



## **College Student, Veteran Writers' Interest in Discussing COVID-19 Pandemic Stressors and Related Political Topics**

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This exploratory case study investigated college student veterans' pre-pandemic versus pandemic types and levels of stress linked to their individual/family and communal, health and social-relational contexts during the COVID-19 pandemic and how this orientation impacted their potential interest in communicating about the pandemic and related political, controversial topics in classrooms with a substantial discussion- and writing-assignment course design. The study focused on student veterans, who were compared with their nonveteran peers. From a U.S. university with a socioeconomically depressed, rural population, 78 college students, 39 veterans and 39 nonveterans, participated. The authors applied a mixed-methods design approach and convergent-parallel strategy reliant on data collection and analysis by utilizing Likert scale and short-answer survey questions, NVivo coding, and SPSS statistical software. As findings, during the pandemic, both the veterans and nonveterans reported high and often similar stress levels of up to 41% for five factors connected to their individual/family and communal, health and social-relational contexts, which negatively impacted their college educational paths. During the pandemic, veterans showed the highest stress rates for three factors: anxiety about 1) a community/national political issue(s) connected to their communal, health and social-relational contexts and, tied for second place, 2) an injury/illness of a family member(s) affecting veterans' individual/family health and 3) a community/national issue(s) related to the COVID-19 pandemic as again linked to veterans' communal, health and social-relational statuses. Meanwhile, the nonveterans' top stressor concerned a personal socializing issue associated with their individual/family, social-relational background.

Keywords: college teacher/student class discussion, writing-assignment design, COVID-19 pandemic stressors, political/current discussions, student veterans

### **INTRODUCTION**

According to Hart and Thompson (2020), as a recent historical trend, U.S. college student veterans represent a focused, resilient population with a capacity for

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demonstrating leadership, establishing classroom camaraderie, and supporting their community and nation as part of many faculty's objectives in implementing curricular designs with a substantial discussion- and writing-assignment element. Meanwhile, nationally, some veterans face stress factors and barriers connected to their individual/family and communal, health, social-relational, and financial contexts that they might wish to express to others, such as peers and teachers. Of concern for the current study of U.S. Southwestern, regional student veterans, in Hembrough and Dunn's (2019) study located in the Southwest, many student veterans suffer likewise from additionally marginalizing stress factors connected to existing, educationally exclusionary systems affecting their socioeconomic, geographical, and ethnic/racial and sex/gender demographics, and academic backgrounds. Recently, nationally, Reilly and colleagues (2022) also found in their survey of college student veterans linked to the COVID-19 pandemic that 61% reported worrying about contracting the virus, and 36% felt isolated as greater impediments to their existing success, persistence, and matriculation rates overall. Within the pandemic, student veterans' rates of mental-health and life-threatening issues have skyrocketed, with some veterans feeling even more alienated because of quarantining and social-distancing protocols than before. Consequentially, in Valenstein's and others' (2022) national study, mental-health problems, high-risk behaviors, loneliness, the economy, and job loss contributed to student veterans' increased pandemic suicide rates.

Foreseeably, in the current authors' study, located in Oklahoma, such stressors, contexts, and settings affected Southwestern student veterans similarly. According to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (2022), Oklahoma has a high number of veteran residents, constituting 9% of the population, with many being Native American and rural residents living in a geographically, socioeconomically depressed area. Thus, during the pandemic, some Oklahoma student veterans participating in the current study may also have possessed additional stressors and risk factors affecting their individual/family and communal, social-relational, health and outcomes, creating a context that might hamper their successful ability to pursue a college education. Indeed, in the study's locale during the pandemic, some student veterans were experiencing problems including employment loss or unemployability, housing and food shortages, and budgeting disparities. Considering the existing literature and providing the study's institutional context relevant to pandemic-affiliated circumstances that negatively could have affected student veteran participants' status, the authors developed research questions examining the existence and nature of pandemic-related, individual/family and communal, health and social-relational stressors that Southwestern college student veterans may have experienced compared with their nonveteran peers. The authors also explored the extent to which the veterans demonstrated a desire and capacity for discussing potential pandemic stressors they were facing, as well as conversing about associated political topics impacting them within a class(es) with a discussion- and writing-assignment design. Of relevance in entering a post-COVID-19 era, this research area holds continuing significance for discussion- and writing-oriented, cross-disciplinary faculty since many veterans as minoritized students demonstrate an enduring desire for establishing classroom camaraderie; receiving and providing assistance in their writing- and discussion-heavy courses, academic institution, and

communities; and engaging in dialogues about political topics, including those surrounding the pandemic, as curricular objectives of faculty value contributing to many veterans' betterment, as well as that of their peers and locale.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Experiencing Remote Learning Formats and Examining Discussion Spaces

As stress factors that Sutton (2021), referencing a 2021 "U.S. Operation College Promise Report," identified as tied nationally to student veterans' social-relational, health, and financial contexts impacting their college success, many navigated university shutterings, including in the dormitories; G.I. Bill funding delays limiting college availability; and the shift to online-class formats, scenarios affecting veterans in various ways for the current authors' study also. Meanwhile, in Hembrough's (2024) and Hembrough and Cavanagh's (2022) studies, both exploring pandemic stressors of Southwestern students-at-large, a range of stressors, but especially financial ones for the first study (2024) and social ones in the second (2022), hampered many students' ability to grapple with their life circumstances, let alone achieve their academic goals while supporting their families. During this timeframe, for some student veterans, as well as students-at-large, these and other pandemic disruptive factors resulted in their experiencing high stress in a range of areas, including also possibly fracturing their ability to interact with teachers and peers in online class formats. Nationally, Hart and Thompson (2020) found that most student veterans reported concern that the pandemic impinged upon their academic goals and achievements. In turn, Sutton (2021) indicated that some student veterans yearned for institutional support in managing their individual/family relationships, health, work, and finances. Meanwhile, in the current authors' study, veterans potentially also were experiencing various stressors related to their lives, as well as the transferring of their classes online. Significantly, in Hazaymeh's United Arab Emirates study (2021), college students-at-large disliked the shift to online coursework with their loss of access to an on-campus environment where they had discussed their backgrounds and realities with one another and teachers. Arguably, these students may have missed many beneficial exchanges related to communicating their pandemic and related political concerns, with this being an adjacent area of interest for the current authors' study exploring student veterans' potential desire to converse about such subjects in their own classes with a discussion-and writing-assignment design during this time. Overall, in the Midwest, Kirchner and Pepper (2020) found that veterans lacking engagement with their teachers, as well as opportunities to form peer relationships, experienced greater problems with their online coursework, as well as a lowered interest in the curriculum. According to Hembrough and Dunn's (2019) view of Southwestern student veterans especially, many wish to discuss their military status, including in lower-level, writing courses, in the following cases when 1) faculty and classmates support or are familiar with a military lifestyle; 2) faculty broach actual-world situations where students can respond as analytical, reflective thinkers; 3) faculty and students forge a learning community where students can formulate and share course information; and 4) faculty and students collaborate as active members of a democracy. In light of such valuable curricular outcomes for student veterans nationally, Dean and colleagues (2020) call upon college teachers to

support veterans, as well as nonveterans, in expressing themselves and valuing one another through a curriculum portraying all students' backgrounds favorably and choosing course topics of veteran interest that, in terms of the current study, could include pandemic and related political topics.

