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Dear Colleagues, Academics, Students, and Friends:

On behalf of the 2016-2017 Executive Editorial Board, I am proud to present the thirteenth edition of the Journal of Student Affairs at New York University. This year we had many submissions from authors across the United States that highlighted various issues within higher education and student affairs. After countless hours of review and deliberation from our editorial team, we are beyond excited to present the following three articles. We hope these articles will introduce you to a new topic or further expand your knowledge.

This edition of the Journal of Student Affairs includes topics on veteran students, students with disabilities, and student integration in social media. Combating the Stigma: The Challenges of Disability Disclosure in Higher Education and Veterans Transitioning Into College: Challenges and Strategies For Success bring light to many issues that these student populations face and encourage higher education and student affairs professionals to think about how to better serve these students in everyday practice and when making long term change. Measuring College Student Integration in Social Media is a study that analyzes the correlation between student sense of belonging on campus, level of engagement, and use of social media.

The success of this journal would not have been possible without the unyielding commitment of the Executive Editorial Board: Rebecca Burwell, Fanny He, Kristina Neuhaus, and Ryan Gambino. I thank each and every one of you for your continuous dedication to the team and journal. On behalf of the 2016-2017 Executive Editorial Board, I want to express my gratitude to our outgoing faculty advisor Dr. Gregory Wolniak, new faculty advisor Dr. Stella Flores, and Dr. Michael Funk who have supported the Journal of Student Affairs in various capacities throughout the year. I also would like to thank the Internal Review Board and External Review Board for spending countless hours editing and providing feedback to ensure that this journal has quality peer-reviewed articles. Lastly, I would like to thank our wonderful authors for their time and commitment to this process. It was apparent that each author was passionate about their respective topics. We thank you for sharing your insight, and congratulate you for your contributions to the field.

On behalf of the 2016-2017 Executive Editorial Board, Internal and External Review Boards, and authors, it is with great pleasure I introduce to you the thirteenth edition of the Journal of Student Affairs at New York University.

Sincerely,

Mishaal Barrett

Editor-in-Chief, JoSA Volume XIII
Combating the Stigma: The Challenges of Disability Disclosure in Higher Education

Ryan G. W. Grubbs
New York University

Abstract
As the percentage of students with disabilities enrolling in post-secondary institutions increases, so does the need for faculty, staff, and institutions to gain more insight on this population. Students with disabilities face unique and often previously unexperienced challenges relating to how and when they choose to disclose their disability. This process spans the entirety of a student’s academic career, from admission to retention at a post-secondary institution. Disclosure can bring stigma that can hinder students’ access to the reasonable accommodations they need to succeed. The need to disclose a disability can also be in direct opposition to the desire of a student with a disability to maintain a sense of “normalcy” in their life and interactions with faculty and peers. The general lack of knowledge or understanding about disabilities by faculty, administrators, and other students, as well as the dearth of voices of students with disabilities in institutional policies creates additional barriers for academic success for this population.

This literature review explores the challenges of stigma in disability disclosure and the ways students with disabilities can contribute to the education of faculty and staff on strategies, like the implementation of universal instructional design, which can be used to help reduce the stigma surrounding disclosure.

Keywords: disability disclosure, students with disabilities, higher education
receive, faculty at post-secondary institutions are likely to know little more about the process than that they are required by the ADA to provide reasonable accommodations if a student requests them, but not how best to provide them or what types of accommodation strategies work (Eckes & Ochoa, 2005). The laws in place therefore create a gap in support and protections between secondary and post-secondary institutions, leading students to navigate a new terrain regarding their disability and how they should disclose their status to receive accommodations from faculty and staff who may not be entirely knowledgeable about the unique challenges these students face.

The change in the need to disclose a disability to receive accommodations can be burdensome and carry stigma that can limit the effectiveness of an accommodation or the eventual success of the student. It can also be in direct opposition to the desire of a student with a disability to maintain a sense of “normalcy” and “pass” as nondisabled in their interactions with faculty and peers; a status that is complicated by the presence of intersecting identities. This literature review explores the barriers that stigma can create for students who disclose their disabilities, the process of disclosure, and the desire for, and complications of, normalcy. It also explores the ways students with disabilities can contribute to the education of faculty and staff about disability, and how strategies like implementing universal instructional design can be utilized by faculty and staff at post-secondary institutions to help reduce the stigma surrounding disclosure.

**Stigma of Disability Disclosure**

While necessary to receive reasonable accommodations from a post-secondary institution, possessing a disability and disclosing this fact can be accompanied by stigma. The theme of encountering stigma was related in participant responses in two qualitative studies about the experiences of students with disabilities in higher education (Barnard-Brak, Lechtenberger, & Lan, 2010; Blockmans, 2014). Blockmans (2014) outlines how stigma around disability is formulated by ableism, defined as a “prejudice or discrimination against people with apparent or assumed physical, intellectual, or behavioral differences” (p. 2). Ableism can manifest itself in stereotypical views of students with disabilities as “lazy, stupid, or trying to manipulate the system,” especially after a disability is disclosed and a request for accommodations is made (Rocco, 2001, p. 11). This is illustrated in the response of a participant in the Blockmans (2014) study who indicated hesitation to disclose their disability was based on a desire to “prevent underestimation of [their] skills” in the course (p. 13).

Even if a student meets the requirements and requests reasonable accommodations, some participants in the Barnard-Brak et al. (2010) study indicated the need to negotiate with faculty members who were reluctant to provide the requested accommodations. These participants noted that negotiation was preferred to reporting ADA noncompliance for the faculty due to the possibility of being “outed” and ‘black-balled’ by going through official channels and reporting non-compliance” (Barnard-Brak et al., 2010, p. 420). For these students, the risk of being denied accommodations, even after disclosure, was coupled with the threat of increased stigma if the noncompliance was reported. As one participant noted, “there’s no winning, just degrees of losing” (Barnard-Brak et al., 2010, p. 420) due to the lack of knowledge and resistance of some faculty members to provide accommodations.

While disclosure of a disability can certainly carry a level of stigma, there are also benefits for students who disclose. Through disclosure, students are able to
receive the necessary reasonable accommodations they need to participate more fully in the classroom (Lynch & Gussel, 1996). The act of disclosing a nonvisible disability can benefit the person with the disability, as it decreases the stress of hiding the disability and the fear of being “disscredited” or being discovered, against their will, as having a nonvisible disability (Goffman, 1963, p. 75). In addition, participants in Blockmans’s (2014) study indicated that disclosure of a disability brought them closer to peers; as their relationships matured, the sharing of a disability became part of the overall conversational process in how these students made connections with one another.

Even with the benefits, disclosure is not always the preferred activity. What is most striking from the Barnard-Brak et al. (2010) study is the overall preference of the respondents not to disclose their disability status if possible, or to minimize their disability as to appear nondisabled (p. 420). Each respondent in the study indicated that they would not disclose their disability if not for the fact that, in order to receive accommodations, a disclosure must occur (Barnard-Brak et al., 2010, p. 421). Respondents in the Blockmans (2014) study also indicated some preference for avoiding disclosure for either self-protection or anticipation of negative implications of the disclosure (pp. 12-13). The findings of these two studies indicate that the respondents would prefer to forego accommodations altogether and be perceived as nondisabled than have to face the stigma involved by the disclosure of their disabilities.

The Act of Disclosure

For those students who do choose to disclose, this process can start in the very beginning of the admissions process to a post-secondary institution. Although current law prohibits any pre-admission inquiry related to students’ disabilities, institutions can learn about possible disabilities based on whether an applicant requests reasonable accommodations for taking the standardized tests required for admission, such as the SAT or ACT (Palombi, 2000). If accommodations for these tests are requested, the test results sent to institutions carry a notation of “nonstandardized,” creating a dilemma for students with disabilities. In requesting accommodations for taking the standardized tests, these students are seeking to create a more equitable environment in which to take the test on par with their nondisabled peers. However, the notation of nonstandardized could alert institutions to the possible presence of a disability, which could potentially be taken into account in an admissions decision for the applicant. If the accommodations are foregone, a potential poor score on the standardized test due to a student’s disability could then jeopardize the student’s admission chances as well (Palombi, 2000). The importance of disclosure by a student with a disability at this juncture could be the make-or-break of admission to a post-secondary institution, but disclosure comes at the cost of the student’s privacy.

