Transitioning from military to college: A pilot course developed for veterans to help them succeed in
their first year of college

A doctoral dissertation presented
by

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To
The School of Education

In partial fulfillment of the degree of
Doctorate in Education

in the field of

Education

College of Professional Studies
Northeastern University
Boston, MA
December, 2015
Abstract

Student veterans face particular challenges not typical of the general student population. In an effort to develop a pilot course intended to help student veterans transition from the military to college, this qualitative study sought to evaluate existing university veteran transition programs and courses and determine factors that appear to be working at top military friendly institutions. To help examine the continuing need for and elements of a successful transition course for veterans, interviews were conducted with experts in the area of student veterans’ transition, and a document review conducted to ascertain the type of veterans’ success programs/courses currently available. This study found 1) that institutions of higher education can improve the success and retention of student veterans by offering courses that assist them in their transition to the academic environment and careers as civilians and 2) that there are gaps in existing programs and courses that can be filled by modifying, expanding, and combining currently existing courses. In an attempt to do so, the researcher designed a pilot course to help first year student veterans’ transition into higher education and later the workplace. Specifically, the pilot course is designed with the primary focus of transitioning from military to college, making meaning of the transition and adding elements of civilian career exploration. The pilot course allows veterans to apply their military experiences to their future efforts as college students and civilians. This study adds to the research that has been conducted in the past decade into the lives and success (or lack thereof) of student veterans, and reiterates the need for higher education to create spaces for learning where student veterans are welcomed and supported. Because of their unique needs, which the pilot course seeks to meet, purposeful attempts by institutions of higher to improve the learning environment of student veterans will undoubtedly lead to an improved learning environment for all students.
Keywords: student veterans, transition courses, student veterans’ success, military transition
Acknowledgement

This doctoral thesis would not have been possible without the support, love and encouragement from my family. I want to thank my husband for always supporting my dreams and reminding me that anything is possible. Thank you for believing in me and showing me time and time again that dreams really do come true. I would like to thank my son, Bennett, for his patience when mommy had to write night after night. Thank you for always checking on me and telling me that I really can do it. Mommy is finally done with her “doctor stuff.” I would like to thank my daughter, Kira, for her amazing smile that makes me believe that miracles are real.

While you spent most of this journey growing inside of me, it was the anticipation of your arrival that made me work harder than I ever thought possible. I would like to thank my parents for their unconditional love and support in all my educational endeavors. Thank you for always believing in me, and for the countless hours of babysitting so that I could finish this research.

My father-in-law, thank you for all the late night calls and for being a sounding board and telling me over and over again that I will persevere.

My deepest gratitude is to my advisor, Dr. Lynda Beltz. I have been extremely fortunate to work with an advisor who pushed me and encouraged me throughout this process. Thank you for your patience, direction and support throughout this process. Thank you for being an incredible adviser and mentor. You are truly one of a kind and I am so grateful. I would also like to thank my second reader, Dr. Kristal Clemons. Thank you for offering your perspective and providing valuable feedback. I also would like to acknowledge my third reader, Dr. Andrew Griffin. Thank you for pioneering transition courses for student veterans. Thank you for always offering your help in every aspect of this journey. You have never let me down and I am honored that you were part of this committee.
Finally, I would like to thank the many colleagues that have offered their time to help with this research. Specifically, I would like to thank David Vacchi, Krysta Kursynski, and Dave Cass, for your knowledge and feedback. Last, but certainly not least, I would like to thank all my student veterans – past, present and future. You are the inspiration for this research.
Dedication

“If I can see further than others, it is by standing upon the shoulders of giants.”

Isaac Newton

This work is dedicated to my giants: John Money, Bennett Money, and Kira Money
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Transitioning from combat to college: A pilot course developed for veterans to help them succeed in their first year of college

Chapter I: Introduction

Statement of the Problem

The end of Operation Iraqi Freedom in 2011 and the end of U.S. combat operations in Afghanistan in 2014, combined with reductions of ranks in the U.S. through involuntary separations or early retirement, have resulted in many individuals leaving the military. Specifically, it is estimated that five million Post 9/11 service members will have left the military by 2020 (Ang & Molina, 2014). Many of these service members are taking advantage of the Post 9/11 GI Bill to attend colleges and universities (ACE, 2012, Ackerman, Diramio, & Mitchell, 2009, Arminio, Grabosky, & Lang, 2015). Since 2009, the post 9/11 Bill has paid for nearly one million veterans of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars to attend college at an estimated cost of approximately $30 billion (Wagner, 2014). Because of the generous benefits of the Bill, more veterans are enrolled in postsecondary education than ever before (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2014).

