



**NORTH DAKOTA STATE UNIVERSITY
SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY & AFFECTIVE NEUROSCIENCE IN HEALTH LAB**

SPANH LAB NEWSLETTER

APRIL 2026

Congratulations 2025 & 2026 Graduates!

A huge congratulations to our SPANH Lab Members who graduated from NDSU this academic year!

Winter 2025

Ethan Cox
Emily Wehri

Spring 2026

Amy Berg
Jennifer Brudwick
Hannah Johnson
Cora Larson

A Note From Dr. Finley

Welcome to the very first SPANH Lab Newsletter! We hope you enjoy learning more about the students who make up the North Dakota State University Social Psychology and Affective Neuroscience in Health Lab, aka the SPANH Lab, and the science we work on every day.

If you are interested in participating in our research, you can find our studies at www.ndsu.edu/labs/spanh/participants. We hope to see you in the lab soon!

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Unpacking Hidden Baggage: A Study on Military Self-Stigma

by Jani Western
SPANH Graduate Student

FROM THE LAB

In my personal experience with veterans, I know when you leave the military and try your darndest to reintegrate into society, it doesn't always go smoothly. Maybe you will struggle for a while, or spend years in therapy. Somewhere along the way, someone will likely suggest that you should try getting out more, meet new people, or become more socially involved. In psychology, we call this social integration.

Research consistently shows being socially connected is associated with better overall well-being. On paper, the solution seems simple: build community, stay socially engaged, and well-being improves. But from one veteran's perspective, something that sounds simple can actually be incredibly difficult. When you leave the service, you are not only adjusting to civilian life, you are often trying to figure out who you are now. You are no longer a soldier, but you are not quite sure what being a veteran means yet.

Now imagine that you have been out for a few years and you are doing your best to "reintegrate." You meet new people, make new friends, and eventually mention that you are a veteran. Often the response is a sympathetic look or a concerned tone. While the support is well-intentioned, those moments can quietly reinforce the idea that veterans (including you) are somehow broken, fragile, or permanently struggling.

This is where the concept of Military Self-Stigma comes in. Military Self-Stigma refers to the internalization of negative societal messages about veterans. Public campaigns about PTSD and veteran struggles are *incredibly* important for awareness and support, but the constant exposure to narratives about struggling veterans may unintentionally shape how veterans see themselves.

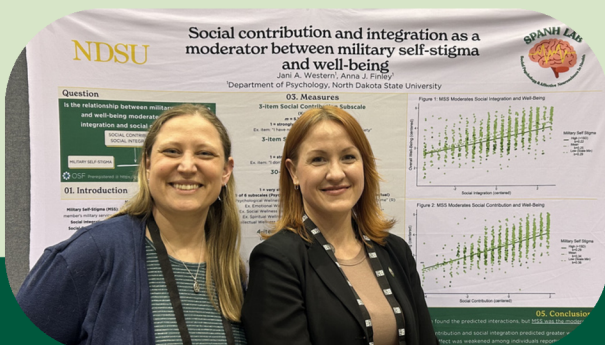
We wanted to explore whether higher levels of social integration (feeling connected to your community) and social contribution (feeling that you meaningfully contribute to your community) might lessen the negative effects of Military Self-Stigma on overall well-being. In other words, we asked:

Can feeling socially connected & valued protect veterans from the harmful effects of self-stigma?

We used data from a public dataset called The Military Health and Well-Being Project to test this hypothesis. Our analyses showed that social integration and social contribution were positively related to well-being, consistent with past research highlighting the importance of social connection. However, we found something unexpected: higher levels of Military Self-Stigma weakened the relationship between social integration and contribution with well-being. **In other words, when veterans internalize negative stereotypes about themselves, it may weaken the benefits of feeling connected to others or contributing to their community.**

These findings raise an interesting question. While public awareness campaigns about PTSD and veteran struggles are incredibly important, could constant exposure to narratives about struggling veterans also unintentionally reinforce self-stigma for some individuals? Perhaps instead of focusing only on the hardships veterans face, we should also spend more time highlighting how capable, resilient, and downright badass veterans truly are.

