



UNC GREENSBORO

Supporting Student Veterans' Physical Activity

Project Summary - 2022

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DID YOU KNOW?

North Carolina ranks among the top 10 states that have the highest veteran population in the US

UNCG was voted a military friendly institution



BACKGROUND

- Military veterans are at increased risk for chronic health conditions due to a variety of factors, including reduced physical activity following separation from military service.
- The university setting is a relevant context to examine physical activity behaviors because many veterans pursue educational benefits provided to service members after they transition out of the military.

METHODS

- Online survey
- Focus groups with student veterans
- Interviews with university stakeholders



PURPOSE

Describe student veterans' physical activity experiences related to their transition out of the military and identify relevant community assets to support student veterans.

STUDENT VETERAN PARTICIPANTS

Survey

- 70 total participants
- 30% Female, 70% Male
- 70% undergrad, 30% graduate



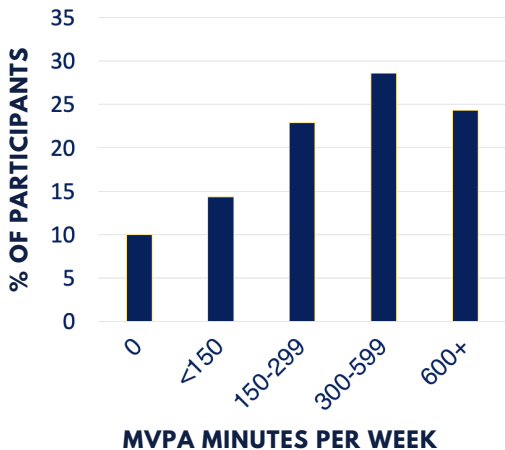
Focus Groups

- 15 total participants
- 40% Female, 60% Male
- 87% undergrad, 13% graduate



SURVEY RESULTS

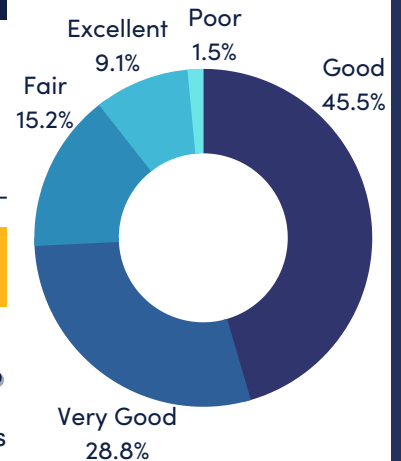
Current Self-Reported Moderate-to-Vigorous Physical Activity (MVPA)



How has your physical activity changed since the conclusion of your military career?



In general, would you say your health is...



Participants reported having been diagnosed with...



"you just knew that y'all stood for something ... that was motivating in and of itself. You didn't have to know every little piece about them ... that built community, you lose immediately when you leave service. It's not a transition. It's a you're there, you're not."

"it was a part of your job ... if you have a homework assignment due tomorrow it's gotta be done, it's the same thing with exercise in military."

"I think one thing I would love to see happen would be like a community, right? An established community of veterans, people who not so much hold you accountable, but that encourage you."

FOCUS GROUP/INTERVIEW FINDINGS

Physical Activity Transition



Student veterans characterized their physical activity journey from before, during, and after their time in the military. They described a transitional period where they were figuring out how to reintegrate physical activity into a lifestyle that was totally different from what they were used to in the military; accordingly, the type of physical activity they engaged in and their reasons for engaging in physical activity often changed post-military.

Community

Student veterans valued being part of a community with others, shaped by their shared experiences through their military training. This strong peer network was lost when they left the military, and they perceived a lack of community building opportunities to connect with other student veterans at the university.



Organizational Roles

Student veterans articulated how the military "breeds fitness," yet perceived a lack of support from the military in their transition to their current lifestyle.

Student veterans did not view the university as playing much of a role in their current physical activity, and stakeholders indicated more work was needed to help the university better understand and support the needs of student veterans, including where physical activity promotion fits.



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Program Implications

Student veterans and campus stakeholders offered important content, structure, and logistical considerations to inform future physical activity promotion programming efforts on campus. Examples of potential programming of interest included group-based physical activities for student veterans, an online networking community, education around health-related physical activity, and hosting various physical activity events for student veterans.



"the transition was hard for me ... to go from having that support to trying to do it all on my own."

"Now I live a whole different life, like priorities in the civilian world isn't fitness. Priority is productivity, making money, having a job, doing your job. It's not about being healthy and active and doing your job. It's like the pyramid got flipped when I got out."

"I didn't know what was enjoyable and what wasn't enjoyable after I was in the service... I had to rediscover what fitness was for me."

"I have heard from students that there is a lack of adaptive equipment and programming."

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Provide newly enrolled student veterans with orientation to university resources and services.
2. Host targeted community physical activity events to bring student veterans together.
3. Create an infrastructure for student veterans to connect through (and beyond) physical activity.
4. Leverage partnerships across campus to better serve student veterans and promote their well-being.
5. Consider the diverse needs and interests of student veterans by including their voices in future strategic planning.
6. Explore structural barriers that exist in current policies and practices and identify potential solutions.