### **Broaching Political, Current, and Pandemic Discussion and Writing Topics**

An uncertain sociopolitical climate, such as the pandemic produced, can exacerbate tensions already present between college student populations. However, according to Sybing's (2019) study of U.S. students, discussing political, current topics within the classroom supports students in building knowledge about current events, enhancing their tolerance of other viewpoints, and broadening their political interests and local and national civic action. According to Molloy's (2016) study of U.S. college writing students, those choosing to express their identities, including stressful or traumatic episodes, such as due to a community crisis, can gain an increased ability to express their ideas about their personal and cultural settings in dealing with their individual/family and collective pain and to share their stories with others in order to create desired change. In the current authors' study, as well as linked to various other faculty members' curricular designs implementing a discussion- and writing-assignment based component, such objectives are also primary. Moreover, for student veterans, Dean and others (2020) found that those who opted to communicate their political ideas and experiences also supported their nonveteran peers in envisioning such dynamics from the former's underrepresented perspective, thus expanding the latter's view. According to Hart and Thompson (2020), veterans aid their communities via working with people of many cultures in fraught situations in order to tackle complicated problems and thus may also embrace opportunities for assisting one another and nonveteran classmates in finding campus and community resources, a phenomenon, as in the current authors' study, of foreseeable usefulness for teachers and peers, especially in times of epic crisis, such as the pandemic, in light of what the current study addresses.

For students, the benefits of holding discussions about political current topics with a diverse peer group, including student veterans, is clear. Yet, for Gómez and colleagues' (2023) international study referencing U.S. college students-at-large, such debates are held rarely in classrooms, regardless of disciplinary or curricular approach, largely because faculty are concerned about students', administrators', or community members' retribution. Due to the potential for such fraught systems at some faculty members' institutions, they also may forgo or have ignored a broaching of pandemic or related political topics in order to avoid such strife. In the existing literature, the current authors found no mention of this scenario either in support or defence of a particular side. Thus, it became an area for study exploration. Meanwhile, according to Mefford and others' (2022) referencing of an "American Psychological Association 2020 Report," with the pandemic's inception, 65% of students surveyed nationally reported that the country's present state of unpredictability was stressful to them. During this time, nationally, Gallup (2020) also identified that although most students (68%) believed that their free speech rights were vital to the democratic process, the majority felt unable to practice them. Concurrently, 68% of students were attending classes online due to the pandemic,

and a third felt psychologically isolated, with many students overall wishing to cover pandemic and related political subjects in their classes albeit in a safe manner in order to communicate their ideas about such subjects. Specifically, over half (59%) were willing to tackle politics, and 65% wished to discuss the 2020 presidential election. Adjacently, in the current authors' study during the pandemic, a number of student veterans also foreseeably were experiencing a similar battery of stressors and barriers to their possible free expression, including any inclination they had to express their identities and belief systems in classes with a discussion- and writing-design by sharing their individual/family and communal, health and social-relational settings particularly. Thus, despite the obstacles being raised for some teachers of discussion- and writing-design courses, as well as their students, in engaging in constructive dialogues about controversial topics, such as those pandemic-related, faculty must consider how they can make a greater effort in order to support their students wishing to formulate their thoughts purposefully and safely in depicting their backgrounds affiliated with current zeitgeists while also protecting their boundaries in depicting themselves without divulging any personally stressful and potentially trauma-provoking details. According to Boonroungrut and others' (2022) study of multinational college students' rise in pandemic mental-health problems, by showing respect, focusing on students' strengths and potential for resilience, and employing a social-justice focus valuing minorities, faculty can address students' personal and educational roadblocks and disparities, including those pandemic and post-pandemic-related. In the current study concerning student veterans, who already may experience marginalization and inequities in their individual/family and communal, health and social-relational backgrounds, with the potential to impact their college paths negatively, this curricular approach is of arguable benefit.

Responding to the pandemic, as a consensus point, Hart and Thompson (2020) indicate that there is agreement amongst many U.S. colleges that greater efforts must be made to address minoritized student issues, with veterans having a place within this group. Overall, students failing to matriculate from college possess a diminished possibility of financial success. Thus, for the authors' study, exploring and addressing rural, Southwestern, student veterans' obstacles to matriculation remains critical as studies by Hembrough (2024), Hembrough and Cavanagh (2022), Hembrough and Dunn (2019), and others suggest. In the regional, national, and international literature, a picture of college students-at-large's COVID-19 stressors has been painted to various degrees but does not consider Southwestern, Native American, or area rural, minoritized, student veterans comprising the U.S.' most vulnerable populations. Furthermore, a gap exists concerning known research in any discipline, including those with discussion- or writing-heavy formats, about college teachers' valuing or avoiding students' engagement in dialogues about their potential pandemic stressors, including those connected to individual/family and communal, social-relational and health settings, as well as students' coinciding possible wish for communicating about such backgrounds and attributes in political conversations, an outcome that foreseeably could provide many veterans with a sense of connection and assistance during the pandemic and post-pandemic era. This article investigates veterans' potential desire for discussing their COVID-19 stressors in classes with a discussion- and writing-design and calls upon

teachers implementing such formats to engage students in dialogues about pandemic and post-pandemic scenarios upsetting their students' lives and academic paths. The authors posed these study research questions: 1) Out of a grouping of five specific health and social-relational stress factors potentially affecting student veterans, as well as their nonveteran peers, in terms of the veterans' individual/family and communal contexts as a scenario also possibly impinging on the veterans' college careers, which did they perceive as being most damaging? 2) Additionally, did veterans, compared to their nonveteran peers, desire to raise their potential stressors, the pandemic, and related political topics in any class(es) with a discussion- and writing-design during the semester and, if so, why?

## **METHOD**

### **Research Methods**

The authors, having secured approval from the Institutional Review Board, utilized an exploratory case study and implemented a mixed-methods design, along with gathering and analyzing data according to a convergent-parallel strategy, with the intertwining evaluation of quantitative and qualitative data providing the authors with a greater comprehension of their research questions and supporting their analysis of participant responses (Creswell & Creswell, 2017) as being an apt approach. Researchers select an exploratory case study in order to focus on a recent or new phenomenon in order to provide thick description of the case as being of potential value to other researchers focused on similar explorations of phenomenon, such as the pandemic. Thus, the authors utilized exploratory research to generate and understand ideas about how Southwestern, minoritized, college student veterans and their nonveteran peers, with the latter serving as a control group, viewed various COVID-19 pandemic stressors related to their individual/family and communal, health and social-relational dynamics. Some survey stress factors were connected to the VA's (2023) *Life Stressor Checklist-Revised* and Hembrough's (2024) and Hembrough and Cavanagh's (2022) Southwestern studies comparing Native American and Caucasian students utilizing Hembrough's (2019) *Scale of Pandemic Stress Factors for College Students* indicated within it. The study's first research area converges with the second investigating whether veterans desired to discuss their possible pandemic-affiliated stressors as part of political, current conversations in one or more classes with a substantial discussion- and writing-assignment design, with some faculty creating dialogue forums with the purpose of generating class unity and camaraderie amongst students, especially veterans, as a valuable outcome.