I presented this research at the 2026 Annual Convention of the Society for Personality and Social Psychology in Chicago, IL. To check out the full poster and preregistration of this research, please go to <https://osf.io/chp25>.



Dr. Anna Finley & Jani Western in front of Jani's poster at the 2026 Society for Personality and Social Psychology Annual Convention in Chicago, IL

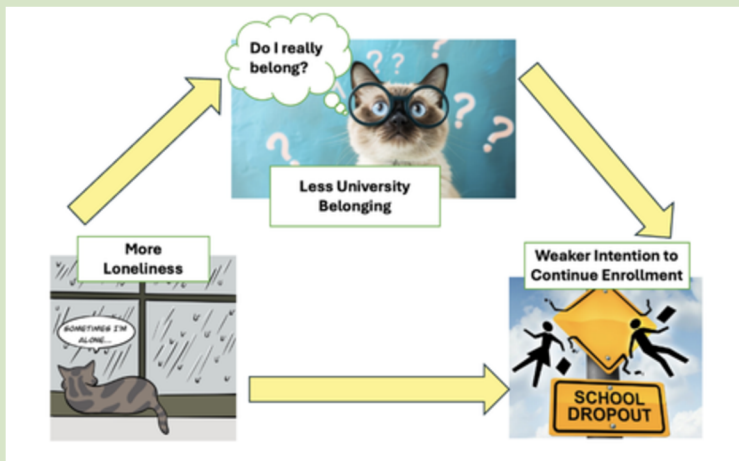
What Makes You Stay? A Senior Thesis

by Amy Berg
SPANH Undergraduate Thesis Student

If you went to a vocational school, attended university classes, or pursued additional training or certifications, what did your first week or semester of school look like? What motivated you to stick with your program, attend classes, or continue your training? For me, my first semester at North Dakota State University was hectic. I encountered a lot of roommate changes, with some dropping out of college for various reasons, including feeling as though college wasn't the right fit. I was lucky enough to persist, and now, in my senior year, I had the privilege of representing NDSU and the SPANH Lab through presenting my undergraduate senior thesis findings at the Society for Personality and Social Psychology conference located in Chicago, Illinois this year. My research question was:

What factors contribute to a first year, first semester student success and what informs decision to continue enrollment at NDSU?

I hypothesized that social-emotional factors such as loneliness and university belonging (feeling connected to the university, peers, school spirit, faculty, etc.), can be major determining factors in a student's decision to stay enrolled in college. More specifically, I hypothesized:

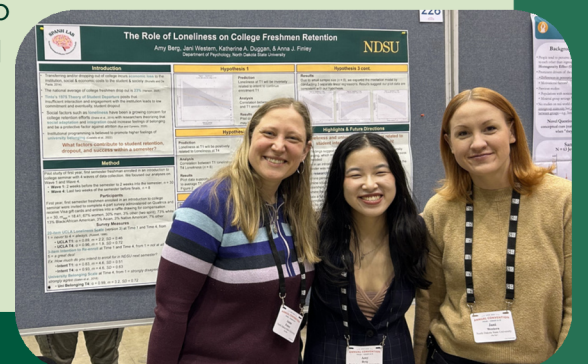


- A student's level of loneliness would be related to their intention to continue enrollment at NDSU, such that higher levels of loneliness would be associated with weaker intentions to continue enrollment at NDSU.
- I thought feelings of university belonging at the end of the semester would help explain the relationship between loneliness across the semester and end-of-semester plans to enroll. The figure to the left shows a graphical depiction of this prediction.

To test my hypotheses, I gave out four online surveys at different time points throughout the Fall semester to new freshmen enrolled in a first-year experience seminar called "You got here, now what? Tools for epic success" (think of a one-credit crash course, like University 101). Students reported their feelings of loneliness, university belonging, and intent to continue enrollment at NDSU.