Student veterans tend to enter college with many advantages because the experience of serving in the armed forces usually provides greater self-confidence, an enhanced sense of identity, sense of purposefulness, and pride (Kelley, Smith, & Fox, 2013, Litz & Orsillo, 2004). These qualities translate into positive attributes that veterans possess as students. Because of these attributes, student veterans tend to be motivated, determined, organized and self-disciplined. But student veterans also face substantial challenges. These challenges range from a missing the camaraderie they felt within the military and relating to other students and faculty, difficulty obtaining college credit for military training and experiences, and adjustment to
civilian life, specifically the world of higher education (Cate, 2014, Cook & Kim, 2009, Hamrick & Rumann, 2013, Lang & Powers, 2011, National Conference of State Legislatures, 2014). A recent study done by the Student Veterans of America (SVA) found that approximately half (51.7%) of the veterans who used their educational benefits received a certificate or degree between 2002 and 2010. While half of the veterans received a certificate or degree, research still has not determined what factors initially lead veterans to enroll in college and complete their degrees and what factors contribute to or deter success in higher education.

In an effort to gain a greater understanding of student veterans and factors associated with their college experience, the American Council of Education’s (ACE) Center for Policy Research and Strategy (CPRS) analyzed U.S. Department of Education data from the 2011-2012 academic year. One of the main findings identified a number of risk factors that may negatively impact a college student’s persistence and degree attainment, including: delayed enrollment, no high school diploma, part-time enrollment, having dependents, single-parent status, and full-time employment (ACE Center for Policy Research and Strategy, n.d.). Forty-four (44%) percent of student veterans were found to have four or more of the aforementioned risk factors (Ang & Molina, 2014). These findings indicate that student veterans may be at considerable risk of dropping out of their postsecondary programs. Beyond the traditional risk factors, a large number of veterans also deal with transitioning out of the military and military related trauma. Therefore, while some of the challenges faced by student veterans are similar to other non-traditional students, their military experience sets them apart (ACE, 2012, Ang & Molina, 2014). According to the U.S. Department of Education (2011), National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), veterans have a higher risk index for success in higher education than any racial or ethnic minority. Figure 1 depicts the risk index for student success in higher education.
Figure 1: Risk Index for Student Success in Higher Education (U.S. Department of Education (2011)). The index is based on the sum of seven possible characteristics that may adversely affect persistence and attainment: delayed enrollment, type of high school degree, attendance pattern, dependency status, single parent status, has dependents, and work while enrolled.

The characteristics of these student veterans are unique: 73% are male; 27% are female; and 62% are first generation college students; only 15% of student veterans are traditionally aged college students (18-23). The majority are between the ages of 24 and 40. A large number of student veterans have families; 47% of student veterans have children, and 47.3% of student veterans are married (Characteristics of Student Veterans/ VA Campus Toolkit Handout, 2014). Due to these unique characteristics, student veterans have been identified as one of the largest sub-categories of the non-traditional student body and represent a very distinct population of
college students (Kim & Cole, 2013, Kirchner, Coryell, & Yelich Biniecki, 2014). The number of student veterans on campus is growing at an expeditious rate. In 2009, there were nearly 500,000 student veterans and beneficiaries receiving education benefits (Characteristics of Student Veterans/ VA Campus Toolkit Handout, 2014). In 2013, that number rose to over 1,000,000, and it continues to increase (Characteristics of Student Veterans/ VA Campus Toolkit Handout, 2014).