Once matriculated, the process of disclosure continues. Those with nonvisible disabilities are more likely to engage in the disclosure process, as possessing a physical disability can often preclude the “voluntary act of disclosure” (Barnard-Brak et al., 2010, p. 414) for those students who may use a wheelchair or a service animal, as they can more readily be identified as having a disability. While students with physical disabilities still go through a disclosure process, it is those with nonvisible disabilities who struggle most with managing the amount of information about their disability that they disclose to others. As Goffman (1963) writes in his work on stigma, those with nonvisible identities must choose “to display or not to
display; to tell or not to tell; to let on or not to lie; and in each case, to whom, how, when, and where” (p. 42). In other words, those with nonvisible disabilities must choose when and what to disclose about their disabilities to others in every setting.

The typical act of disclosing, as Petronio (as cited in Barnard-Brak et al., 2010) notes, relies on the revelation of “personal, private information about oneself” in a “gradual and ongoing process dependent first and foremost upon with whom one is communicating with and in what context” (p. 413). Meaning, one can choose to share relevant information with another person to find common interests or as a result of a relationship deepening over time, or they may choose not to, depending on their familiarity and trust of the other person. The disclosure process for students with disabilities, however, differs from this typical process, as it requires disclosing “what would normally be personal and privileged information to an essential stranger, a faculty member” in order to receive the necessary accommodations (Barnard-Brak et al., 2010, p. 413). What one would typically choose to share with another person after knowing them for a stretch of time is what students with disabilities must often disclose to faculty members by the first day of class in order to receive the necessary accommodations to excel in the course. This again puts the privacy of the student with a disability at risk.

Desires and Complications of “Normalcy”

The retention of privacy and a desire for normalcy, or to be seen as individual people first and not be grouped and limited by disability and how others perceive them, was a reoccurring theme in current literature (Barnard-Brak et al., 2010; Blockmans, 2014; Hutcheon & Wolbring, 2012). It was discussed most succinctly in the Blockmans (2014) study, in which participants noted a “reluctance to be deprived of their individuality and to be reduced or reduce themselves to their disabilities” (p. 14). While the connection between the desire for normalcy and the stigma of disability disclosure was prevalent in all three studies, participants in the study by Hutcheon and Wolbring (2012) complicated this desire for normalcy by looking at it through an intersectional lens.

In the Hutcheon and Wolbring (2012) study, participants relayed the theme of “hegemonic ableism,” which expanded on the definition offered by Blockmans (2014) by including not only “ability preferences related to functioning” but also “other culturally valued abilities” into its framework (Hutcheon & Wolbring, 2012, p. 43). In their responses, the participants were able to draw conclusions on how the hegemony of ableism intersected with other hegemonies, such as gender and sexuality (Hutcheon & Wolbring, 2012). For example, one participant noted how their disability of stuttering intersected with how others viewed them: “Respondent: …be-be-before I talk, people create this image of who…who I am. So when I talk it kind of shatters…it shatters that image. […] Like people see me…and of course I’m hot. Interviewer: Do you think that having the stutter conflicts with the idea of being sexy? R: Yeah.” (Hutcheon & Wolbring, 2012, p. 43). Here, ableism interacts with the expectations that others place on this participant and the culturally-valued characteristics of being deemed sexually attractive. Because of his nonvisible disability, others may perceive this participant as being nondisabled, and thus desirable, but the participant becomes less desirable and sexually attractive when others find out about his stutter.

The participants in the Hutcheon and Wolbring (2012) study also complicated the notion of normalcy in their responses,
voicing the need “for a continued interrogation of existing cultural scripts regarding normalcy” (p. 45). One participant responded that, “if our society was somehow...more than willing to help, and didn’t feel awkward around difference...then suddenly, the physical differences that exist between people might not be perceived as disability and might be perceived as opportunity” (Hutcheon and Wolbring, 2012, p. 45). In other words, the participants in the Hutcheon and Wolbring study are interrogating assumptions about difference and what is considered “normal,” which could bridge gaps between students with disabilities and their nondisabled peers. The participants noted that if it could be recognized that “everyone has something that they’re dealing with” then the stigma of possessing a disability could be lessened (Hutcheon and Wolbring, 2012, p. 45).

Critiques of the Literature

Although Hutcheon and Wolbring (2012) introduced this new intersectional conceptual framework that complicates the notion of normalcy, the study did not go deeper into the intersections of different social identities and how these affect perceptions of normalcy. In fact, this is a gap present in all the texts reviewed for this topic. For example, the studies by Barnard-Brak et al. (2010) and Blockmans (2014) provided participant demographics such as age, gender, and disability, but they did not further disaggregate the data by race or ethnicity. This information about the participants would be useful to consider as this concept of a desire for normalcy and individuality is discussed. Being considered an individual aside from other identity markings is, as DiAngelo (2009) writes, “a privilege only afforded to White people” (p. 54). Analyzing demographic data along race and ethnicity in these studies could yield intriguing insight into how race and disability intersect.

Disability is viewed from a single vantage point in the majority of the studies analyzed, leaving out the complications of the intersections of disability with other identities. The experiences of a person of color with a disability or a lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer (LGBTQ) person with a disability are vastly different than the experience of a White person with a disability. While all three individuals could possess the same disability, their experiences of that disability are affected by the ways in which their other social identities (e.g. being a person of color or being LGBTQ) intersect. In other words, the ways in which these identities interact with one another also shape the way a person interacts with the systems of power and privilege in our society. This means that an LGBTQ person with a disability is affected by, and interacts with, their environment in a different way than a heterosexual person with the same disability, because of the multiple marginal identities the LGBTQ person with a disability has that the heterosexual person is likely not to possess (Wijeyesinghe & Jones, 2014). Reconceptualizing these studies using a framework of intersectionality that recognizes that “social identities are not discrete entities that are isolated from the influence of all others” (Wijeyesinghe & Jones, 2014, p. 15) would provide a richer analysis of how disability disclosure and stigma are experienced.

Recommendations and Discussion

Even with the lack of discussion of intersectionality and disability, the literature does provide important insight into policies and procedures practitioners can utilize to support students with disabilities. At the admission and matriculation level, creating written policies and procedures outlining the actions needed to ensure students with disabilities are considered in a “manner consistent with their nondisabled peers” is
important so admissions officers and other staff members can be informed and fair (Palombi, 2000). In addition, adapting a practice in which the onus of requesting reasonable accommodations is not placed on the student, but rather having accommodations more fully integrated into the curriculum and learning environments—a process called Universal Instructional Design (UID)—would be helpful.

UID aims to develop a curricular practice that “benefits all students at the same time that it serves students with disabilities” (Pliner & Johnson, 2004, p. 105). With the status quo, institutions do not need to act until a student requests an accommodation; thus, any poor performances by students with disabilities who do not—or cannot—request accommodations can be attributed by the institution to a failing on the part of the student, rather than the result of a structural failure of the institution. In implementing UID, the focus of instructional accommodations is shifted “from the individual to the systemic” (Pliner & Johnson, 2004, p. 108). This paradigm shift highlights the “deficit” mindset in which the current system operates (Bensimon, 2007). Instead of placing the responsibility on students to “adapt to exclusionary structures” of education, institutions instead can focus on creating curriculum and support services that “include the learning needs of all students” (Pliner & Johnson, 2004, p. 109).

This is not to say that the goal of UID is to eliminate the challenge and necessary rigor of a course of study in favor of an easier approach. Rather, it intends to assist instructors in distinguishing between those elements of necessary rigor relevant to the goals of the course of study, and those that create unnecessary barriers to learning for students (Hackman & Rauscher, 2004). Application of UID can be seen in simple alterations to instruction style, such as providing class notes online (which opens access to all students, regardless of factors such as hearing ability, English proficiency, or note-taking level) and using a circular seating arrangement in small class spaces so students can see and face speakers (which benefits students who are Deaf or hard of hearing and those with attention deficit disorders) (Scott et al., 2003, p. 375). Implementing UID by incorporating these simple additions begins to shift the responsibility to the institution, tasking it with incorporating accommodations into the curriculum and learning environments. This shift in responsibility removes some of the weight on the student to disclose their disability in order to receive any needed accommodations, as the barriers these students may face are removed from the curriculum itself. This results in greater success for all students whether they possess a disability or not, and a more equitable learning environment is created through UID.