The authors utilized a mixed-method design to amass quantitative or numerical data and qualitative data via open-ended survey questions through a voluntary participant survey with 122 Likert scale questions having answers spanning from 1 "strongly disagree" to 5 "strongly agree," with linked open-ended questions allowing participants to elaborate on the Likert scale responses. Within the data collection process, participants created an online, anonymous, SONA Systems account, where they could choose to participate in the study. By clicking upon the study, students were redirected to Alchemer, an online, anonymous, survey tool. The study's first page contained an online consent form

indicating ethical clearance and study protocols. Participants received compensatory points for their selected teacher's course. The survey had an estimated length of one hour, and participants reported demographic data; information about their online learning experiences during the pandemic; stress factors affecting their individual/family and communal, health and social-relational contexts, which might impact their persistence and matriculation; and preferences for covering the pandemic and affiliated political topics in class(es) with a discussion- and writing-assignment element. Applying the convergent-parallel design approach, the authors amassed and evaluated the survey's quantitative (Likert scale) and qualitative (short-answer responses) to produce a fuller dataset, with some students writing up to two paragraphs per short-answer response (see Creswell & Creswell, 2017), commentary the authors used to create codes in NVivo 14, a qualitative coding software program emphasizing patterns and giving context for students' responses. Additionally, the authors utilized SPSS 27 statistical software to run survey results. The authors computed paired and independent samples *t*-tests (see Creswell & Creswell, 2017) comparing students' pre-pandemic and pandemic stress levels and ran independent samples *t*-tests concerning their potential desire to discuss the pandemic and related political topics. To create additional study credibility and reliability, the authors utilized an adequate participant sample via GPower 3.1.9.7 software analysis, and they served as faculty who oversaw and taught writing classes or were affiliated with the study in this way. In January of 2020, the U.S.'s higher education was affected noticeably by the pandemic, with many institutions moving online during March, as in the authors' study. Thus, as the timeline, the authors queried participants about their self-reported stressors within a six-month span during the pre-pandemic period from August to December 2019, compared with their pandemic stressors at the time of study participation, with data collection occurring between April 2020 and April 2022 to allow for and accommodate an inclusive range of minoritized, student veterans' participation.

### **Research Site and Sample Demographics**

In Oklahoma, the study was conducted at a public university affiliated with the lowest income areas. There were 39 veterans and 39 nonveterans, with women being 41% in each category. The study was comprised of undergraduates and a small number of master's students. Veterans' ages ranged from 20 to 73 ( $M = 37$ ,  $SD = 11$ ). Native American veterans included Choctaw, Cherokee, and Eastern Shawnee. Of veterans, 56% ( $n = 22$ ) were Army; 23% ( $n = 9$ ), Navy; 15% ( $n = 6$ ), Air Force; 10% ( $n = 4$ ), Marine; and 13% ( $n = 5$ ), National Guard; with 13% ( $n = 5$ ) Active Duty. Military time served ranged from two months to 22 years, with 44% ( $n = 17$ ) having deployed and 26% ( $n = 10$ ) having served in combat. The veterans majored in fields such as English, criminal justice, psychology, business, finance, and aviation. Their class(es) with a discussion- and writing-assignment design referenced may have been affiliated with any of these disciplines, as well as others. Nonveteran students had similar demographic characteristics to the veterans. See Table 1 for all demographic information.

Table 1  
Students' demographic characteristics

Gender:	Veterans	Men 59% (n = 23)	Women 41% (n = 16)		
	Nonveterans	Men 59% (n = 23)	Women 41% (n = 16)		
Ethnicity/Race:	Veterans	Caucasian/ Non-Hispanic 79% (n = 31)	Native American 13% (n = 5)	African American = 3)	8% (n = 3) Other 8% (n = 3)
	Nonveterans	Caucasian/ Non-Hispanic 77% (n = 30)	Native American 13% (n = 5)	African American 8% (n = 4)	Other 8% (n = 4)
Occupation status:	Veterans	Student 26% (n = 10)	Part-time work 3% (n = 1)	Full-time work 72% (n = 28)	
	Nonveterans	Student 31% (n = 12)	Part-time work 3% (n = 1)	Full-time work 67% (n = 26)	
Age:	Veterans	17-19 0% (n = 0)	20-29 26% (n = 10)	30-39 38% (n = 15)	40+ 21% (n = 8)
	Nonveterans	17-19 5% (n = 2)	20-29 26% (n = 10)	30-39 46% (n = 18)	40+ 39% (n = 15)
Marital status:	Veterans	Married 54% (n = 21)	Cohabiting 8% (n = 3)	Separated/ Divorced 13% (n = 5)	Single 26% (n = 10)
	Nonveterans	Married 46% (n = 18)	Cohabiting 13% (n = 5)	Separated/ Divorced 5% (n = 2)	Single 36% (n = 14)
Financially responsible for children under 18:	Veterans	1 child 8% (n = 3)	2 children 31% (n = 12)	3 children 8% (n = 3)	4+ children 8% (n = 3)
	Nonveterans	1 child 18% (n = 7)	2 children 18% (n = 7)	3 children 18% (n = 7)	4+ children 3% (n = 1)
Annual household income:	Veterans	\$0-15,000 8% (n = 3)	\$16,000- 30,000 8% (n = 3)	\$31,000- 45,000 (n = 8)	\$46,000+ 21% 63% (n = 24)
	Nonveterans	\$0-15,000 5% (n = 2)	\$16,000- 30,000 23% (n = 9)	\$16,000-30,000 23% (n = 9)	\$46,000- 60,000 44% (n = 17)
Residency, town size:	Veterans	Under 5,000 26% (n = 10)	5,000-10,000 10% (n = 4)	11,000-20,000 26% (n = 10)	20,000+ 39% (n = 15)
	Nonveterans	Under 5,000 33% (n = 13)	5,000-10,000 10% (n = 4)	11,000-20,000 23% (n = 9)	20,000+ 34% (n = 13)

Note. N = 78; Veteran, n = 39; Nonveteran, n = 39.



