.9%) followed by the Marine Corps ($n = 11$, 10.8%). Participants were both enlisted and officers, with ranks ranging from private first class to lieutenant colonel. Most participants reported using service-related benefits to engage their education ($n = 87$, 83.7%). Table 1 provides a full overview of participant

DESCRIPTIVE CATEGORY	N	%
Military Status		
Active duty	5	4.8
Reserve	6	5.8
National Guard	47	45.2
Veteran	42	40.4
Other	4	3.8
Military branch		
Air Force	7	6.7
Air Force National Guard	9	8.7
Army	32	30.8
Army National Guard	30	28.9
Army and Army National Guard	2	2.0
Army Reserve	5	4.8
Army National Guard and Army Reserve	1	1.0
Marine Corps	11	10.6
Marine Corps Reserve	1	1.0
Navy	6	5.8
Rank		
E-2	1	1.0
E-3	14	13.5
E-4	35	33.6
E-5	31	29.8
E-6	9	8.7
E-7	2	1.9

descriptives.

(Contd.)

DESCRIPTIVE CATEGORY	N	%
E-8	2	1.9
E-9	2	1.9
O-1	1	1.0
O-3	6	5.7
O-5	1	1.0
Race and ethnicity		
American Indian or Alaskan Native	1	1.0
Asian American	7	6.7
Black or African American	2	2.0
Latino or Hispanic	4	3.8
White	90	86.5
Self-identified gender		
Female	43	41.3
Male	60	57.7
Non-binary	1	1.0
Class standing		
Undergraduate	79	75.0
Graduate	25	24.0
Transfer status		
Yes	41	39.4
No	60	57.7
Other	3	2.9
Generation to college		
First	41	39.4
Continuing	63	60.6
Current employment status		
Part-time work	58	55.8
Full-time work	20	19.2
Not currently employed	26	25.0
University SSM/V dedicated space		
Yes	67	63.8
No	9	8.6
Not sure	28	26.7
Did not indicate	1	1.0
Use of university SSM/V dedicated space		
Yes	27	25.7
No	39	37.1
Did not indicate	39	37.1

(Contd.)

DESCRIPTIVE CATEGORY	N	%
Available SSM/V dedicated space (n = 67)		
Use of space		
Yes	27	40.3
No	39	58.2
Did not respond	1	1.5
Reasons for using space		
Social interactions with other SSM/V	18	17.3
Studying	18	17.3
Quiet/peace	17	16.3
Rest	7	6.3
Reasons for not using space		
Not interested	15	14.4
Not enough time	15	14.4
Not ideal location	13	12.5
SSM/V dedicated space influence on educational experience		
Positive influence	28	41.8
Negative influence	1	1.5
No influence	29	43.3
Uncertain influence	9	13.4
No or uncertain about available SSM/V dedicated space (n = 36)		
If space were available, would they use		
Would use	18	54.3
Would not use	5	14.3
Unsure of use	11	31.4
Reasons for using space if available		
Studying	29	27.9
Social interactions with other SSM/V	23	22.1
Quiet/peace	23	22.1
Rest	13	12.5
Reasons for not using space if available		
Not interested	7	6.7
Not enough time	3	2.9
Not ideal location	3	2.9
No SSM/V dedicated space influence on educational experience		
Positive influence	1	3.0
Negative influence	6	18.2

(Contd.)

DESCRIPTIVE CATEGORY	N	%
No influence	15	45.5
Uncertain influence	11	33.3

Table 1 Participant Descriptives for 105 Student Service Members/Veterans.

Notes. Numbers in the reasons for use of available dedicated SSM/V space do not add up to the respective amounts because participants were instructed to select all that apply.

INSTRUMENTS

DEMOGRAPHIC FORM

Participants were asked a series of personal (e.g., age and self-identified gender), educational (e.g., self-reported grade point average, student standing, and use of service-related education benefits), and military history (e.g., rank and deployment history) questions prior to completing the counter-balanced standardized scales. In addition, a series of questions were asked about access and use of a campus dedicated SSM/V space on campus.