Overall, while we had fewer students participate than we hoped, the data from our study are consistent with the hypotheses I made. **Students who have higher feelings of loneliness across the course of the semester feel less university belonging, and students who feel less university belonging report weaker intentions to continue their education at NDSU.**

I am grateful to work alongside and be mentored by Dr. Finley, to Dr. Duggan for feedback, and Jani Western for her support. Special thanks to the NDSU College of Arts and Sciences, especially Assistant Dean for Student Success, Dr. Nadeje Alexandre, and Dean Dr. Kimberly Wallin; without your support, this project wouldn't be possible. If you are interested in seeing my poster or reading my senior thesis, go to <https://osf.io/eghrp>



Authenticity, Belonging, and Loneliness in College

by Alexa Bendixen
SPANH NDSU EXPLORE Student

The relationship between loneliness, authenticity, and sense of belonging on a college campus have been examined separately, however the relationship between the three is under researched. Universities are hoping to improve student retention and experience by deepening their understanding of the factors that contribute to a sense of belonging on campus and reduce student loneliness and distress. Additionally, loneliness is recognized as an important social determinant of health, making loneliness an important primary intervention target for public health programs.

As part of my NDSU EXPLORE Undergraduate Research Program project, I am hoping to understand how authenticity, or feeling like your actions are in line with your true self, may contribute to the relationship between belonging and loneliness. If we can gain a further understanding of this topic, then we can design campus wide interventions to potentially reduce loneliness in college students. I asked the question:

Do feelings of authenticity help explain the link between feeling like you belong at your college and loneliness?

We examined this question by conducting a self-report study on $n = 201$ undergraduate students at North Dakota State University who were mostly freshman (84.1%), female (68.7%), and white (90%). Participants answered questionnaires about their feelings of loneliness, authenticity, and feelings of belonging at NDSU. We preregistered our hypothesis and analysis plan. I hypothesized that:

- People who feel less university belonging will also report higher loneliness.
- Authenticity will explain this relationship, such that lower university belonging will be related to lower authenticity, which in turn will be related to higher levels of loneliness.

Our analyses found that loneliness and university belonging were related consistent with our hypotheses. When we looked at how authenticity might explain this relationship in a mediation model, we found that only the component of authenticity related to self-alienation, or feeling like you know who you are, partially explained the relationship between feelings of belonging at NDSU and loneliness. Additional exploratory analyses suggest that living authentically may be related through less loneliness in college students through increased feelings of university belonging and decreased feelings of self-alienation.

I presented my initial findings at NDSU Undergraduate Research Days. We plan on following up on these findings in future studies with NDSU students. If you are interested in seeing my poster or reading my preregistration, you can find it at <https://osf.io/y58ft>.



Dr. Anna Finley & Alexa Bendixen in front of Alexa's poster at the 2026 NDSU Undergraduate Research Days

Combatting Undergraduate Anxiety

by Hannah Johnson & Cora Larson
SPANH Undergraduate Students

FROM THE LAB

Everyone can relate to feeling anxious at one point or another, especially when entering into a new environment like undergraduate students beginning college, where you are expected to meet new people and succeed in academics. Relationships with family and friends are a great way to cope with anxiety as they provide outlets and support through difficult times. We must also take into account that familial and friend relationships can also cause strain through events like disagreements, family emergencies, and roommates or friends moving out. Our desire to understand the complexities of relationships lead us to our research question:

How does familial and friend support and strain relate to anxiety in college students?

For our research question we hypothesized:

- If a student is experiencing low social support from family and friends, then they will have higher amounts of anxiety.
- If a student is experiencing high social strain from family and friends, then they will have higher amounts of anxiety.