The literature recommends an increase in education around disabilities and ableism for faculty and staff (Barnard-Brak et al., 2010; Lynch & Gussel, 1996; Thomas, 2000). Braithwaite and Labrecque (1994) note that while “legislation can address physical access and removal of […] barriers, it is not possible to legislate beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors toward persons with disabilities” (p. 289). Education, cultural competency training, and an increase in familiarity of these issues are the only ways to alter beliefs about people with disabilities. To assist with this process, those faculty or staff with previous experience working with students with disabilities can serve as peer resources to colleagues who may be engaging in work with this student population for the first time (Lynch & Gussel, 1996, p. 356). Creating more opportunities for students with disabilities to have their own voice and express their lived experiences can contribute to this education as well. As Hutcheon and Wolbring (2012) remark, voices of students
with disabilities are currently absent in the discourse of higher education scholarship, research, and practice (p. 40). It is telling that, out of the literature reviewed, only three papers included qualitative studies in which the lived experiences of students with disabilities were taken into account. More research incorporating these particular lived experiences would be beneficial.

Finally, a focus on the intersections of other social identities with disability would further add to the conversations of the literature. A major gap in the literature reviewed was the single focus on the target identity of disability, without any interrogation of how this target identity interacts with other social identities (e.g. race, class, gender), which would better illustrate how the participants in these studies experience stigma. Exploring these intersections would also help foster the change from a deficit to an equity mindset outlined above (Bensimon, 2007), as policy changes that focus only on addressing disability may still place an undue burden on students who have complicating identity intersections. More research on these intersections would help to address the gaps in the current literature and provide richer resources for faculty, staff, and institutions to more fully support all students with disabilities.

Conclusion

As the number of students with disabilities continues to rise, post-secondary institutions will need to alter the way they provide accommodations. What was once a more manageable approach to providing individual accommodations to a small portion of the college cohort no longer is effective, and there is need for new approaches related to accessibility and effective instruction (Scott et al., 2003). If disclosure of a disability continues to be truly necessary to receive these accommodations, then faculty and staff need to be better prepared and better educated about disability issues so that the stigma currently experienced by students with disabilities is mitigated and all students can learn in a more equitable environment.

References


Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004, 20 USC § 1400.


Measuring College Student Integration through Social Media

Grant McCormack

Purdue University

Abstract
With the increased use of technology on college campuses over the past few decades, Web 2.0 technology has taken on an important role in the lives of college students. Social media use in particular has spread from the business world to the personal and academic lives of students, faculty, and administrators on college campuses. This study explores whether or not social media benefits student integration to campus life at the University of Maine. For the sake of this study, integration is defined as the direct relationship between student sense of belonging and engagement on campus. A 30 question Likert scale based survey was used to measure correlation between sense of belonging, engagement, and social media use with supplementary questions determining the most commonly used social media applications by University of Maine undergraduates. The results showed no correlation between sense of belonging and social media use, or between engagement and social media use. However, a positive correlation was observed between sense of belonging and engagement, reflecting the likelihood that students feel better connected to a campus in which they are actively involved. The lack of correlation between social media and the other variables does not minimize the importance of social media, but reflects how integral its use has become to college students. The widespread use of social media is a social norm for many undergraduates and could be considered a part of college culture instead of a tool that benefits integration.

Introduction
Advancements in technology have led to the creation of many innovations and inventions that have changed how we live. One example is the internet, which has created a vast network of information that can be exchanged between users instantaneously (Van Dijck, 2013). The internet made the creation of social media possible, and its widespread use and rapid development made research of its effect on society important (Rios-Aguilar, González Canché, Deil-Amen, & Davis, 2012; Van Dijck, 2013). The college landscape in particular has seen a rise in social media use, and this rise has affected various areas of higher education as a profession (Fuller & Pittarese, 2012; Stoller, 2015). For example, is social media use such a critical part of student lives that professionals would benefit from studying its effect on students? Research on the use of specific social media applications is becoming more prevalent, but little research has been conducted on whether or not social media use has an effect on students’ adjustment and fit to campus culture. Plenty of research has already been conducted to observe the effects of student sense of belonging and engagement on campus, but does social media use offer additional benefits (Kuh, 2009; Strayhorn, 2012)?

This study was originally developed to answer that question, focusing specifically on the effect social media has on student integration to college campuses. Social media use on college campuses is becoming more widespread, and professionals need to determine the best methods of using and regulating different social media tools in their practice. Understanding if social media has
an effect on student integration can help determine best practices in working with college students. Additionally, this study was designed to determine if a relationship exists between three variables related to social media and integration: social media use, student engagement, and student sense of belonging. My prediction for this study is social media use will be positively correlated to both student engagement and sense of belonging, implying social media helps students feel more integrated to college campuses.

To understand if social media use has a positive effect on integration, I first provide a literature review of social media as it relates to integration, including a history of social media and its use on college campuses to provide the context of this study. With the literature review offering a brief overview of important social media history, I next present the methods of the study, outlining my surveying and distribution strategies. The results of the survey identify if those three variables have any sort of relationship to each other, also outlining the typical demographics and preferred social media applications of respondents. With this data analyzed, limitations observed in this survey are outlined with respect to the greater implications of this research, providing more information on a possible relationship between integration and social media use.

**Literature Review**

**History of Social Media**

From the onset of the World Wide Web in 1991, none of the networked websites that allowed creation of user-specific profiles had a built-in method of directly connecting users to each other (Van Dijck, 2013). It was in 1997 that the first social networking site (SNS, also known as Social Media Technology or SMT) SixDegrees.com was developed, allowing users to both create profiles and connect directly to other user profiles (Boyd & Ellison, 2007; Davis et. al, 2012). This first SNS led to the onset of other social media platforms throughout the late 1990s, which led to an increase in the number of people using social media (Picciano, 2012). The influx of new social media platforms was also seen in the professional realm with the development of Ryze.com, a business-based SNS that catalyzed the creation of more popular professional networking sites like Tribe.net and LinkedIn (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). In the early 2000s, the development of some of the currently popular SNSs that focus on customizable profiles with searchable friend lists and customizable content were created, including the development of Myspace in 2003 and Facebook in 2004 (Boyd & Ellison, 2007; Lampe, Ellison, & Steinfeld, 2006). When Facebook developed its “fan page” feature, the trend of using SNSs for students to research and interact with larger organizations such as universities, departments, and residence halls began (Fuller & Pittarese, 2012). These features and applications became the foundation of what we now so commonly refer to as “social media.”

Though the onset and history of social media can be identified, the actual origin of the phrase “social media” is up for debate (Boyd & Ellison, 2007; Bercovici, 2010). Some individuals concurrently made the same inferences about technology through their independent research in the 1990s, and the mid-1990s saw many different individuals coining the term “social media” without collaboration (Bercovici, 2010). The then newly labeled “social media” came to be defined as “a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content [(UGC)]” (Kaplin & Haenlein, 2010, p. 61). This definition
assumes knowledge of two terms that are critical to understanding social media, Web 2.0 and UGC. Web 2.0 refers to technological media in which current platforms are updated and modified with new content instead of developing new websites, applications, or domains (Kaplin & Haenlin, 2010). UGC is any original information posted to a social media platform created by a user of social media (Davis, Deil-Amen, Rios-Aguilar, Canche, & Sacramento, 2012). This combination of constantly changing media and UGC redefined how people made connections online, providing a virtual “place” in which conversations and connections could develop into more intimate relationships (Rios-Aguilar et. al, 2012). With these multiple places to connect and multiple platforms developed, it would only be a matter of time before the technology was seen and used on college campuses.

**Common Uses of Social Media on College Campuses**

With the various types of social media, a range of different uses developed that provide multiple benefits to collegiate social media users. Many variations and changes in SNSs came about as focus shifted from providing a previously unavailable service to offering new features that help users choose which SNS is right for them (Van Dijck, 2013). For business uses, SNSs like LinkedIn and Facebook can be used to represent departments or campus groups, offering a profile in which students can browse resources or connect with representatives (Stoller, 2015).