To download full report



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PROJECT REPORT

Background

A veteran of the US military is a person who served in the active military, naval, or air service, and who was discharged or released under conditions other than dishonorable. North Carolina ranks among the top 10 states that have the highest veteran population in the US. Promoting the health and well-being of veterans is a critical priority for our state, the UNC system, and for UNC Greensboro, which has been recognized as a “military friendly” institution committed to supporting veterans.

Research suggests that chronic diseases and their related risk factors may be more prevalent among veterans than the general population. Lack of regular physical activity is a key risk factor for the development of most noncommunicable chronic diseases. The transition out of military service represents a vulnerable period when recently separated service members may be at risk for establishing unhealthy lifestyle behaviors, including reduced physical activity. Alternatively, adoption and maintenance of a physically active lifestyle can promote lifespan health and well-being and help combat health issues that are particularly relevant to veterans, such as post-traumatic stress and osteoarthritis. Given that veterans can pursue education benefits afforded to them through the Post-9/11 GI Bill which helps pay for school or job training, identifying community-based physical activity opportunities within the university setting offers a promising avenue to enhance the transition to a healthy civilian lifestyle.

Purpose

Our long-term goal is to develop a physical activity promotion framework to guide programming for student veterans. The purpose of this project was to describe UNCG student veterans’ physical activity experiences related to their transition out of the military and to identify relevant community assets to promote physical activity for student veterans at UNCG. With input from the student veteran community and university stakeholders, we used an asset-based approach to identify relevant issues, leverage assets, and inform solutions in a culturally appropriate, relational, and sustainable way. Our approach involved surveying UNCG student veterans, conducting focus groups with student veterans, and interviewing university stakeholders.

Participants and Procedures

Based on information from the Office of Institutional Research and Analytics, 474 students classified as “veterans” were enrolled at UNCG in Fall 2020. During that semester, student veterans were invited to complete an online survey about their current physical activity and health through an email list maintained by the Office of Military-Affiliated Services (MAS). Survey responses from 70 student veterans are included in this report.¹ At the end of the survey, participants were invited to register their interest to participate in an online focus group. Additional student veterans were invited to participate in online focus groups by referral through MAS. A total of 15 student veterans participated in one of six small focus groups (2-3

¹ For institutional data reporting, UNCG defines “veteran” as an individual who has served in the US military, including those who may still be serving (e.g., active duty or reserve). For this study, we used a narrower definition (i.e., previously served in the military but no longer serving) to focus on physical activity experiences outside of military involvement. For the survey, responses were included in data analysis if participants indicated they had been discharged from the military > 0 months and provided self-report physical activity data. Students who self-identified as veterans also were invited to sign up for focus groups. During the course of the interviews, two participants revealed they were not currently serving in active duty but were involved with the military in some capacity; they were included in focus group data analysis because their insights added to focus group discussions.

participants in each) between July 2020 and February 2021. Participants were offered a \$10 Amazon gift card for completing the survey, and focus group participants received \$25 Amazon gift cards to compensate them for their time. Additionally, five university stakeholders representing campus recreation, student affairs, and military-affiliated services completed individual interviews via a virtual meeting platform during the 2020-2021 academic year to provide insight on opportunities and services that support student veterans. Prior to finalizing the current report, three student veterans who participated in previous focus groups reviewed a draft of this report and provided feedback on the findings and recommendations included herein. All participants consented to participating in this research project, which was approved by UNCG's Institutional Review Board.

Findings

Demographic information for the student veterans who participated in this study is reported in Table 1. Where available, data from UNCG's Office of Institutional Research and Analytics for all student veterans enrolled in Fall 2020 is also shown for reference. The survey sample was predominantly comprised of individuals who identified as white (67%), male (70%), undergraduate students (70%) with a mean age of 35. Focus group participants reflected similar demographics as observed in the survey sample but tended to be younger ($M_{\text{age}} = 29$) and more recently transitioned out of the military. The majority of participants in the study served in active duty. All of the major military branches were represented in this study, with veterans of the US Army comprising the largest group. Participants were split on their perceptions of the difficulty they experienced with transitioning out of the military, with about a third of survey respondents rating it as easy/very easy and a similar number rating it as difficult/very difficult.

General Health Status

To support our understanding of physical activity participation among student veterans, questions about their general health status were included for added context. Overall, approximately 38% of student veterans in our sample rated their health as either "very good" or "excellent," 45.5% rated their health as "good," and close to 17% rated their health as either "fair" or "poor." Over a third of student veterans reported having been diagnosed with anxiety or depression, with close to 30% diagnosed with post-traumatic stress. Additionally, 28% reported some form of arthritis, gout, lupus, or fibromyalgia. These rates appear to be higher than prevalence rates in general college students based on the American College Health Association's (ACHA) national survey results reported for Fall 2020 (see Tables 2 and 3). These preliminary trends provide some evidence in support of developing targeted physical activity promotion efforts with student veterans on our campus because regular participation in physical activity can improve symptoms associated with mental and physical health conditions.