## FINDINGS

Based upon the emerging literature and pandemic's social climate, for the study, the authors examined two research questions, with the first comparing Southwestern student veterans with their nonveteran peers, as a control group, in terms of five potential pandemic stressors' that might influence the veterans' individual/family and communal, social-relational and health contexts, and thus potentially their academic outcomes, negatively. Likewise, for the second question, the authors explored the veterans' possibly connected desire to communicate about their potential stressors, backgrounds, and the pandemic and related political topics more generally in a class(es) with a discussion- and writing-design. For the first research question, the authors found that the veterans reported experiencing five pandemic stressors between the rates of almost 26% ( $n = 10$ ,  $M = 4.46$ ,  $SD = 1.94$ ) and 41% ( $n = 16$ ,  $M = 3.30$ ,  $SD = 1.75$ ) related to their individual/family and communal, health and social-relational settings that they further indicated as negatively impacting their academic careers. Comparatively, the nonveterans' pandemic stressors spanned rates of almost 18%, ( $n = 7$ ,  $M = 3.54$ ,  $SD = 2.23$ ) and 41%, ( $n = 16$ ,  $M = 3.54$ ,  $SD = 1.82$ ) and thus similarly negatively influenced their college goals likewise. Moving forward, for the second research question, the authors found that almost a fifth (15%,  $n = 6$ ,  $M = 4.46$ ,  $SD = 0.52$ ) of veterans desired to communicate about their various pandemic stressors and connected identities and backgrounds, the pandemic itself as a phenomenon, and, depending upon the context, pandemic-based political topics in a class(es) with a discussion- and writing-assignment design, as again compared with their nonveteran peers (18%,  $n = 7$ ,  $M = 4.22$ ,  $SD = 0.44$ ), who also wished to discuss their stressors, the pandemic, and potentially, related subject matter at a slightly higher but comparable rate of three percentage points. As additional data from Likert scale questions and short-answer commentary that the authors coded, the veterans provided seven rationales for their desire to communicate about their pandemic stressors and experiences, including within the likely political context of local, national, and international topics within their class(es) with a discussion- and writing-design, based upon their needs for self-expression and greater identification about important pandemic subject matter, and care for peers and the community.

### **Student Veterans' Pre-pandemic and Pandemic Stressors Versus Their Peers'**

#### *Students' Pre-pandemic and Pandemic Stressors with Percentage and Rate of Change*

As quantitative findings based on percentage, during the pandemic, the veterans reported stress levels of almost 26% ( $M = 4.46$ ,  $SD = 1.94$ ) to 41% ( $M = 3.30$ ,  $SD = 1.75$ ), compared with stress levels of between almost 18% ( $M = 3.54$ ,  $SD = 2.23$ ) and 41% ( $M = 3.54$ ,  $SD = 1.82$ ) for their nonveteran peers, aligned with five stress factors of greatest perceived self-relevance to them impacting their individual/family and communal, health and social-relational backgrounds, which the veterans believed also negatively influenced their college educational paths and success in the short run if not more greatly. The veterans, compared with their nonveteran peers, also potentially experienced the same scale of pre-pandemic and pandemic stress factors at some

similar, as well as on par, percentage rates. Ranked from greatest to least for veterans during the pandemic, the stress factors are as follows, with their associated frame of potential influence upon their lives stated afterwards, and there being a greater possibility of overlap within the associated frames of influence than necessarily stated: an anxiety about 1) *a community/national political issue(s)* (veterans at 41%,  $n = 16$ ,  $M = 3.30$ ,  $SD = 1.75$ , versus nonveterans at 33%,  $n = 13$ ,  $M = 3.53$ ,  $SD = 1.90$ ) as associated with students' individual/family and communal, health and social-relational contexts; 2) *an injury/illness of a family member(s)* (veterans at 36%,  $n = 14$ ,  $M = 4.03$ ,  $SD = 1.84$ , versus nonveterans at 28%,  $n = 11$ ,  $M = 4.10$ ,  $SD = 2.06$ ) as linked with students' individual/family health concerns; 3) *a community/national issue(s) related to the COVID-19 pandemic* (veterans at 36%,  $n = 14$ ,  $M = 3.47$ ,  $SD = 1.91$ , versus nonveterans at 36%,  $n = 14$ ,  $M = 3.44$ ,  $SD = 1.82$ ) as connected with students' individual/family and communal, health and social-relational statuses; 4) *a personal socializing issue* (veterans at 26%,  $n = 10$ ,  $M = 3.51$ ,  $SD = 2.06$ , versus nonveterans at 41%,  $n = 16$ ,  $M = 3.54$ ,  $SD = 1.82$ ) affiliated with students' individual/family, social-relational contexts, and 5) *the death of a family member(s)* (veterans at 26%,  $n = 10$ ,  $M = 4.46$ ,  $SD = 1.94$ , versus nonveterans at 18%,  $n = 7$ ,  $M = 3.54$ ,  $SD = 2.23$ ) as joined with students' individual/family, health and social-relational statuses. Significantly, during the pandemic, veterans were concerned most with these three stressors, thus of emphasis for this study: 1) *a community/national political issue(s)* (41%,  $n = 16$ ) and, tied for second place, 2) *an injury/illness of a family member(s)* (36%,  $n = 14$ ) and 3) *a community/national issue(s) related to the COVID-19 pandemic* (36%,  $n = 14$ ). Meanwhile, as a control group, nonveterans reported their top stressor as being linked with their ability to *socialize* (41%,  $n = 16$ ), with their greatest focus set on their individual/family, social-relational needs and not on both their individual/family and communal contexts as were the veterans more largely, who reported that *a community/national political issue(s)* (41%,  $n = 16$ ) served as the greatest stressor for them. Interestingly, during the pandemic, both veterans and nonveterans worried equally about a *pandemic-associated, community/national issue(s)* (36%,  $n = 14$  versus 36%,  $n = 14$ ), while having an only 8% difference in their stress levels concerning *a community/national political issue(s)* (41%,  $n = 16$  versus 33%,  $n = 13$ ), thus indicating that both veterans and nonveterans experienced the first stressor at the same rate and, for the nonveterans, the second one as only somewhat less important, according to the veterans and nonveterans' differing order of value in ranking the five stressors for themselves overall. Moving forward, as the veterans' fourth-ranked pandemic stress factor, *a personal socializing issue*, their stress levels were 15% ( $n = 6$ ) lower than nonveterans' (41%,  $n = 16$ ), indicating that this was not as great of concern for the veterans. Finally, as both veterans' and nonveterans' last ranking pandemic stressor, 26% ( $n = 10$ ) versus 18% ( $n = 7$ ) expressed an anxiety about *the death of a family member(s)*, with veterans having an 8% higher stress rate than their peers. See Table 2 for veteran and nonveteran pre-pandemic and pandemic stressors with percentage and rate of change.

Table 2  
 Veteran and nonveteran students' 5 pre-pandemic and COVID-19 pandemic stressors

Participant stress factors	Experienced pre-pandemic		Experienced during pandemic		Rate of change/number of student increase or decrease					
	Nonveteran		Veteran		Nonveteran		Veteran			
	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>		
A community/national political issue(s)	23.1	(9)	<b>33.3</b>	<b>(13)</b>	<b>33.3</b>	<b>(13)</b>	44.2	(4)	23.1	(3)
Injury/illness of a family member(s)	12.8	(5)	17.9	(7)	<b>28.2</b>	<b>(11)</b>	<b>35.9</b>	<b>(14)</b>	120.3	(6)
A community/national issue(s) related to a pandemic/the COVID-19 pandemic generally	12.8	(5)	20.5	(8)	<b>35.9</b>	<b>(14)</b>	<b>35.9</b>	<b>(14)</b>	180.5	(9)
Personal socializing issue	17.9	(7)	17.9	(7)	<b>41.0</b>	<b>(16)</b>	<b>25.6</b>	<b>(10)</b>	129.1	(9)
Death of a family member(s)	12.8	(5)	17.9	(7)	<b>17.9</b>	<b>(7)</b>	<b>25.6</b>	<b>(10)</b>	39.8	(2)

Note. *N* = 78; Veteran, *n* = 39; Nonveteran, *n* = 39. Veteran stressors are bolded. A dataset of all student comments will be published on ResearchGate subsequent to article publication.