Unfortunately, one issue with such uses of social media is students, customers, patrons, etc. have to follow or connect with these profiles for content to reach its target audience (Fuller & Pittarese, 2012). Outreach, however, becomes less of an issue when considering the educational use of social media, especially when students are required to create profiles on a SNS to submit assignments, receive feedback, download after-class lecture notes, access new assignments, view grades, and more (Johnson, 2012). A study done by Megan Fuller and Tony Pittarese (2012) found 77% of students surveyed either read or would be willing to read postings made by their professors for a class through an SNS. This willingness to utilize social media shows the benefits available in professionals using SNSs to provide resources to students, such as career counseling offices providing example LinkedIn profiles or professors making all course lectures and PowerPoints available online (Stoller, 2015). Other forms of SNSs provide similar services to help professionals reach more students, including but not limited to instant document sharing, real-time messaging, and even video meetings for students when they are off-campus (Hrastinski & Aghaee, 2011). With both professionals and students using social media, a merging of the educational and business uses was inevitable.

With a variety of applications for SNSs on college campuses, an overlap is likely to happen between the business and educational uses. One concept that was introduced recently is work-life separation with SNSs and the implications of having separate profiles for personal and professional use (Ramsdell, 2015). Having separate profiles can come across as impersonal and an attempt to hide personal details and life events from a younger generation raised with technology as part of its culture, or “digital natives” (Prensky, 2001; Ramsdell, 2015). Professionals can better appeal to these digital natives with a holistic approach of combining the “legacy media” of “digital immigrants” like book reading, critical thinking, and writing skills with “future content” of “digital natives” like computing skills and technological literacy to make social media use on campuses applicable,
effective, and genuine for all generations (Prensky, 2001). This approach can be seen in the use of Twitter, Facebook, blogs, and other commonly used SNSs on college campuses in combination with topics learned from book readings and homework assignments (Davis et. al, 2012). Twitter can be used to encourage the continuation of conversations and discussion on class material outside of the classroom using personalized hashtags, allowing students to both track topics and interact with classmates (Junco, Heiberger, & Loken, 2010). Also, LinkedIn can be used as a “secondary resume” that allows students to elaborate further on their experiences, considering research in 2011 showed 48% of employers looked at an applicant’s LinkedIn page prior to hiring (Van Dijck, 2013). These class uses and potential employment benefits show social media is becoming an important part of college students’ lives, but the most salient use of social media to college students is the social and relationship aspect (Lampe, Ellison, & Steinfeld, 2006).

It should come as no surprise that students primarily use SNSs to connect to friends, coworkers, and professors, even if no previous communication has been made (Boyd & Ellison, 2007; Lampe, Ellison, & Steinfeld, 2006). SNSs are quickly becoming a primary tool for building campus communities considering the high number of students using social media to interact and connect to their peers (Ahlquist, 2013; Lampe, Ellison, & Steinfeld, 2006). A study done by Cliff Lampe, Nicole Ellison, and Charles Steinfeld (2006) showed surveyed students primarily use SNSs to learn more about people they met in person, learn about peers in their residence hall or Greek chapter, and stay in touch with friends from outside of their campus. These searches on SNSs have become critical in shaping the social norms of college students, forming both the criteria with which they interact and the structure of their relationships (DeAndrea, Ellison, LaRose, Steinfeld, & Fiore, 2012). These social norms are tested and compared in a practice known as social browsing, a behavior in which users search for shared interests on SNSs to connect with other users to establish a relationship before any communication is made (Lampe, Ellison, & Steinfeld, 2006). Beth Poling, Assistant Director of Housing Services at the University of Maryland, emphasized “[Social media] presents interesting challenges for us around things like privacy and digital citizenship and even talking to people about etiquette, like what do you say online and what do you not” (E. Poling, personal communication, November 2, 2015). These social performance norms help determine how students identify the best way to connect and adapt to this digital hybrid community (Lampe, Ellison, & Steinfeld, 2006). With this unspoken code of new social norms and browsing, identifying any effect social media has on student integration to campus life becomes more relevant to working with students.

**Integration for College Students**

With a developed community based on social interaction, the extent and benefit of student integration can be examined. As modified from a definition of engagement from George Kuh’s (2009) research and involvement found in Terrell Strayhorn’s (2012) book, integration is defined in my study as a sense of interest, belonging, and purpose within a larger group resulting from a deliberate investment of time. Belonging is a human need based on a sense of inclusion, which can be summarized as a feeling of mattering, importance, and appreciation for an individual (Strayhorn, 2012). Engagement plays into a sense of belonging since it involves the amount of time and effort an individual puts into an activity in hopes of achieving a predetermined outcome (Kuh,
The connections drawn between engagement and fit were derived from Astin’s theory of student involvement, comparing integration to the benefit increased time investment and effort have on student development in higher education (Astin, 1984). One of the primary factors affecting student integration to campus is the ease in which students can access and share information, considering the effect communication can have on involvement in student groups, participation in coursework, and even maintaining friendships (Ahlquist, 2013; Lampe, Ellison, & Steinfeld, 2006; Van Dijck, 2013).

SNSs can also have a direct impact on student integration based on student-student and student-campus interactions. Students that connect to student organizations through SNSs receive direct advertisements to organization events, providing both the knowledge of the activity and a sense of connection for receiving communications from the group (Fuller & Pittarese, 2012; Strayhorn, 2012). Similarly, peer leaders that use SNSs are able to connect to their students faster, providing their students with a sense of mattering and appreciation (Johnson, 2012; Strayhorn, 2012). The campus community as a whole benefits from such interactions, especially considering the benefits to accessibility departments, groups, and organizations gain in helping shape student perceptions of campus culture (Ahlquist, 2013). Some of these departments, groups, and organizations might be unknown to students, and an accessible profile on an SNS gives students a chance to learn more about these potentially useful campus resources (DeAndrea et. al, 2012). Students can also be connected to alumni, incoming students, and community partners through SNSs and increase their knowledge of campus culture, helping them engage with the campus culture and feel as if they fit more on campus (Rios-Aguilar et. al, 2012).

However, it should be noted that despite all of these benefits to be gained from using SNSs, social media can also have a negative effect on a student’s experience in college. A consistent use of SNSs can both benefit and hinder a student’s adjustment to college culture. Using SNSs can prevent the fear of isolation on campus, allowing students to focus on fulfilling other basic needs (Rios-Aguilar et. al, 2012; Strayhorn, 2012). Additionally, students who actively use SNSs tend to show a more active interest in their college experience, helping them feel more engaged (Junco, Heiberger, & Loken, 2011). These feelings of engagement also help prevent anxiety students might experience from a lack of involvement on campus, giving them a group with which they identify and connect (Strayhorn, 2012). However, the drawbacks that come as a result of depending on SNSs for student integration can be equally detrimental. Self-confidence and self-belief are affected by social interactions on social media, and a negative reaction to a post or content can lead to a disassociation from a group, leading to a lesser feeling of fit on campus (DeAndrea et. al, 2012). Combined with the permanency of content posted on SNSs, any negative feedback that could affect a student’s sense of integration will stay on social media and is sharable with other students and professionals, potentially leading to a diminished sense of belonging or engagement on campus (Davis et. al, 2012; Strayhorn, 2012). This discrepancy between benefits and drawbacks is part of what motivated this study on the effect of social media on student integration, and my hope is this study will provide a baseline understanding on if a relationship exists between student integration to college and social media use.
Methodology

For this study, a digital survey was used to determine if a relationship between social media and integration exists. I developed the survey and analyzed the data as an independent part of my graduate curriculum to both gain a better understanding of the history of social media on college campuses and explore a new concept of integration as it relates to social media. I created the questions by utilizing the information seen in the literature review and in my graduate studies, and the questions were created to measure a student’s reaction to the following three categories: student engagement, student sense of belonging, and social media use. To determine if a relationship existed between sense of belonging, engagement, and social media use, a total of 30 Likert scale-based statements were created (Appendix A). This scale was based on seven possible answers that ranged as follows: strongly agree, agree, somewhat agree, neither agree nor disagree, somewhat disagree, disagree, and strongly disagree. Each response is associated with a value of one to seven where negative responses in the survey were given lower values, positive responses were given higher values, and neutral responses were given median values. Questions were reviewed and validated by both my research advisor and other colleagues to ensure the survey questions and format were clear. No other validation process or sample testing was used for this study.