Table 1. Participant Demographics

Characteristic	UNCG Veteran Profile (<i>n</i> = 474)	Survey (<i>n</i> = 70)	Focus Group (<i>n</i> = 15)
Gender			
Female	<i>n</i> = 167, 35.2%	<i>n</i> = 21, 30.0%	<i>n</i> = 6, 40.0%
Male	<i>n</i> = 307, 64.8%	<i>n</i> = 49, 70.0%	<i>n</i> = 9, 60.0%
Race/Ethnicity			
American Indian or Alaska Native	<i>n</i> = 2, .42%		
Asian	<i>n</i> = 17, 3.6%	<i>n</i> = 2, 2.9%	<i>n</i> = 1, 6.7%
Black or African American	<i>n</i> = 113, 23.8%	<i>n</i> = 7, 10.0%	<i>n</i> = 1, 6.7%
Hispanic or Latino	<i>n</i> = 57, 12.0%	<i>n</i> = 9, 12.9%	<i>n</i> = 3, 20.0%
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	<i>n</i> = 1, .21%		
Non-Resident Alien	<i>n</i> = 1, .21%		
Two or more races	<i>n</i> = 31, 6.5%	<i>n</i> = 4, 5.7%	
Unknown	<i>n</i> = 9, 1.9%	<i>n</i> = 1, 1.4%	
White	<i>n</i> = 243, 51.3%	<i>n</i> = 47, 67.1%	<i>n</i> = 10, 66.7%
Age			
18-22	<i>n</i> = 71, 15.0%	<i>n</i> = 5, 7.1%	<i>n</i> = 1, 6.7%
23-24	<i>n</i> = 39, 8.2%	<i>n</i> = 5, 7.1%	<i>n</i> = 3, 20.0%
25-29	<i>n</i> = 112, 23.6%	<i>n</i> = 16, 22.9%	<i>n</i> = 5, 33.3%
30-34	<i>n</i> = 110, 23.2%	<i>n</i> = 14, 20.0%	<i>n</i> = 4, 26.7%
35 and over	<i>n</i> = 142, 30.0%	<i>n</i> = 30, 42.9%	<i>n</i> = 2, 13.3%
Student Status			
Undergraduate	<i>n</i> = 330, 69.6%	<i>n</i> = 49, 70.0%	<i>n</i> = 13, 86.7%
Graduate	<i>n</i> = 110, 23.2%	<i>n</i> = 21, 30.0%	<i>n</i> = 2, 13.3%
Second Bachelor's	<i>n</i> = 34, 7.2%		
Branch			
Marine Corps		<i>n</i> = 14, 20.0%	<i>n</i> = 4, 26.7%
Army		<i>n</i> = 30, 42.9%	<i>n</i> = 7, 46.7%
Navy		<i>n</i> = 13, 18.6%	<i>n</i> = 2, 13.3%
Air Force		<i>n</i> = 12, 17.1%	<i>n</i> = 2, 13.3%
Coast Guard		<i>n</i> = 1, 1.4%	<i>n</i> = 0, 0.0%
Service Component			
Reserve/ Natl. Guard		<i>n</i> = 15, 21.7%	<i>n</i> = 6, 40.0%
Active Duty		<i>n</i> = 54, 78.3%	<i>n</i> = 9, 60.0%
Years of Service			
		<i>M</i> = 6.73, <i>SD</i> = 5.08	<i>M</i> = 6.20, <i>SD</i> = 4.31
Years Since Discharge			
		<i>M</i> = 7.85, <i>SD</i> = 8.66	<i>M</i> = 3.93, <i>SD</i> = 4.87

Table 2. Self-Reported Health Indicators

Ever been diagnosed with... ²	Our Study ³	ACHA Fall 2020 Report for General Student Population
Arthritis, gout, lupus, fibromyalgia	<i>n</i> = 19, 28.4%	7.7% (chronic pain)
Diabetes	<i>n</i> = 7, 10.4%	2.6%
Kidney Disease	<i>n</i> = 2, 3.0%	1.6% (urinary system disorder)
Post-traumatic stress	<i>n</i> = 20, 29.9%	5.8%
Anxiety	<i>n</i> = 26, 38.8%	29.6%
Depressive Disorder	<i>n</i> = 24, 35.8%	22.0%
COPD, emphysema, or chronic bronchitis	<i>n</i> = 2, 3.1%	3.1% (bronchitis)
Other Cancer	<i>n</i> = 0	0.90% (all cancer)
Skin Cancer	<i>n</i> = 3, 4.5%	--
Asthma	<i>n</i> = 8, 11.9%	16.9%
Stroke	<i>n</i> = 0	--
Angina or coronary heart disease	<i>n</i> = 1, 1.5%	2.5%
Heart Attack	<i>n</i> = 0	--

² Items in our survey were drawn from Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System. Comparable items from the ACHA survey of college students are included for reference.