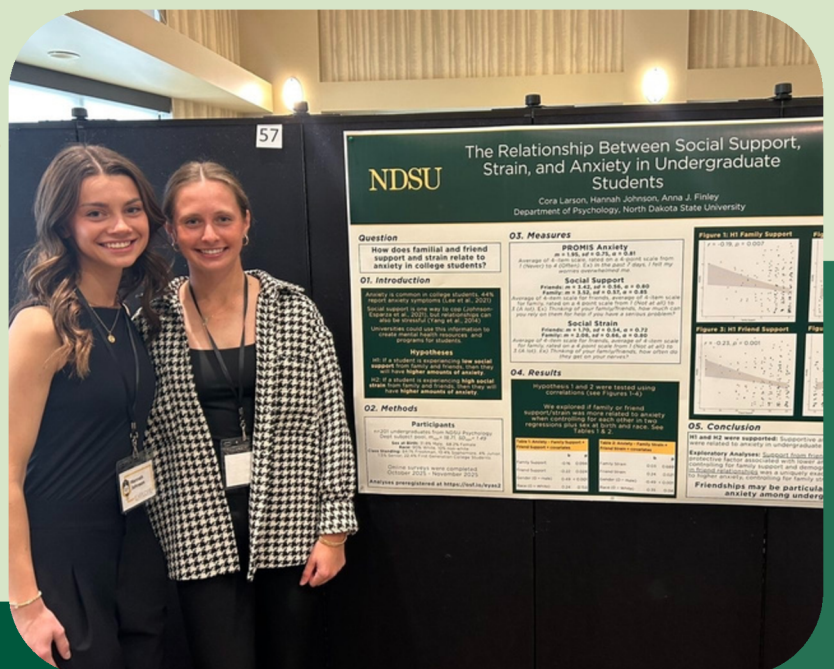
To test our hypotheses, we asked 201 undergraduate students at NDSU to respond to three different self-report questionnaires to measure anxiety and relationship support and strain in relationships with family and friends. Most of our responses came from freshman students (84.1%), of whom 22.4% were the first in their family to go to college, 68.2% were female, and 90% were white.

We found that **students with more family and friend social support experience less anxiety**, which supported our first hypothesis. Moreover, we found that **higher levels of strain in family relationships and friend relationships were related to more anxiety**. This supported our second hypothesis, in that students with higher amounts of social strain experienced more anxiety.

We then wanted to see if familial support or friend support was more strongly associated with anxiety. To do so we ran exploratory analyses which found that **the support from friends was a protective factor associated with lower anxiety, even after controlling for family support, gender, and race. This means that friendships may be particularly important for anxiety among undergraduates.**

We presented our poster at the NDSU Undergraduate Research Days and connected with many other students, faculty, and guests. At the event, **our poster received the 2nd Place Poster Award out of 92 posters!**

We were very grateful to have the opportunity to represent the Department of Psychology as well as the SPANH Lab. We are very thankful for the help from Dr. Anna Finley and Jani Western for all their guidance throughout this project and truly helping us make this happen. If you are interested in viewing our poster or the preregistration of our hypotheses, please visit <https://osf.io/eyas>.



Hannah Johnson and Cora Larson in front of their award-winning poster at the 2026 NDSU Undergraduate Student Research Days



Cora Larson, Hannah Johnson, Dr. Anna Finley, Amy Berg, & Alexa Bendixen at NDSU Undergraduate Research Days

AWARDS AND MORE!

Congratulations our amazing lab members for earning so many awards this academic year!

Alexa Bendixen, NDSU EXPLORE Undergraduate Research Program 2026, NDSU Psychology Department Junior Research Award, E.V. Estensen Scholarship for the most Outstanding Senior Psychology Major

Amy Berg, NDSU Libraries Undergraduate Research Award, NDSU College of Arts and Sciences First Year Experience Pilot Study Award, NDSU Psychology Department Faculty Excellence Award

Cherish Morin, P.A. Beatty Scholarship for Outstanding Junior or Senior Psychology Majors

Lily Vincelli, NDSU Psychology Department Junior Academic Achievement Award

Hannah Johnson & Cora Larson, 2nd place Poster Award at NDSU Undergraduate Research Day

Dr. Anna Finley, NDSU Dean of Students Office Difference Maker Award

Want to Get Involved With the SPANH Lab?

Are you interested in participating in a study?

Go to www.ndsu.edu/labs/spanh/participants to see the current list of the SPANH Lab studies!

Are you a student interested in joining our lab?

Go to www.ndsu.edu/labs/spanh/spanh_team to learn how to join!

Do you want to keep up with the latest SPANH news? Follow us on social media! We are on

[Facebook](#) and [Instagram](#).



Dr. Finley showing a student a brain at the 2026 Fargo South High School Career Day