MATTERING

The College Mattering Scale assessed students' sense of importance and mattering to others in the academic setting (Tovar et al., 2009). Consisting of six subscales, the scale addressed mattering relative to general focus, marginality, counselors/advisors, instructors, students, and perception of value. A sample item from the Mattering to Instructors subscale is "My instructors sometimes ignore my comments or questions" and a sample question from the Mattering to Students subscale is "Other students rely on me for support." Higher subscale scores reflect an increased sense of mattering to instructors and students. Tovar et al.'s (2009) multi-staged validity study, which included both undergraduate and graduate students, reported strong subscale and total score internal consistencies ($\alpha = .91$). Bodrog et al. (2018) also reported a total scale score reliability of $r = 0.93$, with mattering positively predicting college adjustment for 157 SSM/V students. For this study, only two of the six mattering subscales (i.e., Mattering to Instructors and Mattering to Students) were used.

CONNECTEDNESS

Assessing students' sense of connectedness to others within social and academic environments was accomplished using the Social Connectedness Scale-Revised (Lee et al., 2001), which includes 10 positively worded items

and 10 negatively worded items. A sample positive item is "I am able to relate to my peers" and a negative item is "I feel like an outsider." The negative statements are reverse-scored and a total scale score ranging from 20 to 120 is calculated by summing together the positive and negative scores. Higher scores represent a stronger sense of social connectedness. Based on a sample of 100 college students from a large, public, southwestern university, Lee et al. (2001) reported acceptable reliability ($\alpha = .94$) and significant correlation with the UCLA loneliness scale ($r = -0.80$).

SSM/V VIEW OF SELF

The Veterans Returning to College: Notion of Self Scale (Bodrog et al., 2018) was used to assess SSM/V positive and negative self-perceptions within university contexts, based on their current and previous military experiences. This scale emphasizes the unique strengths and skills SSM/V bring to academic settings as well as the challenges or negative views of self they may experience in these settings. Comprised of two scales, the scale was validated with 157 SSM/V (Bodrog et al., 2018). The positive view of self scale includes the stem "Given my previous military service..." followed by items such as "My ability to follow instructions and pay attention to details will help me succeed." The negative view of self scale uses the stem "Given the time I have provided in military service I feel that..." followed by items like "I have seen and lived through experiences that others do not understand and I feel isolated from my student peers." Higher scores represent more positive or negative self-perceptions, respectively. Bodrog et al. (2018) reported strong internal consistency coefficients for the positive ($\alpha = .94$) and negative ($\alpha = .85$) SSM/V view of self scales.

WELL-BEING

Addressing dimensions of students' well-being, the PERMA Profiler (Butler & Kern, 2016) consists of nine subscales (i.e., positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning, accomplishment, overall well-being, negative emotion, health, and loneliness). The scale is based on Seligman's (2011) multidimensional concept of flourishing. A sample item includes, "In general, to what extent do you feel excited and interested in things?" with higher scores reflecting increased well-being. Using the PERMA profiler with 199 post-9/11 SSM/V undergraduates, Weiss et al (2024) reported scale factor structure and predictive validity of academic success as a total scale score. For this study, the overall well-being subscale was used.

RESULTS

Prior to completing study analyses, scale descriptives, reliability, and correlations were conducted (Table 2). All scales were within limits for skew and kurtosis, evidenced adequate internal consistency, and had low to medium associations. Specific to the correlations, a higher mattering to instructors, connectedness, and positive view of self was related to a higher sense of well-being. A lower negative view of self was related to an increased sense of well-being.