³ % based on # of participants who responded to the question (*n* = 67)

Table 3. Body Mass Index (BMI)

BMI ⁴	Our Study	ACHA Fall 2020 Report for General Student Population
Mean / Standard Deviation	<i>M</i> = 28.48, <i>SD</i> = 4.56	<i>M</i> = 25.43, <i>SD</i> = 6.07
< 18 (<i>Underweight</i>)	<i>n</i> = 0, 0.0%	4.9%
18.5 to < 25 (<i>Normal or Healthy Weight</i>)	<i>n</i> = 13, 18.6%	53.2%
25.0 to < 30 (<i>Overweight</i>)	<i>n</i> = 36, 51.4%	24.5%
≥ 30 (<i>Obese</i>)	<i>n</i> = 21, 30.0%	17.5%

⁴ Body Mass Index was calculated based on participants' self-reported height and weight.

Physical Activity

Overall, self-reported physical activity levels among student veterans were high relative to the minimum physical activity guidelines established for health promotion in the general population (i.e., at least 150 minutes per week), with half of survey respondents reporting at least 300 minutes of moderate-to-vigorous physical activity in the last 7 days. However, there was a sizable group (31%) who reported that they were not currently exercising on a regular basis. See Table 4 for more details on physical activity participation.

Most (57.4%) student veterans reported being less physically active after they concluded their military career. Student veterans cited lack of time due to having other responsibilities now (e.g., work, school, family), lack of motivation, loss of structure and routine, loss of access to facilities that were available to them in the military, physical activity no longer being a requirement, and injuries as reasons for their decline in physical activity post-military. On the other hand, benefits to their health/wellbeing, finding new physical activity outlets that they enjoyed, and greater autonomy over their physical activity helped student veterans maintain or increase their activity (see Table 5).

Table 4. Student Veterans' Self-Reported Physical Activity Participation

Self-Reported Physical Activity	Survey Responses
Minutes of Weekly Moderate to Vigorous Physical Activity	<i>M</i> = 401.14, <i>SD</i> = 361.00
0 Minutes per week	<i>n</i> = 7, 10.0%
< 150 Minutes per week	<i>n</i> = 10, 14.3%
150 – 299 Minutes per week	<i>n</i> = 16, 22.9%
300 – 599 Minutes per week	<i>n</i> = 20, 28.6%
600+ Minutes per week	<i>n</i> = 17, 24.3%
Do You Exercise Regularly? (3-5 times per week for at least 30 mins)	
Yes, I have been exercising regularly for more than 6 months	<i>n</i> = 37, 54.4%
Yes, I have been exercising regularly for less than 6 months	<i>n</i> = 10, 14.7%
No, but I intend to start exercising regularly in next 30 days	<i>n</i> = 7, 10.3%
No, but I intend to start exercising regularly in the next 6 months	<i>n</i> = 10, 14.7%
No, and I do not intend to start exercising regularly in the next 6 months	<i>n</i> = 4, 5.9%
Change in Physical Activity	
Less now than military career	<i>n</i> = 39, 57.4%
About the same	<i>n</i> = 14, 20.6%
More now than military career	<i>n</i> = 15, 22.1%

Table 5. Why Has Your Physical Activity Changed?

-	+
Other responsibilities (<i>n</i> = 17)	Health/Well-Being (<i>n</i> = 11)
Lack of motivation (<i>n</i> = 9)	New activity (<i>n</i> = 5)
Lack of routine/structure (<i>n</i> = 7)	Autonomy (<i>n</i> = 3)
Injury/Illness (<i>n</i> = 6)	Limited PT in military position (<i>n</i> = 3)
Not required (<i>n</i> = 5)	More time (<i>n</i> = 1)
Lack of access (<i>n</i> = 5)	
Don't enjoy (<i>n</i> = 2)	
Older (<i>n</i> = 1)	

Main Themes

Four themes were developed from a qualitative analysis of interviews with student veterans and campus stakeholders. The themes provide important context for understanding student veterans' physical activity participation at the university. First, the "physical activity transition" theme describes how physical activity experiences evolved for student veterans as they transitioned from youth to the military, and then to the university. Second, the "community" theme describes how student veterans valued being a part of the tight knit military community and how this shapes their preferences for having similar or different community bonds at the university. The third theme illustrates how "organizational roles" shape student veterans' experiences through the provision of physical activity opportunities. The fourth theme explains "programming implications" for the university to improve the physical activity experience for student veterans. It is important to note that the four themes are interrelated. For example, the program implications discussed in the final theme are also informed by the knowledge that

student veterans are often more likely to engage in physical activity when they are connected to a community that has similar interests. Taken together, the four themes characterize the physical activity experiences and preferences of student veterans and illustrate the extent to which their physical activity needs are being met at the university.