Overarchingly, pre-pandemic to pandemic, compared to veterans, the nonveterans experienced greater increases in four of five pandemic stressors, excepting stress concerning *a family member(s)' death*, while the veterans experienced higher pandemic stress rates in three of four categories. Thus, the nonveterans' rise in pre-pandemic to pandemic stress rates can be attributed to the fact that they suffered from lower stress levels in the affected categories pre-pandemic than did the veterans, excepting one factor concerning nonveterans' stress about *the death of a family member(s)*, for which the veterans demonstrated a higher pre-pandemic stress rate. Proceeding, nonveterans and veterans were tied in rank during the pre-pandemic period concerning their stress levels for *a personal socializing issue*, the stressor also being of greatest relevance for the nonveterans during the pandemic itself. Nevertheless, for the veterans, pre-pandemic, their biggest stressor remained *a community/national political issue(s)* (33%, *n* = 13, *M* = 3.24, *SD* = 1.75), if down 8% compared to the pandemic. Likewise, in the same position on the veterans' pre-pandemic list of stressors, 21% (*n* = 8, *M* = 3.19, *SD* = 1.95) also reported stress concerning *a community/national issue(s) related to a pandemic*, down 15% from the pandemic, and 18% (*n* = 7, *M* = 3.69, *SD* = 2.08) similarly reported stress about *an injury/illness of a family member(s)*, down 18% from the pandemic. Alternately, and of interest, pre-pandemic, 18% (*n* = 7, *M* = 3.18, *SD* = 2.02) of nonveterans had also been worried about *a personal socializing issue*, down 23% (*n* = 9) from the pandemic, as relevant regarding their stressors' focus.

#### *Students' Pre-pandemic/COVID-19 Pandemic Stressors Independent Samples T-tests*

As a next step, using quantitative methodology, the authors applied a veteran subject matter expertise and their theory-based methodology in order to consider Table 2's figures more fully in determining statistically whether significant findings existed for the current findings established based upon percentage calculations and a rate of change

formula, which the authors utilized in order to determine comparisons amongst veteran versus nonveteran, veteran versus veteran, and nonveteran versus nonveteran populations in evaluating the five stress factors that student veterans and nonveterans experienced pre-pandemic and during the pandemic. The authors utilized an independent samples *t*-test in making these analyses. As a first step, the authors determined that no statistically significant differences existed for the veterans' pre-pandemic to the nonveterans' pre-pandemic stress factors. Second, the authors determined that for the veterans, compared to the nonveterans, during the pandemic, there was a single stress factor with a statistically significant difference, with the veterans experiencing a higher stress rate concerning *a family member(s)' death*; contrastingly, the nonveterans had no statistically significant difference for this stressor. See Table 3.

Table 3

Statistically significant difference for a *family member(s)' death*, measured for veterans versus nonveterans during the COVID-19 pandemic

Personal stressors	Experienced pre-pandemic		Experienced during pandemic		Independent samples <i>t</i> -test results comparing nonveterans to veterans					
	Nonveteran	Veteran	Nonveteran	Veteran	Pre-pandemic	During COVID-19 pandemic				
	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>				
A family member(s)' death	12.8	(5)	17.9	(7)	17.9	(7)	25.6	(10)	<i>t</i> (36) = 1.59, <i>p</i> = .12, 95th C.I. = -.07 to .59	<i>t</i> (36) = 2.00, <i>p</i> = .05, 95th C.I. = .004 to .66

Note. *N* = 78; Veteran, *n* = 39; Nonveteran, *n* = 39. Veteran stressors are bolded.

Subsequent to conducting the independent samples *t*-tests, the authors, again relying on their veteran subject matter expertise and methodology, computed paired samples *t*-tests comparing veterans' and nonveterans' self-reported perceptions related to the five stress factors pre-pandemic versus pandemic. The authors identified no statistically significant mean differences for any factors.

### Students' Pandemic Stressors and Potential Desire to Discuss Them

During the pandemic, as the first finding, many student veterans, compared with the nonveterans, suffered from stressors related to their individual/family health and social-relational contexts that affected their academic outcomes negatively, according to veterans' survey and short-answer responses concerning these stressors, as well as information about students' connected backgrounds and experiences. Coincidentally, as the second finding, veterans, along with their nonveteran peers, reported their potential desire for communicating about pandemic and related political topics in their class(es) with a discussion- and writing-design and their connected rationales for doing so, again through utilizing independent samples *t*-tests, as well as qualitative coding processes. Concerning the second research question, 46% of all students, a third of veterans (33%, *n* = 13, *M* = 4.46, *SD* = 0.52) and nearly a quarter of nonveterans (23%, *n* = 9, *M* = 4.22, *SD* = 0.44), desired to discuss *community/national political issues*, such as those including a controversial, current nature, in at least one class with a discussion- and writing-design that semester, dialogues potentially connected to pandemic-linked topics.

Additionally, as a separate question, almost half 45% ( $n = 35$ ) of students, 17 veterans ( $M = 3.00$ ,  $SD = 0.00$ ) and 18 nonveterans ( $M = 3.00$ ,  $SD = 0.00$ ), similarly reported a desire to communicate about their *pandemic stressors* and connected identities and backgrounds, and the *pandemic* itself as a phenomenon, thus demonstrating their openness to pandemic-related class discussions ostensibly of a political bent when such occasion(s) arose to their liking or seemed personally relevant, according to coding. Coincidentally, during the pandemic as within the study's timeframe, veterans also self-reported that under half (46%,  $n = 18$ ,  $M = 4.33$ ,  $SD = 0.49$ ) were enrolled that semester with at least one teacher and in at least one class implementing a discussion- and writing-design where they experienced one or more scenarios or options for discussing or writing about the pandemic or related political topics. As further background information about the nature of some veterans' adjacent pandemic-affiliated stressors and settings and how these impacted them negatively during the study's time frame, thus marring their academic experiences, it is also important to list surrounding factors affecting some veterans' online-course, technology-related; health; job; and parenting stressors, while not being the article's focus: Concerning online course and technology obstacles, over a quarter (26%,  $n = 10$ ,  $M = 4.50$ ,  $SD = 0.53$ ) of veterans experienced this as a stressor. Healthwise, 15% ( $n = 6$ ,  $M = 2.00$ ,  $SD = 1.35$ ) worried about their own personal injury/illness, including it being potentially pandemic-connected, and over a quarter 26% ( $n = 10$ ,  $M = 4.46$ ,  $SD = 1.98$ ) self-reported suffering from current or emerging psychological disorders, including PTSD, depression, anxiety, insomnia, eating disorders, and suicidal ideation. Financially, 31% ( $n = 12$ ,  $M = 3.34$ ,  $SD = 2.03$ ) demonstrated stress about a personal/family reduced income, including a job loss(es). Meanwhile, most veterans (72%,  $n = 28$ ) worked full-time, and 3% ( $n = 1$ ) worked part-time as further educational constraints. Proceeding, most veterans (54%,  $n = 21$ ) were also parents of children under 18 years old with associated responsibilities, and over two-fifths (41%,  $n = 16$ ) of veterans were women, who, culturally for the area, assume a greater burden for childcare tasks. Additionally, as an ethnic/racial minority, 28% ( $n = 11$ ) of veterans also experienced this status as marginalizing factor. As another factor of consideration that the current study does not have the ability to address, veterans' ages ranged from 20 to 73 ( $M = 37$ ,  $SD = 11$ ), indicating they were experiencing various potential pandemic and other stressors that could be affiliated with their age group.