For distribution of the survey, I worked with the Director of Residence Life and the Staff Associate for Commuter & Non-Traditional Student Programs at the University of Maine (UMaine) to receive email lists for residential and commuter students. The survey was emailed to everyone on these lists through Qualtrics, surveying software that is widely used at UMaine, but only answers from full-time undergraduate students were used in the survey. Qualtrics was chosen as the surveying software based on its widespread use at UMaine, making it more accessible to the students and colleagues helping evaluate the survey. Additionally, Qualtrics collects responses in an easily compiled spreadsheet that facilitated data analysis for this study. The survey was distributed through Qualtrics’ distribution setting to send the survey to all emails on the lists I received, and the sender was listed as my work email address under a UMaine domain (@maine.edu). The average values of responses for questions relating to sense of belonging, engagement, and social media were calculated and plotted against each other to determine correlation through a line of best fit test. Three correlation graphs were observed to determine any possible relationships among engagement, sense of belonging, and social media use, with R2 values ultimately determining if a relationship between any two measured variables exists. Information was also collected on what SNSs students use to determine the most common social media applications used by participants.

Results

Demographics

Of the 204 survey respondents, 202 were full-time undergraduate students at UMaine. Since the study is based on full-time undergraduate students only, the two other survey results were removed from the study, resulting in a sample size of n=202. In looking at the demographic information, the average respondent self-identified as white, feminine, from Maine, and between the ages of 18 to 22-years-old. Of those respondents, there were 135 who listed their gender as feminine. The majority of respondents were from the greater New England area, with 128 respondents selecting Maine as their home state, 23 respondents selecting Mass-
and 13 respondents selecting New Hampshire.

Additionally, the ages listed by most respondents, 18 to 22-years-old, are the common ages for “traditional” college students (Figure 1). Of these students, over half listed they were a first-year student (Figure 2). For preferred SNS of these respondents, there was no one SNS chosen more frequently than another. Over 100 respondents answered they use Facebook, Google, Snapchat, and Instagram, and there were over 20 other SNSs added to the survey from the “other” category (Figure 3). These responses which reflect those of the typical respondent show some populations responded to the survey more often than others, and there was no preferred social media application within this generalized population.

**Correlation**

The three variables of interest were compared against each other to determine if a relationship existed between any of them. Each variable (sense of belonging, student engagement, and social media use) had the numeric values from the ten Likert scale questions averaged for each completed survey, comparing these averaged values against each other to determine the R2 value for determining correlation. Of the three correlation graphs, there was no significant observed relationship between social media use and student engagement or social media use and sense of belonging based on R2 values of 0.0051 and 0.0230 respectively (Figures 4 & 5). A positive relationship was observed between student engagement and sense of belonging with an R2 value of 0.4705, implying a positive relationship between these two variables exists (Figure 6).

**Discussion**

**Results**

In looking at the results of the study, the significant positive relationship between student engagement and sense of belonging was expected. Previous scholarship and research has shown students who are more engaged on campus have a stronger sense of belonging through the multiple clubs and organizations in which they participate (Kuh 2009; Strayhorn, 2012). However, the lack of relationship between both variables and social media use for college students came as a surprise considering the recent upward trend in social media use on college campuses (Stoller, 2015). There was a slight positive correlation between social media use and sense of belonging, but the R2 was so low as to negate any significance of the positive trend in the data. It can then be assumed that social media use is related to neither student sense of belonging or student engagement for undergraduates at UMaine.

Social media has become such an integral part of many college clubs, organizations, departments, and courses that a lack of relationship almost seems counterintuitive (Hrastinski & Aghaee, 2011). If more students are using social media, it could be assumed that social media allows students to better integrate to campus life. If this study on UMaine students is to be taken at face value, that assumption would not be true. However, the slow development of technology over the course of time may help explain this lack of relationship. The concept of “digital natives” introduced by Mark Prensky (2001) speaks to a generation of individuals that coincided with the onset of technology’s sudden growth of use. The first SNS application was created in 1997 and was soon followed by other social media platforms, meaning the generation of students born in that time period would have always existed with some form of social
The demographic information collected in this survey shows the majority of students who participated were between the ages of 18 and 22, meaning they were born between 1994 and 1998. Additionally, they were all within the general four year time frame of a program in higher education, implying the average respondent was a college student born no earlier than 1994. The start of this generation of students coincides perfectly with the onset of social media and the generation of digital natives, meaning these students have always been exposed to some form of SNS in their lives.

With this information in mind, the definition of integration developed for the purpose of this study involves the deliberate use of time in creating a purpose, interest, and sense of belonging on campus. Since current college students were raised in the era of digital natives, it can no longer be assumed that social media use is an active part of these students’ lives (Prensky, 2011). Instead, it is entirely possible that social media use as it would relate to a sense of integration has become passive to students since it has always been present in their lives. This passive use could imply any use of social media does not give an additional sense of integration to campus, but is already contributing to their sense of campus integration. The use of social media could already be such an inherent part of students’ experiences that its use and benefit to engagement and sense of belonging goes unnoticed. However, it is also possible the use of social media provides no observable benefit considering how many different forms of social media are available to students. Its use in classes and use for business representation could balance out the additional social influences provided by SNSs (Johnson, 2012).

Regardless of its effect on integration, the presence of SNSs on college campuses cannot be denied. Of the 202 respondents for the survey, only two indicated they used fewer than two SNSs. Its use is widespread by these individuals, and if a larger sample of respondents was collected, it is highly likely more applications would be listed. These various platforms and the high frequency of use for common forms of social media as shown in Figure 3 further shows how saturated social media has become on college campuses. Many students are required to use some form of social media for classes, and the already prevalent social use of SNSs creates a culture in which social media is used for the majority of time students are awake (Boyd & Ellison, 2007; Fuller & Pittarese, 2012; Stoller 2015). In addition, Web 2.0 technology is continuing to increase at a rapid pace that allows new SNSs to develop in shorter and shorter timespans (Kaplin & Haenlin, 2010). The future of the college landscape could see an even more widespread use of SNSs to the point where student integration relies on its use.

**Limitations**

With the potential benefit provided by research on social media and integration, it is important to identify the limitations found in this research. Considering the survey was directly sent to all residential students but only indirectly sent to commuter students, there was a large population that may have been excluded from the study. Only two respondents out of the 202 that took the survey identified as commuter students, largely due to the availability of commuter contact information at UMaine. While Residence Life keeps contact information for all on-campus students, there was no similar resource that could reach the large commuter population at UMaine outside of posting on websites available to both commuter and residential students. The difficulty in reaching commuter students leaves out some critical data in understanding how social
media can help students stay connected to campus. It is possible commuter students feel a stronger sense of integration by receiving information of student groups and organizations when they leave campus, but another study will need to be conducted to determine if any such relationship exists. Additionally, the population of students that responded were of a specific demographic. This study cannot be used as a model for all college campuses, but provides some insight to traditionally college aged women primarily from the state of Maine. The study was meant to get an understanding of social media’s role on college campuses since research on social media is still young, but it cannot stand as a model of all students if there was a heavy representation of some identities over others in respondents. Additionally, this study was only used to show if a quantitative relationship could be shown between the three measured variables for student integration. Integration to college campuses requires some qualitative analysis to identify the extent to which students feel more comfortable on campus. The quantitative data offers a good starting point in analyzing the data, but further research will be necessary to better understand if a relationship between social media and integration to college campuses exists.

Implications

This study was designed to identify if social media has any effect on student integration to campus, but it was only meant to do so at an entry level. The lack of correlation between social media use and engagement or social media use and sense of belonging could be explained by a passive use of social media, but it could also be due to the approach of the study. Quantitative data makes this sort of study difficult, but the lack of perceived relationship does not imply an absence of relationship. A follow-up study that collects both quantitative and qualitative data from respondents is a logical next step, utilizing focus groups and in-person interviews to better observe how social media affects student integration. Also, evaluating the survey questions and recreating the study at multiple institutions could show if the responses were specific to students at UMaine or are indicative of greater trends in social media use.