Physical Activity Transition

This theme characterizes student veterans' physical activity journey from before they joined the military, to their time in the military, through their transition to life after the military. Prior to joining the military, most student veterans described being physically active in their youth, particularly through participation in organized sports (e.g., youth, high school) and through recreational activity with family and friends. In some cases, their involvement with physical activity was a natural entrée to joining the military. Physical activity participation during the military was highly structured and mainly revolved around regular, required physical training (PT) with their unit for the purpose of meeting the physical requirements of the job, which necessitated being combat ready. In this representative quote, a student veteran described the narrow focus of physical training in the military: ***"We had a physical fitness test and a combat fitness test. So we did those, one at the beginning of the year, one at the end of the year...everything we did was just catered to those, like run three miles and run with all your gear on and it wasn't fun."***

After their military career ended, student veterans recognized a shift in the incentive structure for physical activity because performing physical activity was no longer a required part of their job. As one student veteran explained, ***"There was an incentive that was always there, which was you want to pass your PT test. You want to make height and weight or your tape test. Now I'm in class 8 hours on Tuesdays and 7 hours on Thursdays, I'm not going for a walk at 10 o'clock at night. I'm not going for a walk at 4 o'clock in the morning. Cause I'm not paid to do it anymore."*** With the military requirement removed, the type of physical activity that student veterans engaged in and their reasons or motivation for engaging in physical activity changed as student veterans transitioned out of the military. More specifically, their physical activity tended to decrease in overall intensity and shifted toward more "feel good" activities that they enjoyed, that promoted their mental and physical wellbeing, and that connected with their family and friends (e.g., exercising with a partner, friend, child). For some student veterans, the amount and type of physical activity they could participate in was affected by pain and other limitations resulting from injuries they sustained during their military career. However, the lingering effects of these chronic injuries also served as a key motivator for continuing to be physically active to help manage their pain and feel better.

Student veterans described a transitional period following separation from the military where they were figuring out how to reintegrate physical activity into a lifestyle that was totally different from what they were used to in the military: ***"So I think the first four months after transitioning out, I barely did anything just because I was trying to adapt to what my new life was going to be. And it definitely took a toll on just my physical and mental health as well, because I went from being active to not doing anything. So, that's when I recognized that I needed – I guess I was used to training or doing physical activity so much that I needed to incorporate that again into my life to kind of go back to my normal self."*** This transitional period involved discovering new activities they enjoyed: ***"I didn't know what was enjoyable and what wasn't enjoyable after I was in the service... I had to rediscover what fitness was for me. Like what do I like doing?"*** Having more autonomy over their physical activity pursuits tended to result in perceiving physical activity as more enjoyable now than it was in the military: ***"And since being out, I can choose what time I***

want to go on a run, how fast I want to run it, how slow I want to run it. And I guess just having control of the physical activity feels good to me.”

Importantly, efforts to promote post-military physical activity among student veterans should consider how physical activity connects with the rest of their lives. As a student veteran explained: **“You got to imagine when you’re in the military, like everything’s done for you. You go to a chow hall, you don’t have to cook your own food, you have a place to live, everything like that. So when you initially transitioned, not only at school, [which is] a big jump, but you know, getting your crap together is also a big part of it. So maybe fitness immediately isn’t the first thing on veterans’ minds. So finding out where they are in life first would probably be the biggest thing. Like, cause nobody’s gonna want to spend two hours a day working out if they don’t have an apartment yet and they’re commuting an hour and a half every day to campus.”** Another student veteran reflected, **“Now I live a whole different life, like priorities in the civilian world isn’t fitness. Priority is productivity, making money, having a job, doing your job. It’s not about being healthy and active and doing your job. It’s like the pyramid got flipped when I got out.”** Student veterans can be overwhelmed by this major life transition and navigating new priorities in the civilian world. Physical activity may not be a central focus for student veterans when they have more pressing concerns to address. However, student veterans also recognized how physical activity enhances their well-being, relieves stress, and connects with their personal values. Thus, understanding where physical activity may fit within the larger picture of student veterans’ lives is critical to addressing this transition holistically.

Community

A consistent finding from the focus groups was that student veterans valued being part of a community with others, shaped by their shared experiences through their military training. Student veterans often reflected on the sense of community or **“esprit de corps”** which refers to **“the pride of belonging”** they gained through group affiliation during their military service. This unique shared experience of military service provided a community of support. As one student veteran explained, **“you didn’t have to know that person working out next to you but you knew you had the same goal in mind.”** Student veterans suggested that **“you’re always surrounded by other people when you’re in the military, you’re never really alone.”** Due in part to that shared experience, many student veterans valued opportunities for group interaction through their physical activity. One student veteran suggested that **“I prefer groups because you have people pushing ... giving everything you’ve got because that person is giving everything they got. It’s more of a motivator for me.”**

When student veterans leave the military, they experience a loss of community in their physical activity specifically, and more generally. For example, one student veteran explained that in the military, **“you just knew that y’all stood for something ... that was motivating in and of itself. You didn’t have to know every little piece about them ... that built community, you lose immediately when you leave service. It’s not a transition. It’s a you’re there, you’re not.”** Entering the university setting, student veterans felt a need to connect more with others who could relate to their experience, but found limited opportunities to do so. One example was a coffee meeting organized periodically for student veterans. According to one participant, **“that’s really the only interaction I’ve had with other veterans on campus besides those people that I happen to bump into.”** University stakeholders understood the need to better connect student veterans, with one administrator noting that student veterans **“see themselves as a support network for one another.”** Student veterans echoed that sentiment, suggesting that **“as veterans [we] just kind of help each other through because that’s what you do in the military – you’re helping each other get through.”**