As an expression of some veterans' and nonveterans' desire to discuss pandemic and related political topics in their class(es) with this discussion and writing design, they provided seven rationale(s) for their doing so by addressing a set of additional, optional, seven Likert scale and short-answer questions, with the latter serving as commentary that the authors coded thematically, with numbered participants indicated in parentheses. A subgrouping of 46 to 48 participants, or up to 24 veterans and 24 nonveterans, answered these questions, with the study continuing to focus on veterans in articulating the articles' second finding. As the first rationale of seven, by discussing controversial topics in the classroom, 46% ( $n = 22$ ) of students, a third of veterans (33%,  $n = 13$ ,  $M = 4.46$ ,  $SD = 0.52$ ) and 9 nonveterans (23%,  $M = 4.22$ ,  $SD = 0.44$ ), indicated that they *liked talking or writing about controversial topics in [their] class(es)*. According to coding, in discussing controversial topics, which could include pandemic topics in the current timeframe, veterans *liked educating others* ( $n = 1$ ),

learning about others' opinions ( $n = 1$ ), discussing rights and civil liberties ( $n = 1$ ) and different perspectives ( $n = 1$ ), and participating in controversial topic discussions more largely ( $n = 2$ ). As a second rationale, 20% ( $n = 9$ ) of students, 7 veterans (20%,  $M = 4.14$ ,  $SD = 0.38$ ) and 2 nonveterans (5%,  $M = 4.50$ ,  $SD = 0.71$ ), wanted to discuss ways that the pandemic impacted [them] and/or [their] family. 3) As a third rationale, 22% ( $n = 10$ ) of students, 8 veterans (21%,  $M = 4.13$ ,  $SD = 0.35$ ) and 2 nonveterans (5%,  $M = 5.00$ ,  $SD = 0.00$ ), wanted to discuss the pandemic because [they] believe[d] that [their] opinion would be valued. According to coding, the veterans believed that their opinions could shed light on past or current situations ( $n = 1$ ) and show how everyone experienced pandemic hardships ( $n = 2$ ). As a fourth rationale, 28% ( $n = 13$ ) of students showed a continuing interest in pandemic discussions. Again, more veterans ( $n = 8$ ,  $M = 4.25$ ,  $SD = 0.46$ ) than nonveterans ( $n = 5$ ,  $M = 4.60$ ,  $SD = 0.55$ ) were interested in pandemic topics. As a fifth rationale, 28% ( $n = 13$ ) of students, 10 veterans (26%,  $M = 4.00$ ,  $SD = 0.00$ ) and 3 nonveterans (8%,  $M = 4.33$ ,  $SD = 0.58$ ), viewed the pandemic as a necessary current event to cover. Of this total, over three times as many veterans than nonveterans saw the pandemic as being a vital occurrence to tackle, and, according to coding, the veterans believed that the virus's effects and people's reactions to it would influence society for a long time ( $n = 3$ ), and that the different types of information being circulated needed addressing ( $n = 1$ ). As a sixth rationale concerned with students' desire to conduct pandemic discussions, 13% ( $n = 6$ ) of students believed that they were relevant to their major/coursework. Of this total, twice as many veterans ( $n = 4$ ,  $M = 4.50$ ,  $SD = 0.58$ ) than nonveterans ( $n = 2$ ,  $M = 4.50$ ,  $SD = 0.71$ ) also agreed that COVID-19 pandemic dialogues were important to their major/coursework, because, according to coding of veteran responses, the pandemic caused a decline in many individuals' mental health ( $n = 1$ ) and quickened the pace to a digital world ( $n = 3$ ). As a seventh rationale, 50% ( $n = 23$ ) of students, 12 veterans ( $M = 4.50$ ,  $SD = 0.52$ ) and 11 nonveterans ( $M = 4.73$ ,  $SD = 0.47$ ), desired to broach pandemic subjects despite any potential privacy concerns. Although many students did not wish to discuss pandemic matters, according to the coding, veterans' greatest refusal did not revolve around privacy. Instead, many believed that the pandemic affected everyone ( $n = 4$ ) and was a public health concern rather than a private issue ( $n = 2$ ). With these rationales, veterans provided reasons for desiring to discuss pandemic and related controversial and political discussions. Nonetheless, students who did not answer the additional questions cannot be considered.

## DISCUSSION

The study offered two findings comparing Southwestern student veterans with their nonveteran peers, with the first indicting that some veterans suffered from up to five pandemic stressors affecting their individual/family and communal, social-relational and health contexts, thus damaging their academic outcomes. As a second finding, some veterans displayed the connected desire to communicate about their stressors, backgrounds, the pandemic, and related political topics in their class(es) with a discussion- and writing-assignment design. As the study delineates, for the first finding, both before and during the pandemic, some veterans, as well their nonveteran peers, experienced five stressors of both an individual/family and communal/national nature that they reported as negatively impacting them healthwise and social-rationally,

hence hurting them academically. The veterans' top stressor was *community/national political issues*, with their third, connected stressor, *community/national issues related to the COVID-19 pandemic generally*, having a similar meaning. Arguably, because the veterans and nonveterans lived in the same area, their stress factor outcomes related to their individual/family and communal statuses were more similar than might have been the case otherwise, with between 26% and 41% of veterans and 18% and 41% of nonveterans experiencing one or more of the five stressors if ranked differently. Proceeding, regarding the study's second finding, 46% of all students, 33% of veterans and 23% of nonveterans who in enrolled in at least one class with a discussion- and writing-design also desired to discuss *community/national issues* as constituting curricular subject matter of a controversial, current nature to which they might connect conversations about their potential pandemic stressors, the pandemic itself, and their linked backgrounds and communities as the pandemic affected them. Meanwhile, almost half of students (45%,  $n = 35$ ), 44% of veterans and 46% of nonveterans, were neutral in their desire to cover pandemic topics, indicating their potential to participate under certain circumstances, according to their coded commentary, especially ones where they felt *safe* and *valued* in terms of their teacher(s) and classmates and also where their teacher(s) could offer class discussions and assign writing tasks fitting within the course focus, curricular coverage needs, and format. Meanwhile, for veterans as a whole, 26% reported a *personal socializing issue* as being their fourth greatest stressor, and thus some veterans, if not all in this category, also may have welcomed the chance that they had in any class(es) with a discussion- and writing-design to communicate their pandemic stressors and circumstances. Meanwhile, of students as a whole, almost a fifth (17%,  $n = 13$ ), 15% of veterans ( $n = 6$ ) and 18% of nonveterans ( $n = 7$ ), had reported specifically that they desired to discuss their own pandemic stressors; the pandemic; and, potentially, related political topics in their class(es) with a discussion- and writing-design whenever possible as also relevant.