Additionally, this study introduced the concept of student integration to college campus while providing a literature review of social media’s role on college campuses. The use of social media is not going away any time soon, and collecting information and sources helps bring more attention to social media presence on campuses. Bringing more attention to social media on college campuses, particularly in regards to its use in departments and organizations, is necessary to ensure it is used effectively. Since student use of social media seems to be here to stay, it is important to ensure professionals understand these uses and the benefits SNSs can bring. More research on what forms of social media are reaching college students could help show student affairs professionals how to best reach out to this population of digital natives, ultimately benefitting the students professionals serve.

Conclusion

This study did not show a relationship can be determined between social media and sense of belonging or engagement on campus. It did, however, provide insight as to the presence of social media on college campuses. The data showed many various forms of social media being used by only 202 respondents, and with the onset of digital natives into the college setting, it is highly unlikely that social media use will disappear from college landscapes. It will take more research on social media use and factors affecting student integration to see if SNSs have an observable effect on integration, but
current research on the general social media use combined with the survey responses shows social media is widespread on college campuses. Considering the rapid development of technology as mentioned in the literature review, professionals in higher education will need to continue researching how social media affects college students. Otherwise, it may be impossible to understand how to best serve the upcoming generations of students.

References


Appendix A: Survey Form

Note: Survey questions and consent form were adapted from the original formatting used in Qualtrics, so formatting and question appearance differed when sent to respondents.

Consent Form

CONSENT FORM AND DETAILS OF SURVEY
You are invited to participate in a research project being conducted by Grant McCormack, a graduate student in the Department of Higher Education in Student Development at the University of Maine, sponsored by [Redacted]. The purpose of the research is to explore the relationships between social media, student belonging, and engagement at the University of Maine. You must be at least 18 years of age to participate.

What Will You Be Asked to Do?
If you decide to participate, you will be asked to answer a series of questions about how you use different types of social media, your sense of belonging, and your sense of engagement on campus. The questions will ask about time spent on social media, how social media has been used in your classes, how student organizations you have joined use social media, etc. It may take approximately ten minutes to participate.

Risks: Except for your time and inconvenience, there are no risks to you from participating in this study.

Benefits: You will have the chance to reflect on the effect social media has had on your college experience. You will answer questions that could introduce you to new ways to use social media in your personal and academic life. Additionally, the research will help student affairs professionals better understand a possible relationship between social media and student integration to a college environment. Social media use has been increasing over time, and few studies have aimed to identify how social media benefits student fit and engagement on campus. This study will answer some of the preliminary questions surrounding social media use on campus, hopefully encouraging further study from other professionals in Student Affairs.

Confidentiality: This study is anonymous. There will be no records linking you to the data, but settings on Qualtrics will prevent the same person from filling out the survey more than once. Any information collected by Qualtrics for this purpose is not accessible by me or anyone involved with the research, and none of the answers can be linked to any identifiable information. Data will be kept indefinitely on a secure laptop that is owned by the primary investigator and will only be shared with the faculty advisor. Responses will be deleted from Qualtrics three months from the date the survey closes.

Voluntary: Participation in this survey is voluntary. If you choose to take part in this study, you may stop at any time. You may check “Neither agree nor disagree” on questions you do not wish to answer. Completion of the survey implies consent to have your answers included in the study.
Contact Information: If you have any questions about this study, please contact me at [Redacted]. You may also reach the faculty advisor for this study [Redacted]. If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact [Redacted] at [Redacted] (or email [Redacted])

By checking the box below, you are indicating you have read the above information and agree to participate.
I have read and agree to the above information
I do not agree to the above information

Introductory Questions
Are you a fulltime student at UMaine? (Taking nine or more credits)
Yes
No
I am not enrolled in classes

Which of the following best describes your role at UMaine?
Undergraduate student
Graduate student
PhD student
Faculty, Staff, or Administrator
Nondegree seeking student

I am on some form of social media service actively or passively about ___ hours every day:
Choose the number of hours closest to your answer. (Please note passively refers to having some form of social media on in the background without paying full attention to its use)
0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12

Social Media Questions
I regularly (on a daily or bi-daily basis) use the following forms of social media (Please check all that apply):
Facebook
Google (Drive, Mail, Plus, etc.)
Instagram
Reddit
Snapchat
Tumblr
Twitter
Yik Yak
Other
None

If you marked other, please put the name of the other social media services you use:

Please mark the answer that best matches your reaction to the following statements:

Social media use is a big part of how I use personal technology (smart phone, laptop, etc.)
I always have some form of social media application open
I check my social media applications before I check anything else in the morning
I often find myself absentmindedly scrolling through a social media application
College wouldn’t be as enjoyable without using some form of social media
I’m happy with how much I use social media applications
Social media is a big part of my daily life
Social media is an important part of working on class projects (using Google Drive, Twitter, Facebook chat, etc)
I’m on a social media application both when I am alone and when I am with friends
Using social media is not a waste of my time

| Strongly agree | Somewhat disagree |
| Agree | Disagree |
| Somewhat agree | Strongly disagree |
| Neither agree nor disagree |

**Engagement Questions**
Please mark the answer that best matches your reaction to the following statements:
I am very involved in student groups on campus
My experience at UMaine has been improved by being involved in on campus activities
I would describe myself as an active member of the UMaine community
Even on the weekends, I find myself looking for events happening on campus
I have made a connection with many faculty/staff members on campus
I am highly interested in spending most of my undergraduate career on campus
I often find myself participating in on campus activities
I have an active interest in the classes I’m taking
I seek out new opportunities to get involved at UMaine
I often attend sports events at UMaine

| Strongly agree | Somewhat disagree |
| Agree | Disagree |
| Somewhat agree | Strongly disagree |
| Neither agree nor disagree |

**Fit Questions**
Please mark the answer that best matches your reaction to the following statements:
I feel a strong connection to other people that go to UMaine
I strongly identify as a Black Bear from my time spent at UMaine
When I leave for breaks, I miss spending time at UMaine
I would describe myself as an active member of the UMaine community
I feel like I belong at UMaine
I have a lot of UMaine gear and apparel that I enjoy wearing
I would describe UMaine as a “home away from home”
I don’t feel as if I would’ve had as positive of an experience in college if I attended another university
I have a sense of purpose at UMaine
I have a friend group on campus that makes me feel like I belong at UMaine

| Strongly agree | Somewhat disagree |
| Agree | Disagree |
| Somewhat agree | Strongly disagree |
| Neither agree nor disagree |
Demographic Questions
Thank you for taking the survey! These last questions are demographic questions and will only be used to help determine the population that took this survey. They are all optional and will remain anonymous.

How many semesters have you attended UMaine counting this one?
1-2
3-4
5-6
7-8
9+
7-8
Prefer not to answer

How would you describe your living situation?
On campus (In a residence hall)
On campus (Not in a residence hall)
Apartment in Orono/Old Town
House in Orono/Old Town
Beyond Orono/Old Town

How would you define your family’s annual income?
< $25,000
$25-50,000
$50,001-75,000
$75,001-100,000
$100,000+
I don’t know
Prefer not to answer

Are you the first member of your family to go to college?
Yes
No, but a sibling(s) has
No
I don’t know
Prefer not to answer

How old are you? If older or younger, please pick the age closest to yours.
18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30 31 32 33 34 35 36 37 38 39 40
Prefer not to answer

What state is home for you?

How do you describe your gender?
Masculine
Feminine
Transgender
Agender
A descriptor not listed
Prefer not to answer

How would you describe your race?
Black
Pacific Islander
Latino/Latina
East Asian
South Asian
White
A descriptor not listed
Prefer not to answer
Appendix B: Figures

**Age of Respondents**

![Age of Respondents Graph](image1)

Figure 1: Age of respondents that participated in the study. The survey was sent to all residential college students at UMaine and made available to all commuter students, resulting in a higher frequency of younger respondents since UMaine has a first-year residency requirement.

**Year in College of Respondents**

![Year in College Graph](image2)

Figure 2: Year of college of the respondents. Since the survey was sent directly to all on-campus students and only made available to all commuter students, the high number of first and second-year students reflects the high number of residential first and second-year students at UMaine.
Figure 3: Frequency in responses of social media use. There were multiple platforms of social media that were added in the ‘other’ category by respondents, implying there is no one preferred social media application by UMaine college students who participated in the survey. The listed SNSs were added based on the most commonly seen services at UMaine, including Google due to Google+ and GMail’s use at UMaine.