However, in sharp contrast to the communal bonds formed in the military, student veterans found community building opportunities lacking at the university. One student explained, ***“It’s something I noticed the moment I came here. I don’t think people are asking the right questions or trying to incorporate the veteran community into the [university] community.”*** The student veterans recognized a foundation for community building through the Office of Military-Affiliated Services, ***“[the director] does an amazing job ... but at the end of the day he can only do so much.”*** The student continued, with agreement from other student participants, to explain that ***“I do not see the [upper administration] being involved or trying to put the effort into understanding the veteran community.”*** These sentiments were in contrast to perceptions from university stakeholders who often felt that outreach to student veterans was strong: ***“I think as a university, we do a really good job on the front end to communicate to our students you belong here,”*** one stakeholder explained.

The contrasting opinions from student veterans and university stakeholders may be due to tensions between targeting students specifically related to their military affiliation versus promoting their integration into the larger campus culture. ***“They want to fit in”*** according to one university stakeholder, ***“you wouldn’t know that we are targeting those students because they don’t want to be recognized and outed.”*** Another stakeholder elaborated on their perception of the interests of student veterans: ***“I’m thinking a lot of times they want programs that are specifically geared for them. And this is a mixed feeling that we hold as veterans is we want something that’s geared towards us, but we also don’t want to be held as a special standard just because of military status or veteran status ... they want it just because this is something that will relate to us and something we enjoy.”*** Although the student veterans we interviewed desired connection with other veterans, they also acknowledged that a lot of differences exist within the veteran community (e.g., branch, time served) and some veterans may no longer want to be affiliated with the military at all. One university stakeholder explained the challenge of engaging with student veterans who may or may not endorse the veteran identity: ***“A lot of them we’ll tell them about the facilities and they’re like, I don’t want anything to do with the military anymore. Not even as a veteran, this is not who I am, this is why I got out of the service. And then we have the opposite. And some of them were very interested in staying active in that community.”***

In sum, the experiences of student veterans are shaped by their military training and experience where they build a high level of camaraderie among their peers. Once transitioning to the university, this strong peer network is disrupted. Many student veterans prefer tailored opportunities to reconnect with other student veterans to build upon their shared experiences. At the same time, student veterans are exploring more diverse social networks and opportunities that will expand beyond their military affiliation. University stakeholders have responded by offering a foundation of services through MAS while also attempting to offer the full menu of student life to student veterans. These efforts are certainly appreciated by some student veterans but remain on the margins of their experience at the university.

Organizational Roles

This theme describes how the military and the university have shaped student veterans’ physical activity experiences. While in the military, student veterans recalled a variety of structured physical activity which contrast with their experience in the university where physical activity opportunities are available but not required. The military ***“breeds fitness,”*** the student veterans explained, ***“it’s really a big part of being ready for combat.”*** During their military service, student veterans had many incentives to be active and low barriers to physical activity.

“We had our own strength and conditioning coaches” one student veteran explained, and others suggested that ***“the gym was a 300 foot walk,”*** that fitness ***“was designed and told to you,”*** ***“it was a part of your job ... if you have a homework assignment due tomorrow it’s gotta be done, it’s the same thing with exercise in military,”*** and ***“the atmosphere and accessibility definitely helped with keeping up with fitness.”*** The emphasis on fitness was further incentivized by the need to pass fitness tests where ***“if you don’t pass you get booted.”*** This commitment to physical activity creates a thirst for lifelong activity for some student veterans, but for others ***“getting up every day at 4:00 AM, going running 3 miles ... some of them just want to step away from that and see what else they can accomplish with their time.”*** Further, the highly controlled nature of physical activity participation in the military may be an impediment to engaging in future self-directed physical activity. For example, student veterans emphasized the change in the external incentives and atmosphere for being physically active after transitioning out of the military and the associated loss in motivation that can occur: ***“There is zero requirement job wise to be fit ... I joke that I don’t run more because I don’t get paid to do it.”***

Despite physical activity playing a prominent role in their military experience, student veterans perceived a lack of support from the military in helping them transition to their current lifestyle, noting, ***“they don’t follow up ... its very, ‘cut the umbilical cord, bye bye.’”*** Student veterans seemed to agree that ***“the transition was hard for me ... to go from having that support to trying to do it all on my own.”*** Additionally, the transition is complex and shaped by individual factors whereby prior military service may restrict future physical activity for those who sustain chronic injuries. For example, one student veteran explained how injuries limited her current opportunities, ***“I was in a wheelchair for a little bit... I’ve put on about 60 pounds because I can’t get out and be active.”*** And another student explained that, despite his best effort, ***“my physical activity is declining because I had a [military service-related] back injury ... ever since then it’s just been gradually getting worse.”***