Research Question 1: What is use of and perspectives on SSM/V dedicated space on campus? The majority of participants reported a dedicated SSM/V space on campus ($n = 67$, 64.4%); however, just over one-fourth ($n = 27$, 26.0%) used the space. Similarly, over one-fourth of study participants were uncertain there was a dedicated SSM/V space on their campus ($n = 28$, 26.7%). Having the opportunity to socialize with other SSM/V, study, and have a quiet/peaceful space on campus for themselves was the primary reason for use of the space, regardless of whether the university had a dedicated SSM/V space (Table 1).

Research Question 2: Are there differences in sense of mattering, connectedness, view of self, and well-being by SSM/V self-identified gender (men, women) and deployment type (combat, noncombat)? Two sets of t-tests were conducted to assess differences by gender and combat deployment. Results of the t-tests revealed no differences by gender and one difference by combat deployment. Specifically, those participants who had combat deployment reported significantly ($t = 3.77$, $df = 94$, $p = .00$) higher negative view ($M = 4.24$, $SD = 1.26$) than those who did not report combat deployment ($M = 3.25$, $SD = 1.20$).

Research Question 3: To what extent do mattering, connectedness, and view of self collectively and independently predict SSM/V well-being? A three-step hierarchical regression revealed that the dimensions collectively accounted for 52.3% of the variance of well-being ($F(5, 80) = 16.45$, $p = .000$) (Table 3). In the first step, mattering accounted for well-being (21.7% of variance), with mattering to instructors being a positive predictor. In the second step, connectedness was also a positive predictor of well-being (26.7% of variance). For the third step, cultural view of self approached significance ($p = .054$), accounting for 3.9% of the variance. Although not significant, positive and negative SSM/V view of self were positive predictors.

Research Question 4: Does mattering mediate the relationship of connectedness and view of self with well-being, respectively? Using Baron and Kenny's (1986) three-step mediation analyses, mattering fully or partially mediated the relationships of connectedness and positive and negative view of self with well-being, respectively. Mattering to instructors fully mediated the relationships of both positive and negative SSM/V view with well-being, respectively, and partially mediated the relationship of connectedness and well-being. Mattering to students neither fully nor partially mediated the relationships.

Research Question 5: Does deployment type (combat, noncombat) or SSM/V space (no, yes) moderate the mediated relationship (X to M), respectively? Based on the mediation finding, we conducted a second series of regressions to assess if deployment type moderated the relationship of connectedness and positive and negative SSM/V view of self with mattering to instructors, respectively. When simultaneously entered into the

VARIABLE WITH DIMENSION	#	SCALE RANGE WITH ANCHORS	α	M (SD)	2	3	4	5	6
Mattering to instructors (P)	4	1 (not at all) to 5 (all the time)	.86	5.53 (.95)	.01	.43***	.21*	-.36***	.47***
Mattering to students (P)	3	1 (not at all) to 5 (all the time)	.81	4.22 (.99)		.13	.10	-.21*	-.03
Connectedness (S)	20	1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree)	.89	4.97 (.99)			.18	-.52***	.66***
Positive view of self (C)	10	1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree)	.94	5.74 (.99)				-.18	.28**
Negative view of self (C)	10	1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree)	.90	2.69 (.99)					-.31**
Well-being (DV)	16	0 (not at all, never) to 10 (completely, always)	.90	2.33 (.98)					--

Table 2 Scale Measurement, Descriptives, and Correlations Among Study Variables.

Notes. P = psychological dimension; S = social dimension; C = cultural dimension; and # = number of scale items. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

VARIABLE SET	<i>B</i>	95% CI FOR <i>B</i>		<i>SE B</i>	β	<i>R</i> ²	ΔR^2
		LL	UL				
Step 1							
Mattering to instructors	1.14	.65	1.63	.25	.46*	.217	.217
Mattering to students	−.08	−.49	.34	.21	−.04		
Step 2							
Connectedness	1.10	.74	1.45	.17	.58*	.484	.267
Step 3							
Positive view of self	.31	−.04	.65	.17	.15	.523	.039
Negative view of self	.24	−.02	.51	.13	.18		

Table 3 Hierarchical Regression Predicting SSM/V Well-Being.