Figure 4: Correlation comparing the average social media use and the average level of involvement based on student responses in the Likert scale based survey. The $R^2$ value of 0.0051 shows there was no observed significant relationship between social media use and a student’s level of involvement at the University of Maine.
Figure 5: Correlation comparing the average sense of belonging and the average social media use based on student responses in the Likert scale based survey. The $R^2$ value of 0.0230 shows there was no observed significant relationship between social media use and a student’s level of involvement at the University of Maine.

Figure 6: Correlation comparing the average sense of belonging and the average level of involvement based on student responses in the Likert scale based survey. The $R^2$ value of 0.4705 shows there is a positive significant relationship between college student sense of belonging and campus involvement, implying the two variables are connected in college student development.
Veterans Transitioning into College: Challenges and Strategies for Success

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Abstract
As the number of student veterans begins to grow on college campuses, schools must learn to adopt effective methods to ameliorate challenges and encourage their success. However, before strategies for success can be implemented, one must understand the challenges that student veterans experience. This literature review examines some of the common challenges student veterans experience when entering the college environment for the first time. The research includes a description of veteran demographics, and obstacles such as mental and physical health, an uninviting college environment, lack of faculty and staff training, difficulty processing their G.I. Bill funds, and susceptibility to enrolling in for-profit schools. This literature review also describes the tools that some higher education institutions currently utilize. The research indicates that programming, resources, and training by higher education institutions are critical in the success of veteran college students. The findings of this review encourage universities to understand the struggles of their veteran student population, and to initiate programming to welcome them into the academic environment.

Veterans Transitioning into College: Challenges and Strategies for Success
Military service men and women have years of experience functioning in high-stress situations, working together as a cohesive team, and developing self-discipline as part of their daily lives. These positive qualities may actually hinder a veteran’s ability to adjust to an academic setting. After devoting years of their lives to the United States military, veterans often struggle with adjustment to the civilian workforce since their learned skills are not easily transferable. Additionally, they often lack the academic credentials necessary to enroll in higher education institutions (McCaslin, Thiede, Vinatieri, Passi, Lyon, Ahern, & Chitaphong, 2014). As a solution, the Servicemen’s Readjustment Act was enacted after World War II, with positive results, granting its continuation throughout the years. Approximately 180,000 people enlist in the military every year, and since the most recent G.I. Bill passed in 2008, over 817,000 veterans have enrolled in higher education (“Ten Steps to Joining the Military,” 2014; Osborne, 2014).

As the number of student veterans grows on college campuses, schools must learn to adopt effective methods to ameliorate challenges and encourage their success. This literature review studies the various obstacles student veterans experience when transitioning into the college environment such as mental and physical health issues, an uninviting college environment, lack of faculty and staff training, difficulty processing their G.I. Bill funds and financial aid, and their susceptibility to enrolling in for-profit schools. It is important to learn more about these challenges, so that as a nation we motivate our veteran students to enroll and complete post-secondary degrees.
Background of Veteran Students

Veteran college students do not fit the traditional college student profile because they are usually older, often have families, and because they have experienced life and death situations that many of their college peers cannot even begin to fathom (O’Herrin, 2011; Osborne, 2014; Vacchi, 2012). Because the military moved to an all-volunteer military force, post-9/11 veterans are mostly minority, low-income, and first-generation college students (O’Herrin, 2011; Osborne, 2014; Vacchi, 2012). A disadvantaged background limits veterans’ career options, which also lowers the level of degree attainment (Durdella & Kim, 2012; Vacchi, 2012). Not receiving the inherent social and cultural capital that college-educated parents provide places veteran students at a disadvantage, adding to their already existing challenges.

Despite the disadvantaged backgrounds of many veterans, Jolly (2013) reports that today’s student veterans view a college degree as the vehicle to move up the socioeconomic ladder and into the middle class, and therefore will continue to enroll. In addition, President Barack Obama (2009) stated that the G.I. Bill had produced Nobel prize winners, Supreme Court justices, scientists, and engineers in the past. However, because of currently rising tuition rates, the benefit packages of today do not have the same value as in the past.

Common Challenges

To fully support student veterans in higher education and assist them to graduate with a college degree, it is important to understand the unique challenges they encounter when transitioning from the military into an academic environment.

Mental and Physical Health

An important topic in the literature is the effect that a veteran’s mental and physical health can have on his or her experience in balancing coursework, focusing on complex material, and upholding rigorous academic responsibilities. After undergoing multiple tours of duty, experiencing bloodshed, bomb explosions, and death, it is not surprising that many veterans are in need of mental and physical support when they return to civilian life. According to Church (2009), Barnard-Brak, Bagby, Jones, and Sulak (2011), and McCaslin et al. (2014) the most common injuries among returning veterans from Iraq and Afghanistan are Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI), and physical impairments that affect hearing, vision, and mobility.

Fourteen to nineteen percent of soldiers deployed in Iraq and Afghanistan developed mental impairments, impacting their ability to focus and attend classes (O’Herrin, 2011). They can have “difficulties with sustained attention, learning, and memory; increased negative affect and tension; sleep problems resulting in delayed attendance, absenteeism and fatigue; and difficulty sitting for long periods of time because of chronic pain” (McCaslin et al., 2014, pp. 194-195). These are issues unique to veteran students that generalized school programming would not be able to address. Without school interventions, it would be extremely challenging for these students to succeed in a college environment.

Church (2009) found that veterans suffering from mental distress experience anxiety, irritability, angry outbursts, and depression, along with substance abuse and alcoholism. Alvarez (2008) offers an example of the struggles veterans may face through his interview with Mr. Blanchard, an army veteran who described struggling in college after serving in Iraq where a bomb blasted away his left leg. In his transition to college, Mr. Blanchard recalled that after having been in classes only two days, “My mind was blurred, cloudy all the time, and I
was walking around in a daze. I had a full load and I dropped all my classes except two. and yet I’m studying all the time. It was so frustrating.” Furthermore, Widom, Laska, Gulden, Fu, and Lusta’s (2011) study of veteran students in Minnesota found that those who served in Iraq and Afghanistan were more likely to engage in a physical fight, abuse alcohol, and drive while intoxicated. Unfortunately, these experiences happen quite often to veterans who have gone through physically and mentally impairing incidents (Barnard-Brak et al., 2011; Church, 2009; McCaslin et al., 2014).

Unwelcoming College Environment

A common discussion in the literature is the difficulty veterans undergo in transitioning to the college environment. First of all, military life is highly structured and every day of a soldier’s life is scheduled. When veterans arrive on a college campus, they no longer have the structured military team environment to which they have been accustomed. Having complete freedom to create their own schedules, choose their classes, and determine their choice of study can be overwhelming (McCaslin et al., 2014; Osborne, 2014; Vacchi, 2012). The military community trains service members to rely on each other and gives them a sense of family, but when entering a college environment, veteran students must now transition into an academic setting that encourages independence and competition (Shiavone & Gentry, 2014). This redefining of roles is a challenge unique to veteran students. Therefore, in addition to familiarizing themselves to school processes and basic campus staples, they also need to learn to venture out on their own, possibly causing an overwhelming amount of mental distress (Rumann & Hamrick, 2010; Vacchi, 2012).

Likewise, a critical facet of the military culture is breaking down individualistic attitudes, while rebuilding a trusted team of colleagues that will help servicemen build strength, courage, and self-reliance while in service (O’Herrin, 2011; Vacchi, 2012). However, it is precisely these positive characteristics that hinder student veterans from succeeding in a college environment. According to McCaslin et al. (2014), “when stepping onto campus, veterans are separated from their group of trusted and battle-tested comrades” (p. 193), causing them to isolate themselves, and not ask for help when needed. They need assistance navigating college computer systems, registration, and meal plans, but feel an embarrassment in asking for guidance since the core of their training has been to show self-reliance (Osborne, 2014). Without a community or mentorship program in place, veteran students can feel the pressure to appear strong, and might view asking for help as a sign of weakness.