In contrast to their perceptions of the military’s role in their previous physical activity, student veterans did not perceive the university to play a large role in supporting their transition to new physical activity opportunities. Most student veterans mentioned the university fitness center as a touchpoint for physical activity. When asked how the university supports their activity, one focus group of students agreed ***“by opening the gym, that’s about it.”*** Some student veterans were aware of the ***“amazing”*** university recreation center that offers ***“great opportunities, tons of activities.”*** More broadly, the recreation center sponsored outdoor activities that targeted some student veterans. However, many student veterans did not connect with the recreation center: ***“it’s extremely sad to say, but I didn’t find out about [the recreation center] until like my second semester,”*** one student veteran explained, while another student echoed that sentiment, ***“to this day I couldn’t even tell you where the gym is at.”*** Although we learned through conversation with a university stakeholder that MAS also offers access to a ***“day room”*** with some exercise equipment, it is unclear how aware student veterans are of this space as the students did not mention using it.

Interviews with university stakeholders shed additional light on the university’s role in supporting physical activity for student veterans. One stakeholder perceived that there was a ***“reticence with regards to engaging on campus”*** in the student veteran population, suggesting ***“they tend to view their relationship with the university as far more transactional”*** than the traditional university student which may curtail their participation in university-based physical activity opportunities. However, administrators also pointed to structural barriers such as a lack of adaptive physical activity options; for example, one university stakeholder shared, ***“I have heard from students that there is a lack of adaptive equipment and programming”***

currently available at the recreation center. Another stakeholder located the need for adaptive programming, ***“the [recreation center] is actually very accessible ... but the programming doesn’t always match the sophistication of the facility.”*** An additional barrier that was identified relates to physical activity courses offered for academic credit. Although student veterans expressed some interest in enrolling in these courses, benefits from the GI Bill will only cover courses that directly satisfy degree requirements and physical education credits are automatically satisfied by their prior service, meaning that in most cases, student veterans would have to pay out-of-pocket to take these courses.

Several university stakeholders suggested more work was needed to understand the needs of the student veteran population and where physical activity promotion fits within university priorities: ***“[this interview] is about veteran affairs and physical activity, but from a university perspective is that an objective of the university?”*** The stakeholder wondered if the university sees ***“value to reach veterans in an intentional way,”*** and whether resources could be devoted to such an objective to ensure a ***“sustainable program where we’re making smart decisions.”*** These are key questions to consider in evaluating the university’s potential role in serving student veterans in this way, including how such efforts may fit with the strategic plan for the university.

Programming Implications

Student veterans and campus stakeholders who are in position to serve student veterans offered several important content, structure, and logistical considerations to inform future physical activity promotion programming efforts on our campus. As discussed in the theme of “Community,” we came to understand the important role of community for student veterans, and the loss of that community experienced through their transition out of the military. While a few individuals were content to work out alone, the overwhelming sentiment expressed across focus groups was a desire for more connection. Many student veterans were interested in a partner or group format for physical activity programs. They expressed a desire for establishing a fitness community that provides them with ways to connect with other student veterans through their physical activity. Some suggested offering group exercise classes specifically for student veterans or veteran-affiliated activity groups where they could engage in physical activity with other student veterans, build community and relationships, and hold each other accountable for their physical activity goals.

“I think one thing I would love to see happen would be like a community, right? An established community of veterans, people who not so much hold you accountable, but that encourage you to maintain that level of physical activity. When I got out of the army, you know, I left all my buddies and the people I went to high school with had grown up. And so, I mean there was just nobody there besides my wife to encourage me to do the things I needed to do.”

“I think having a call it, in my case, a running group that was predominantly veteran or military affiliated people... personally, if something like that existed, I would’ve most likely joined it just because I was transitioning out and I think I would’ve found comfort in doing a physical activity with people that shared my same, not even ideas, but just my same experience.”

Access to an online networking community was also mentioned by several individuals as a desirable option and might be the most feasible way to connect a large number of student veterans around a shared physical activity community given their lack of proximity to physical spaces on campus, with most being commuters who may live a considerable distance from the university.

Student veterans also wanted more education around health-related physical activity: ***“Maybe also offer some type of personal training for veterans. Cause not that many people know how to properly work out.”*** As noted in the “Organizational Roles” theme, while in the military, service members are typically told, not taught what to do, which may not develop the knowledge and skills needed to engage in self-directed physical activity on their own in the future. The university can be an appropriate setting to promote physical literacy among student veterans. Additionally, offering an orientation to university life and the various physical activity opportunities available was of interest to some student veterans.

In addition to the ongoing group and educational activities mentioned above, student veterans offered suggestions for hosting potential events, such as outdoor hikes, gatherings at Piney Lake, an activity class offered at the Office of MAS, a rock climbing event at the university’s recreation center, or a race that plays off military culture (e.g., Spartan race, “silky” race, obstacle course). In planning such events or programs, providing options that are accessible to, or even tailored to disabled veterans, is critical. Institutional data suggest that a notable portion of student veterans at UNCG have disability ratings resulting from their prior service that may place limits on their current physical activity, which should be considered in universal design of facilities and programs offered on our campus.