Notes. CI = confidence interval; LL = lower limit; and UL = upper limit. Only the newly added variables are shown for each step. * $p \leq .001$.

regression, results revealed that the relationships of connectedness and positive and negative SSM/V view of self with mattering to instructors were each dependent on deployment type. For each regression, the interaction coefficient was nonsignificant, revealing no differences in the strength of the relationship between the variables and mattering to instructors based on deployment type and availability of SSM/V space.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This multi-site study of SSM/V which used a PSC approach (Gloria & Rodriguez, 2000), yielded findings that expand the SSM/V educational experience and direct universities to implement specific support services. The participants ranged in their military status, branch affiliation, and rank and were primarily undergraduates. While each of the university settings had a dedicated SSM/V space, the study's participants varied in knowing about and/or accessing/using it. Specifically, more than half of the participants did not know whether their university had a dedicated SSM/V space. Regardless of whether they knew of the dedicated SSM/V space, the primary reasons for using these spaces were connecting with other SSM/V and studying. Although descriptive, the reported goal of seeking connection with others of similar identity is of importance (Cooper et al., 2018). Having the specific space and potential for connection with others of a shared SSM/V identity is of importance given research consistently has evidenced SSM/V being less connected and engaged on campus in comparison to their non-military affiliated counterparts (Durdella & Kim, 2012). Knowing that one's strengths, skills, and identities are valued or matter are

relevant to their adjustment (Bodrog et al., 2018; Ingala et al., 2013), academic success (Semer & Harmening, 2015), and well-being (Weiss et al., 2024).

As anticipated, the overall theoretical framework was upheld in predicting SSM/V well-being. Collectively, the dimensions predicted substantial (52.30%) variance of well-being, with mattering (psychological) and connectedness (social) as positive predictors. These findings align with Bodrog et al.'s (2018), study; however, positive and negative views of self (cultural dimension) were not predictive.

Given the role of mattering for SSM/V in their postsecondary settings (Bodrog et al., 2018), mattering was explored as a mediating variable. Importantly, students' sense of mattering to others within the educational setting is of clear concern for SSM/V, who typically experience a different trajectory into higher education and differences of experiences from their non-SSM/V peers. For this study, mattering to instructors had a substantial role as it fully mediated the relationships of both positive and negative views of self with well-being. That is, the relationship of SSM/V view of self (positive and challenging) relative to well-being must be considered relative to how SSM/V feel they matter to instructors. Much like they view their military rank structure or command-based structure (Ackerman et al., 2009; Brown & Gross, 2011), SSM/V students may view or hold in regard their instructors as an "educational chain of command," and want to know that they matter to those individuals (i.e., instructors) who they perceive as in charge or in command of the setting. This finding underscores the importance of instructors (i.e., teaching assistants, instructors, or faculty) to know and hold with humility the importance of their role to ensure that SSM/V students are welcomed and validated in the learning setting (i.e., classroom or lab).

Counter to expectations and the extant literature addressing the role of peers for SSM/V, mattering to students did not fully or partially mediate the positive or challenging view of self with well-being. Further, mattering to students was unrelated to well-being, much less predictive. Following the same military culture or value, one's service member counterparts or peers (e.g., unit, squad, or battalion) are centered in group cohesion and responsibility for and to each other (Siebold, 2007). Within military settings, the collective focus on a shared mission is of serious consequence, particularly in combat situations, creating a camaraderie of shared critical incidences (e.g., bonding through difficult training, temporary duties, or life-threatening deployment experiences). Classroom students, who are most likely not military-affiliated, are not comparable to SSM/V peers as classroom experiences typically do not allow students to bond or connect in similar ways.

As extant research evidences the importance of belonging (Barry et al., 2014) and mattering (Bodrog et al., 2018) for SSM/V, perhaps the broader emphasis is on whether mattering to peers is relative to non-military peers or other SSM/V. Nonetheless, additional research is needed to either support or refute this finding. In this same way, the descriptive findings of SSM/V students who accessed their dedicated SSM/V spaces was identified as a way to engage with other SSM/V.

