

Analysis of Campus Perceptions of Veteran Students

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Background/Methodology

In Spring 2015, feedback from the College's veterans motivated the Cultural Competency and Equity Committee (CC&E) to examine what, if any, are the biases that exist on campus that support or have a negative impact on military veterans. A survey was therefore developed to gauge the campus-wide perceptions of veterans. This survey was administered online to the campus community from April 16th to May 1st.

Within this survey, veterans and non-veterans received two differing sets of questions. Those who indicated that they were veterans were asked two open-ended questions: What stereotypes/assumptions about being a veteran frustrate you the most and why, and what actions (behaviors or language) from other people make you feel included and valued. Immediately following each of these questions, veterans were asked to indicate how frequently they encountered these stereotypes/actions on campus (*Never, Rarely, Regularly, and Frequently*).

On the other hand, participants who indicated that they were not veterans were asked to agree or disagree with six statements about military veterans ('ism' statements). These questions were meant to assess the extent to which non-veterans on campus hold false and potentially harmful beliefs about veterans. At the end of the survey both veterans and non-veterans were asked to provide four words that came to mind when hearing the word "veteran." They were then directed to the CRC's Cultural Competency and Equity website where a veterans FAQ was hosted with factual information regarding the six 'ism' statements. Data from this survey were analyzed by examining the frequencies of words/responses and with chi-square/non-parametric t-test techniques.

Overview of Findings

Amongst veterans who participated in the survey, 34.8% stated that they encounter negative stereotypes regularly or frequently on campus. Conversely, 60.9% of surveyed veterans say they encounter actions that make them feel included and valued regularly or frequently on campus. On average, non-veteran students maintained false beliefs regarding veteran combat experience, homelessness, and employment. Finally, positive words were most frequently provided by veterans and non-veterans in response to the final question. The distribution of word categories also did not differ between the two groups.

Limitations of Study/Suggestions for Future Surveys

Generally, the data captured from the survey revealed a much more rich and complicated picture than was expected. For example, many of the non-veterans believed in the 'isms,' but in general their word associations of veterans were positive. With that said, there are a few ways that this survey could potentially be improved. First, the limited number of campus-wide participants may make it hard to generalize findings to the whole campus community. Second, with regards to the design of the survey, there was no opportunity for non-veteran students to provide a frame of reference for their views on veterans. For example, a non-veteran whose family member is/was a veteran might have a different view than someone who has no relation with anyone who is/was a veteran. Additionally, the last section of the survey for veterans and non-veterans could be expanded to gauge perceptions about whether the campus community provides a welcoming and supportive environment for veterans and whether

veterans supported and welcomed by society. These factors could be assessed with seven-point Likert scales.

Analysis

There were a total of 220 responses. Of the 125 students, 12.8% also identified as a veteran (Table 1). Of the respondents who identified as employees, 10.6% (10 out of 94) identified as a veteran.

Table 1. *Veteran/Non-Veteran Sample Sizes by Staff and Student Status*

	Student	Faculty, Administrator, or Staff	No response	Total
I am a veteran	16	10		26
I am not a veteran	109	84	1	194
Total	125	94	1	220

Veteran Questions

Twenty-three of the 26 veterans answered the veteran oriented questions. The most frequently identified stereotype/assumption was that veterans suffer from Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and that they have killed someone in combat. When asked to indicate the frequency of how often they experienced these stereotypes/assumptions at CRC, close to two-thirds responded “Rarely” (43.5%) or “Never” (21.7%). Of the students who responded “Frequently” or “Regularly,” the most common assumption/stereotypes that were shared were that they suffer from PTSD or that they were asked if they killed someone in combat (or how many did they kill in combat).

They were then asked to describe what types of actions from other people make them feel included and valued. The most frequently described action was when others either thanked them for their service or when they are included in conversations with others that are not related to their military service. When asked to indicate how frequently they experienced those types of actions, 60.9% indicated “Frequently” or “Regularly.”

Non-Veteran Questions

As previously stated, survey participants who did not identify as a veteran (Response choice: “I am not a veteran”) were given a set of six statements about veterans and were instructed to indicate their agreement with each. At the end of the survey, the survey respondents were directed to the CRC’s Cultural Competency and Equity website that hosted a FAQ on Veterans. The veteran FAQs included the same ‘ism’ statements, but accompanied by accurate information.

(<http://www.crc.losrios.edu/facstaff/sharegov/cce/minutes/vetfaq>)

Table 2. *Percentage agreement/disagreement with each 'ism' statement*

Statement	Truth of the Statement	% Agreed	% Disagreed	Number of Respondents
More than 50% of veterans have experienced combat.	FALSE	53.7%	46.3%	162
Approximately 25% of veterans experience Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.	TRUE	84.0%	16.0%	162
Approximately 10% of veterans are women.	TRUE	66.0%	34.0%	162
Veterans comprise approximately 20% of the homeless population.	FALSE	78.3%	21.7%	161
The unemployment rate of veterans in California is less than the unemployment rate in California.	TRUE	34.8%	65.2%	161
There are more than 5 million veterans from the Gulf War era.	TRUE	62.3%	37.7%	162

Overall, the majority of non-veterans held correct beliefs about three of the 'ism' statements (percentage of veterans with post-traumatic stress disorder, the percentage of veterans who are women, and the number of veterans from the Gulf War era; see Table 2). On the other hand, on average they held false beliefs about combat and veteran homelessness. The group was nearly split 50-50 in agreement/disagreement over the percentage of veterans who experienced combat (53.7% agreed, 46.3% disagreed; less than 50% of veterans actually have experienced combat). Moreover, the majority of the non-veteran participants agreed (78.3%) with the statement that approximately 20% of the homeless population is comprised of veterans (the actual percentage is 10%). It was therefore not surprising to see that close to two-thirds of the group disagree (65.2%) that veteran unemployment is less than the California unemployment rate (veteran unemployment is actually lower than the California unemployment rate).

Four Words

The four words provided by participants were classified into several broad categories: Positive Traits (e.g., Hard-Working, Brave, Honorable), Negative Traits (e.g., Homeless, Stupid, Entitled), Relationships (e.g., Grandpa, Brother), Military Nouns (e.g., War, Gun, Military), and Neutral/Other (e.g., Who, Other, Old). Interestingly, Positive Traits were the most frequent in non-veteran participant responses, followed by military nouns and 'Other' (Table 3). Veterans also provided a similar distribution of words. A chi-square test comparing the distribution of veteran and non-veteran words was not significant ($\chi^2 = 8.42, ns.$), and therefore, it could not be concluded that the two groups provided differing types of words.

Table 3. *Word Categories by Veteran/Non-Veteran Status*

Word Type	Non-Veterans		Veterans	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
Mental Illness	39	6.6%	9	9.8%
Military	171	28.8%	24	26.1%
Negative Traits	53	8.9%	6	6.5%
Neutral	38	6.4%	3	3.3%
Other	75	12.7%	7	7.6%
Positive Traits	202	34.1%	38	41.3%
Relationships	15	2.5%	5	5.4%
Grand Total	593	100.00%	92	100.00%

The fact that no differences were found between veterans and students could have been attributed to the subjective nature of the word classification system. That is, the judges may have been biased to in assigning words to given categories (e.g., Positive Traits). Therefore, a computer algorithm was used to derive the positive or negative 'sentiment' of the words provided by each participant. On average, both veterans and non-veterans provided words with a slightly positive sentiment. They did not significantly differ from one another (*Wilcoxin Rank Sum Test, W = 1558, ns.*).