Several considerations were raised regarding the location and timing of programming to best suit student veterans’ lives. Student veterans are typically considered non-traditional students; many have families, are employed outside of the university, and often do not live near campus. As one student veteran explained: ***“after you go to class, you just want to go home because like I said, you have other priorities, you have a full-time job, you have children, you have whatever else. So not everyone will want to stay on campus for such activities or go to the rec center.”*** MAS personnel indicated that their events were most highly attended when the programming included family members and was scheduled “off hours” in the evenings or weekends.

As the university considers designing programs for student veterans, it is important to acknowledge that student veterans are not a homogenous group. While student veterans may have some shared experiences or identities, they also have diverse needs and interests, which may pose a challenge for how to best design and market physical activity programs or events geared to student veterans. Having student veteran input in the development and execution of programming is critical to ensure that the university is appropriately serving this diverse population.

Recommendations

Student veterans are considered a special student population with unique needs to be addressed as they transition to the university setting. The results of this study confirm that physical activity is a relevant issue for student veterans whose opportunities for being active change significantly during their transition from the military to the university. The majority of

survey respondents reported a decline in physical activity since transitioning out of the military, and many reported being diagnosed with health conditions that could benefit from regular physical activity participation. Interview findings suggest that physical activity opportunities are available to all students, but they may not be adequately tailored to the needs of student veterans. Importantly, there was a diversity of interests expressed within this student population. Some student veterans, for example, prefer to integrate with the larger student population while others prefer to build community within the military-affiliated student population. Previous literature suggests that student veterans perceive a lack of support from their university but may also be less engaged in university life outside of courses compared to other student groups. The transition to university can be enhanced by having access to a strong veteran peer community, which many participants in this study desired.

Based on the results of this study, several recommendations for improving the physical activity environment for student veterans are grounded in an asset-driven approach that centers and builds upon the strengths and interests of student veterans. Specifically, we recommend the following actionable steps for the university to consider, which align with core elements of the university's strategic plan:

- Develop an orientation for newly enrolled student veterans that provides an overview of university resources and services available to them, with multiple pathways of communicating this information to student veterans throughout their tenure at the university
- Host targeted community physical activity events (e.g., outdoor hike, 5k run/walk) to bring student veterans together through physical activity while promoting awareness of and engagement with university resources and services. Consider meeting times, locations, involvement of family members, and incentives (e.g., giveaways) to maximize opportunities for student veteran participation.
- Create an infrastructure for student veterans to connect through (and beyond) physical activity. Using an online platform, we have recently created a transition community for former student-athletes, which is designed as a space to promote a healthy lifestyle through the transition out of competitive sport with a focus on promoting physical activity, healthy eating, identity exploration, and well-being. With appropriate resource allocation, an opportunity exists to extend this framework and develop a similar online community for student veterans transitioning to UNCG.
- Leverage partnerships across campus between the Office of Military-Affiliated Services, Department of Recreation and Wellness, Department of Kinesiology, Office of Accessibility Resources and Services, and upper administration (e.g., Dean of Students and Provost Offices) to support the needs of student veterans. Specifically, we recommend a planning workshop to discuss pathways for designing collaborative, intentional, and sustainable programming to better serve student veterans and promote their physical activity and holistic well-being.
- Consider the diverse needs and interests of student veterans by including their voices in future strategic planning and by taking a multipronged approach to integrating student veterans into the broader university community. To elevate their voices, the university should engage student veterans in conversations around their transition out of the military and desired physical activity resources. It is also critical that student veterans have a role in the design and delivery of future programming and initiatives.
- Explore structural barriers that exist in current policies and practices and identify potential solutions. For example, investigate current policies at the university, UNC system, and Veterans Affairs related to physical activity course credits and identify alternative funding sources that may be available to support student veterans' enrollment in health promoting courses. Additionally, representatives from MAS, Kinesiology, Recreation and Wellness, and OARS should discuss opportunities to incorporate universal design and adaptive physical activity programming options for student veterans with various abilities.

UNCG CAMPUS RESOURCES

**Below is a list of several on-campus
resources relevant to this project:**

OFFICE OF MILITARY AFFILIATED SERVICES

military.uncg.edu

336.334.5632

OFFICE OF ACCESSIBILITY RESOURCES & SER

oars.uncg.edu

336.334.5440

DEPARTMENT OF RECREATION AND WELLNESS

recwell.uncg.edu

336.334.5924

DEPARTMENT OF KINESIOLOGY

kin.uncg.edu

336.334.5347

DEAN OF STUDENTS OFFICE

sa.uncg.edu

336.334.5514

STUDENT HEALTH SERVICES

shs.uncg.edu

336.334.5340

COUNSELING CENTER

shs.uncg.edu/cc

336.334.5874

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