In addressing how SSM/V view themselves, Phillips and Lincoln (2017) created a clear foundation in addressing veteran identity. Centering military culture and identity as an asset for SSM/V serves to create a culture of value and inclusion within postsecondary education. For this study, the positive SSM/V view of self did not differ by combat deployment, rather it was the negative SSM/V view of self. As veterans continue to be inappropriately portrayed as "deviant characters" (Phillips & Lincoln, 2017, p. 662) and feel the need to hide or minimize their SSM/V experiences (Ackerman et al., 2009; Alexander, 2014; Livingston et al., 2011), it is understandable that negative SSM/V view of self was higher for those with combat deployments in comparison to those who did not have combat deployments. More specifically, if SSM/V feel that they need to hide a central identity or core elements of who they are from those in the educational context, it is likely that they have also integrated others' negative views of themselves. This process most likely informs their increasingly negative view of their experiences.

Indeed, the opportunity to engage with other individuals who are SSM/V in university dedicated spaces is increasingly important to their mattering, connection, and overall well-being. Whether these are brick and mortar spaces (e.g., physical offices or shared desk space in a larger student services setting) or virtual spaces, the opportunity to

engage with SSM/V peers who have shared experiences, in particular combat experiences, is needed for deeper and more nuanced validation. Although current and previous military experiences may be both positive and challenging, SSM/V assessments of these experiences are often different from how they view themselves. Importantly, the study's findings clearly direct that universities need to more fully support SSM/V to inform them of available resources as well as to potentially expand on services provided. Offering SSM/V peer support (check-in or chat spaces), and engaging in instructor/faculty training about how to effectively support SSM/V in learning spaces (drawing on coordinating or group skills) are clearly needed in supporting SSM/V overall well-being.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTION

As a cross-sectional study, SSM/V participants' change of self-perceptions and educational experiences were not assessed relative to mattering to their peers and instructors or view of self over time. A diary study or longitudinal study that asks for SSM/V student experiences pre- or post-class (Guan & Gloria, 2024) could provide more information about access of students' assets and mattering. Although SSM/V participants were from multiple sites, they were primarily from two universities and may not have fully represented the range of perspectives within a Midwestern state in which the research was conducted, much less nationwide.

Additionally, the specifics of SSM/V dedicated space likely varied by campus visibility and level of resources, which likely influenced participants' knowledge of and motivation to access the space. Further, the participants were primarily undergraduate versus graduate students. That the experiences, demands, and context of undergraduate versus graduate students are different may have influenced the findings relative to students and instructors. Future research would do well to explore the specific needs of graduate SSM/V, particularly as faculty instructors and advisors often play a more central role in students' educational trajectory and program/degree completion. For undergraduates, a course instructor is one of many faculty who are part of students' experiences.

Further, the degree to which SSM/V feel "safe" to openly share their SSM/V identity and/or deployment experiences and their subsequent strengths and skills that they hold relative to the learning space (Livingston et al., 2011) is an area of needed focus. Future research could also differentiate contexts in which SSM/Vs feel judged, supported, or validated by their peers and faculty and how it informs view of self, SSM/V identity and theory (Phillips & Lincoln, 2017), and their well-being. Exploring how SSM/V can draw from all of their identities from a strengths-based

perspective and have it reflected on college campuses via dedicated space warrants continued study to allow a full understanding of how they matter, are connected, and perceived in supporting their ongoing well-being.

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COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

AUTHOR NOTES

Dustin Lewis is an LPC-IT at a Veteran Center within the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs and Alberta M. Gloria is a professor in the Department of Counseling Psychology at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. This study was conducted as a thesis project while the lead author was a master's student at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Correspondence should be addressed to dustinsethlewis@gmail.com.

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