Largely, from the pre-pandemic period to the pandemic, veterans experienced between 8% to 18% increased stress rates for all factors related to their health and social-relational contexts, which negatively affected their college experiences, according to survey responses. During the pandemic, veterans experienced higher stress rates than the nonveterans for three of five factors, with the fourth tied as follows: *community/national political issues*; *an injury/illness of a family member(s)*; and *the death of family member(s)*, with *community/national issues related to the COVID-19 pandemic* tied for third place with the nonveterans. Overarchingly, during the pandemic, the veterans demonstrated their greatest anxiety concerning *community/national political issues* (41%,  $n = 16$ ) as part of their individual/family and communal backgrounds; *an injury/illness of a family member(s)* (36%,  $n = 14$ ) as an individual/family issue; and *community/national issue(s) about the COVID-19 pandemic* (36%,  $n = 14$ ) as related again to their individual/family and communal statuses. In this way, veterans' greatest source of stress did not involve a *personal socializing issue* (26%,  $n = 10$ ) affecting themselves or their family as was the nonveterans' top stressor (41%,  $n = 16$ ). Moreover, concerning the veterans and their families themselves, the veterans did not even display their greatest sense of anxiety concerning a *family member(s)' death* (26%,  $n = 10$ ). Nonetheless, for both veterans and nonveterans, the biggest change and the

only one that was statistically significant for veterans consisted of their increased stress regarding *a family member(s)' injury/ illness* during the pandemic, being at 26% ( $n = 10$ ) from pre-pandemic to pandemic, up 18% ( $n = 7$ ), as an outcome arguably indicating that although the veterans demonstrated some anxiety about their individual/family contexts, their communal and national focus was higher in this area. Nonetheless, veterans and nonveterans expressed similar or equally matching pandemic stress rates for *community/national political issue(s) related to the COVID-19 pandemic generally* at 41% ( $n = 16$ ) versus 33% ( $n = 16$ ), with an eight point spread, and *community/national issues related to the COVID-19 pandemic generally*, with both veterans and nonveterans at almost 36% ( $n = 14$ ), indicating that the veterans possessed both stressors at similar or the same rates, if differently ranked by group.

As noted earlier, according to Mefford and others' (2022) evaluation of pandemic stress' effects, political issues caused a national increase in college students' stress since 2016, with 68% of participants having reported anxiety during the pandemic about politics or the presidential election. Comparably, Sutton (2021) also reported that 52% of veterans nationally experienced generally related pandemic stress. Coincidentally, to a lesser degree than for Mefford and others (2022) and Sutton (2021) but of congruent pertinence for the current study, the veterans' first ranked pandemic stressor concerning *community/national political issues* (41%,  $n = 16$ ) and third ranked stressor of *community/national issues related to the COVID-19 pandemic generally* (36%,  $n = 14$ ), with both related to veterans' individual/family and communal statuses, represent comparable stressors in the literature. Although the study's veterans experienced these stressors to a lesser degree, perhaps this was based upon timing, as well as the fact that some current students already suffered from the same stressors pre-pandemic, ostensibly due to their being a geographically minoritized population. Significantly, however, the current veterans ranked individual/family and communal concerns about *community/national political issues* as their biggest stressor both before and during the pandemic, with 41% ( $n = 16$ ) reporting stress concerning various pandemic-related political topics. For the study's veterans, depending on military status, some demonstrated concern about their potential deployment to battlefronts in Syria or the Ukraine. Others were called upon to assist with international border enforcements. At the study's locale, some veterans also participated in vaccinating the public against the COVID-19 virus, thus putting themselves at risk for exposure.

Veterans' top pandemic stressor concerned *community/national political issues*, and their third similarly addressed *community/national issue(s) related to the COVID-19 pandemic generally* as linked with their individual/family and communal statuses. Yet as veterans' second largest stressor, they also were concerned with pandemic-affiliated health issues affecting not only themselves but, even more so, those around them. Specifically, 36% ( $n = 14$ ) of veterans worried about *an injury/illness of a family member(s)*. Likewise, in a related but more dire consideration, 26% ( $n = 10$ ) of veterans reported stress concerning *the death of a family member(s)*, with the veterans experiencing a statistically significant higher stress rate for this factor than their nonveteran peers by 8 percentage points ( $n = 3$ ). Comparably, but a somewhat higher rate than in the current study, Reilly and colleagues (2022) reported that 59% of student veterans displayed anxiety about a loved one contracting the COVID-19 virus. This



difference in percentages for the studies may be due again to their somewhat different timeframes. Although some veterans indicated stress concerning a family member(s)' injury/illness or even death, veterans' first and third greatest stressors concerned not simply their own individual/family needs but also those of their larger community/nation to which they felt a congruent or even greater allegiance. Arguably, veterans' community/nationally related interest in politics, especially during the pandemic period, signalled that they were focused on looking out for others above themselves and perhaps even their own families. Within the study, according to veterans' commentary, this politically related, pandemic focus led them to seek and support other veteran and nonveteran students, including in sharing computer devices; inviting classmates to their house for wireless internet availability in attending class and submitting assignments; and helping others find employment, food, clothing, childcare, and health services in an area with limited resource availability.

Proceeding in terms of pandemic stressors, for veterans, just over a quarter or 26% ( $n = 10$ ) reported experiencing stress involving *a personal socializing issue*, tied in fourth place with *the death of a family member(s)*, as stressors related to their individual/family status. Comparatively, just over two-fifths of nonveterans (41%,  $n = 16$ ) reported *a personal socializing issue* as their top pandemic stressor. Thus, any opportunity that the veterans might have experienced in their class(es) with a discussion- and writing-design to converse about *community/national political issues* as their top stressor (41%,  $n = 16$ ) and *community/national issues related to the COVID-19 pandemic generally* as their third stressor (36%,  $n = 14$ ) in conjunction with their overall chance for communicating about their potential pandemic stressors and circumstances, and related political issues represented a chance that some if not all veterans welcomed, as well as their nonveteran peers. Yet, 46% of all students, 33% of veterans ( $n = 13$ ) and 23% of nonveterans ( $n = 9$ ), who enrolled in at least one class with a discussion- and writing-design, desired to discuss *community/national issues* as curricular subject matter of a current nature that they might link to their potential pandemic stressors, the pandemic itself, and students' linked backgrounds and communities as the pandemic had damaged them. Meanwhile, almost half of students (45%,  $n = 35$ ), 44% of veterans ( $n = 17$ ) and 46% of nonveterans ( $n = 18$ ), were neutral in their desire to discuss pandemic topics, indicating their potential to participate under certain circumstances. In following, on a related note concerning a separate survey question, 15% of veterans ( $n = 6$ ), as well as 18% of nonveterans ( $n = 7$ ), were also desirous of creating classroom communities where students could share their pandemic-stressors and discuss pandemic-related political topics. Additionally, according to the seven optional questions that the student subset submitted, almost a fifth (17%,  $n = 13$ ) as a small but contributing number of both veterans ( $n = 6$ ) and nonveterans ( $n = 7$ ) similarly wished to discuss or write about the pandemic or, potentially, affiliated political topics in course(s) with a discussion- and writing-assignment design, including communicating about the pandemic's implications for themselves and their families. Thus, this latter group of veterans and nonveterans demonstrated their poise and ability to support and assist their peers in classes with a discussion- and writing-design, which they did so variously through promoting inclusion, classroom engagement and collaboration, sharing information and developing camaraderie, and focusing on campus and community involvement,

including civically and politically, as veterans' coded commentary indicated. A group of veterans also provided seven rationales for desiring to discuss pandemic and related political topics in classes with a discussion- and writing-design based upon their 1) need for and joy in self-expression concerning themselves and their families; 2) requirement for greater communication about important pandemic subject matter, including with there being an abundance of information and no certain answers; and 3) care for peers and the community in terms of helping themselves and others, including those ill.