Furthermore, student veterans may find it difficult to build relationships with fellow students, since their traditional-aged peers are directly out of high school without many life experiences prior to college. The perceived immaturity of their college peers can make student veterans uncomfortable, a feeling sometimes exasperated by those peers asking inappropriate questions. Such concerns were reported by Osborne (2013) when interviewing a pre-med veteran who shared, “I’m shocked at how undisciplined and rude a lot of students are” (p. 251). Many college students do not fully understand the inner workings of the military, and can express a “morbid curiosity” that makes student veterans unable to communicate with them (McCaslin et al., 2014). People seem to feel they are experts in military warfare even though they have not served, frustrating student veterans. Rumann & Hamrick (2014) also report the difficulty veteran students experience in building friendships with civilian classmates who minimalize
deployment and ask questions about killing people.

**For-Profit Schools**

For-profit schools have existed for many years sending certificates through mail correspondence in early years, and evolving into online baccalaureate degrees today. After the Post-9/11 Veteran’s Educational Assistance Act [VEAA] went into effect in 2008, for-profit schools began aggressive advertising campaigns, placing recruiters feet from military bases, and using deceptive language to convince active-duty military and veterans that their school programs were the best option for them (Lipton, 2010; Murphy, 2015). Within the first year of the VEAA, for-profit schools received $640 million in tuition payments, directly from student veterans (Lipton, 2010). Because military servicemen are mostly first-generation students, and for-profit schools recruit them before they leave the base, they are unaware of all options and are easily susceptible to the convenient advertising (Lipton, 2010).

Recognizing the risk that student veterans have by possessing G.I. funds and having them paid directly to schools and universities, the U.S. Department of Education and Congress created incentives to help protect them from manipulation: the Cohort Default Rate Rule, the 90/10 Rule, and the Post-9/11 G.I. Bill (Nelson, 2014). Each rule has its own set of conditions too long to discuss here, but unfortunately, for-profit schools continue to find loopholes within all the incentives, and veteran students continue to fall victim to their enrollment (Nelson, 2014).

**Successful Strategies**

Now that the common challenges have been explored, it is important to describe some strategies currently utilized by higher education institutions that have found success in retaining veteran students and helping them adjust to the academic culture.

**Faculty and Staff Training**

A prominent strategy to support student veterans is to create more social awareness among faculty and staff about the challenges that veterans endure in college (Barnard-Brak et al., 2011; McCaslin et al., 2014). By not understanding the mental and emotional distress student veterans experience while in the classroom, faculty are likely to express views or ask questions that are insensitive to their needs, and student veterans will be less likely to successfully complete the class (DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2008). A low GPA already negatively and significantly affects student veterans compared to civilian classmates, and experiencing disparaging comments by faculty will only make it worse (Durdella & Kim, 2011).

Faculty members can actually help a student veteran handle the effects of their PTSD in the classroom, and provide positive reinforcement for their success (Barnard-Brak et al., 2011). However if faculty have negative feelings about the military, then it is less likely that they are able to respect veterans’ needs. DiRamio, Ackerman, and Mitchell (2008) found this topic prevalent in their interviews of student veterans, and one of them shared an instance where the professor described an “American soldier as a terrorist” (p. 89) and immediately made the student feel upset and defensive. Making faculty and staff conscious of veteran issues and understanding of their specific needs is imperative in creating a welcoming environment (Dillard & Yu, 2016). An institution offering training can familiarize faculty and staff with veteran challenges, and not only raise veterans’ confidence in dealing with campus issues, but also helping the student veterans feel supported throughout their college experience.
Building Veteran Student Communities

Veteran students struggle with feelings of isolation, lack of camaraderie, and the inability to ask for help for fear of being seen as weak. Developing a cohort of veterans who share similar experiences can generate a college community to facilitate transition into the college environment, and expose them to other veterans who can serve as helpful peer resources (McCaslin et al., 2014). Student veterans clubs, veteran-only classes, and separate veteran orientations are all initiatives showing effectiveness in mediating barriers student veterans encounter on a daily basis (O’Herrin, 2011; Osborne, 2014; Vacchi, 2012; McCaslin et al., 2014). Because alienation from peers and a struggle to relate to their classmates is so prominent in the challenges of student veterans (Elliot, Gonzalez, & Garson, 2011; McCaslin et al., 2014; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010), developing a student veterans’ organization can truly impact their experience and allow them to build trust among their peers with similar experiences (Dillard & Yu, 2016; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010). Veteran-only classes and separate veteran orientations are also positive suggestions, however might not be financially and logistically possible for many institutions (Hart & Thompson, 2016).

Facilitating College Funds

In addition to aiding veterans’ acclimation to college culture, colleges and universities should focus on providing assistance in processing G.I. funds to pay for tuition, filling out financial aid forms, and in obtaining transcripts from the military (Shiavone & Gentry, 2014). The Department of Defense provides a Transition Assistance Program when soldiers are discharged, but often workers are not prepared to answer questions regarding the G.I. Bill (Osborne, 2014). In addition to difficulties receiving G.I. Bill funding, veterans also experience trouble with many universities not accepting credits obtained during their military service, causing the student veterans frustration, money and time lost (Vacchi, 2012). For this reason, universities should hire a designated administrator to help walk student veterans through necessary steps, and facilitate the process for them (Osborne, 2014). Shiavone & Gentry’s (2014) subjects found their institution’s veteran services helpful in their transition to academia, which included assistance filling out the federal financial aid forms, obtaining military transcripts, providing career counseling, and offering a monthly newsletter with information focused specifically on veterans. Even though such incentives require institutional funds, staffing, and training sessions, they will improve and encourage veterans’ attainment of a college degree.

School Programs

Institutional programming targeting student veterans is another frequently suggested factor promoting the retention and completion of veteran students. McCaslin et al. (2014) demonstrated the effects of the Veterans Integration to Academic Leadership (VITAL) program established in 2011 by the Department of Veterans Affairs in various universities. The goal is to provide supportive resources to student veterans through on-campus programs around the nation, and through outreach events and education fairs. VITAL encompasses many of the effective strategies previously mentioned, such as providing training to faculty and staff regarding veteran needs, facilitating the processing of G.I. funds, advising campuses on initiatives that integrate veterans into the college community, and offering peer mentoring (McCaslin et al., 2014). These strategies strengthen the odds of success among the student veteran population.

Moreover, Virginia Commonwealth University instituted the Green Zone program on campus to help recruit, retain, and support
student veterans of the Post-9/11 era (Nichols-Casebolt, 2012). They incorporated similar initiatives as the VITAL program, such as providing training to faculty and staff, and offering a mentorship program to student veterans. Additionally, they implemented a cross-campus network of contacts that veterans can reach at any point, resulting in a 65% satisfaction rate regarding transition into the college campus among student veterans, and 70% satisfaction rate in creating a veteran-friendly environment (Nichols-Casebolt, 2012). Clearly, taking a proactive approach advances the positive experiences of student veterans at Virginia Commonwealth University.

**Recommendations**

Because acclimation to college culture is one of the biggest obstacles, institutions can implement workshops or all-day retreats that incorporate activities where veteran students interact with non-veteran students to help them adapt to new people, find similarities with each other, and feel comfortable integrating with others. This would also serve as an opportunity for non-veteran students to learn about the struggles their veteran counterparts experience, aiding in their cultural knowledge. Another recommendation is the creation of a mentorship program involving military student alumni and upper-class students creating a network of support, as well as hiring military alumni as student advisors. The mentors can address the specific needs of veteran students, such as providing support in coping with peer understanding of their experience (Church, 2009), transferring credits obtained during military service, and paying their tuition with G.I. Bill funds.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, the literature describes the various obstacles veteran students experience in attempting to acclimate to higher education and graduate with a college degree. As the college student veteran population increases, it is important to study unique challenges and implement strategies to effectively mitigate the effects of obstacles. Even though higher education institutions are beginning to address the needs of student veterans, more empirical and longitudinal research is needed to find effective solutions that are financially and logistically possible for colleges and universities. Ultimately, providing more programming, resources, and training within higher education institutions may best support the success of veteran students. Veterans should feel welcomed to enroll in college, allowing them to join the community they have returned to, and improve the nation’s workforce through the process.

**References**


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