Significantly, within a pandemic setting, some faculty, lacking online teaching experience or the time necessary to function successfully pedagogically in a changing academic environment, had to shift their course mode without much notice, just as many students were also moving to remote-learning. At the current study's locale, the university provided notices about masking, isolating, and reporting procedures, which teachers placed within the syllabus, yet a seeming lack of substantial discussions between some faculty and students, including veteran participants, arose regarding the pandemic's unknown, apparent, and monumental effects upon students and their communities, with a look beyond to the world. Indeed, Sutton (2021) reported nationally that only about a fifth of student veterans did not suffer damage from any pandemic-era events, while also looking outward to what was occurring internationally. Meanwhile, in the current study, almost a fifth (17%,  $n = 13$ ) of all students, as a small but important population constituting six veterans and seven of their nonveteran peers, desired to converse about the pandemic or, potentially, related political topics in their class(es) with a discussion- and writing-design during the given semester, with almost half of students (45%,  $n = 35$ ) overall, 17 veterans and 18 nonveterans, being neutral concerning this scenario and thus indicating an openness to such conversations. Nonetheless, according to veterans' self-reporting, less than half (46%,  $n = 18$ ) of those enrolled in at least one class with at least one teacher implementing a discussion- and writing-design provided the space, at a minimum, for even a single pandemic-linked class discussion and/or writing task. Building upon Sybing's (2019) national study, as well as that of Muslimin and Abidin (2023), the latter conveying an international need for faculty to lead students in raising controversial discussions about difficult personal and cultural topics in order to encourage critical thinking, few instructors make the effort to promote students' critical debates. Perhaps unsurprisingly, potential examples of students' circumnavigation or dread of pandemic topics in the classroom reflected their society-at-large, whose fear of the virus was tempered by attempts to ignore it (Pfefferbaum & North, 2020). However, even with a small amount of such interaction through discussions and writings, students can discover more about their beliefs in various arenas, including those connected to pandemic and post-pandemic and related political topics, ones that, for the study, at least some student veterans, as well as their nonveteran peers, desired to broach in light of their pandemic stressors centered upon *community/national political issues* and *community/national issues related to the COVID-19 pandemic generally*, as well as pandemic-affiliated concerns for their individual/family health and personal relationships. Indeed, such conversations could benefit many students through their positive ability to communicate their stressors, backgrounds, and linked academic goals inside a classroom environment with others who care and could provide support on some level, as opposed to the former remaining

in a state of suffering and isolation while facing various potential stressors and their choice of coping mechanisms. Importantly, in the larger picture for student veterans, Hart and Thompson (2020) point to various colleges' call for marginalized students' needs to be regarded as a priority during the pandemic, a harkening to which the current authors' study contributes in terms of post-pandemic times.

According to the study, many veterans, as well as their nonveteran peers to the extent that they were featured in this article, contributed to or at least welcomed the opportunity for discussions of their identities and potential stressors, examinations of pandemic-connected political and controversial topics, and a building of camaraderie and collaboration amongst peers, with a look outward to the larger community, as constituting valuable pedagogical outcomes for many teachers also. Moving forward, in order to assist veterans and students-at-large in adjusting to and making sense of the magnitude of challenging individual/family and communal experiences at play within pandemic and post-pandemic times, educators can employ 1) healing-centered engagement strategies (Boonroungrut et al., 2022), such as the current study suggests through a bridging of pandemic conversations; 2) a recognition of the long-term result of international crises, such as the pandemic, on individuals and families (Manchia et al., 2022), with the pandemic having a disproportional effect on marginalized students as the current study demonstrates; and 3) a student engagement in pandemic and politically related discussions based on the belief that, according to Boonroungrut and others (2022), most everyone has suffered some trauma throughout life. Indeed, as Boonroungrut and others' (2022) study of multinational college students identified, the rise in mental health problems amongst students since the pandemic presents teachers with a unique opportunity in supporting them, which in terms of the current authors' study, led some veterans in classes with a discussion- and writing-design, along with their nonveteran peers, to raise pandemic and related political dialogues addressing both students' challenges and accomplishments during what continues to be a critical period in terms of marginalized students' lives and academic needs internationally.

### **LIMITATIONS**

During the pandemic, student veterans, compared with their nonveteran peers, experienced five stressors influencing veterans' individual/family and communal, health and social-relational contexts, and thus their academic outcomes negatively, yet almost a fifth of veterans (15%,  $n = 6$ ), as a small but important number, demonstrated a connected desire to discuss the pandemic; their stressors; and, potentially, related political topics, and (44%,  $n = 17$ ) of veterans were also willing similarly potentially to do so in classes with a discussion- and writing-assignment design in order to communicate about themselves and their academic paths both presently and in the future. Likewise, in the survey short-answer commentary, six veterans offered seven rationales describing why communicating about their stressors, lives, and academic goals in classes with a discussion- and writing-design is valuable. As the study's first limitation, due to pandemic-related logistics involving some participants' living, work, and health circumstances, including military deployments abroad, the authors did not select a study design involving participant interviews as an additional instrument. However, in a related post-pandemic study, future researchers might ask participants

semi-structured questions concerning the type and nature of given minoritized student populations' stressors linked with various settings and atmospheres that researchers could implement given the current data collection processes utilizing a Likert scale and short-answer survey. As a second limitation, the current study did not include other university sites, but this was due to the authors' foreseen inability easily to locate additional groups of regional student veterans during the pandemic period. In the U.S., veterans represent about 3% to 4% of college students (VA, 2022), and finding participants in the study's rural region can be additionally difficult. However, as a future direction, researchers could explore an expanded range of student types and preferences for participating in dialogues about controversial topics, especially within discussion- and writing-class designs during a post-pandemic environment, including a look at students' predilections for communicating about themselves and their potential stressors in various settings.

### CONCLUSION

In conclusion, before and during the pandemic, as a minoritized population, Southwestern student veterans, compared with their nonveteran peers, experienced five stressors at the rate of 18% and 41% related to their individual/family and communal, health and social-relational contexts, which negatively affected their college educations but that some wished to discuss with teachers and classmates in terms of their personal and cultural identities, the pandemic, and their academic goals. Overall, many teachers value pedagogical practices that 1) support student dialogues as exchanges concerning their backgrounds and goals, 2) raise controversial and political topics, 3) create camaraderie, and 4) emphasize campus and community support and service. Thus, the authors extend their call to faculty to continue to support their students, including minorities, by asking them to share their identities, strengths, stories, and potential stressors in support of themselves, their peers, and the community as pertinent to their educational paths, especially within this critical time involving a pandemic and post-pandemic era.

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