Transition from Military to Civilian Life

The transition from military service to civilian life presents certain challenges for many if not most Post 9/11 student veterans (Abel, Bright, & Cooper, 2013). Today’s military is comprised entirely of volunteers, and, as a self-selected group, they are not a representative cross-section of society (Gade, 2013). The majority of the men and women who join today’s military do so out of a sense of public responsibility and civic engagement (Cook & Kim, 2009, Kelley et al., 2013), and according to a Heritage Foundation report, they “are drawn to the benefits offered by the armed forces that allow them to obtain funding for college.” Merely one half of one percent of the U.S. population has been on active military duty at any given time during the last ten years. Thus it is not surprising that 84% of post 9/11 veterans report that “the public does not understand the problems faced by those in the military and their families” (Pew Research Center, 2011). Some problems faced by veterans have been identified as a lack of understanding and support from civilians. Specifically, the Pew Research Center (2011) War and Sacrifice Post 9/11 report found that some “83% of all adults say that military personnel and their families have had to make a lot of sacrifices since the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks; 43% say the same about the American people. However, even among those who acknowledge this gap in burden-sharing, only 26% describe it as unfair.” “Seven-in-ten (70%) consider it just part of
being in the military. Further findings reveal that the public makes a sharp distinction in its view of military service members and the wars they have been fighting. More than nine-in-ten express pride in the troops and three-quarters say they thanked someone in the military. But 45% plurality say neither of the post – 9/11 wars has been worth the cost and only a quarter say they are following news of the wars closely. And half of the public say the wars have made little difference in their lives (Pew Research Center, 2011). These findings indicate that the general public does not have an understanding of what veterans and their families go through.

Additionally, the combat experience of today’s veterans is vastly different from that of veterans of previous wars (Gade, 2013). Hoge, Castro, Messer, McGurk, Cotting and Koffman’s (2004) survey of more than 1,700 soldiers and marines who served in Iraq disclosed the following:

- 94.9% received small-arms fire
- 94.5% saw dead bodies or remains
- 92.0% were attacked or ambushed
- 89.2% received artillery, rocket, or mortar fire
- 86.2% knew an injured or killed service member
- 81.2% fired or directed fire at the enemy
- 75.4% saw injured women/children but were unable to get help
- 69.8% saw a dead or seriously injured American

These veterans have faced conflicts characterized by chronic, low to moderate degrees of violence rather than by the dramatic, high intensity battles of veterans from past wars (Gade, 2013). However, while they may not have operated in the front lines like veterans of WWII and the Vietnam War, they have been in combat that is highly concentrated with civilians. This
means that today’s veterans have been exposed to a larger degree of civilian suffering, which has produced greater psychological effects (Gade, 2013). Many veterans who served “on the ground” experienced potentially traumatic events on a regular basis (ACE, 2011). According to the American Council on Education (ACE) (2011), veterans report being mentally drained from working in an environment where ambush or attack with an improvised explosive device (IED) is constantly possible. While not every combat veteran has had the same traumatic experience, for those that have, it is imperative to recognize that the skills and habits that promote survival on the battlefield may make transitioning to civilian (student) life difficult (Kelley, et al., 2013). Specifically, enduring this type of combat has been related to the feelings of frustration and neglect, specifically neglect that many student veterans report experiencing on college campuses and contributes to high rates of dropping out among student veterans (Abel et al., 2013).

In an effort to understand student veterans as a sub-population of college students, it is important to define the term, student veteran. However, at the present time, a universally agreed upon definition of who a veteran is does not exist, mainly because it depends on the circumstances of the individual (Vacchi & Berger, 2014). For the purposes of this research project, Vacchi’s (2012) definition of student veteran was adopted, “a student veteran is a student who is a current or former member of the Active Duty Military, the National Guard, or Reserves regardless of deployment status, combat experience or legal status as a veteran” (Vacchi, 2012, p. 17). This definition includes all members of the military services and allows the researcher to discuss student veterans as a sub-population of college students.

Returning to civilian life is not simply a matter of going back to school upon return from military duty. It is a matter of maneuvering through a complex bureaucratic system of accessing benefits, transfer credits, registration and career advice (Willen, 2013). The military provides an
array of end of deployment debriefing programs. One such program is the Transition Assistance Program (TAP). TAP provides transitional support for veterans that includes career counseling, resume assistance, and job resources (Transition Assistance Program, n.d.). The VA also posts deployment briefings on educational and medical benefits. Research indicates that quality and effectiveness of these programs varies. Many veterans see them as a last stop before reuniting with family, they may therefore rush through the process (Ackerman, Diramio, & Mitchell, 2009). As more and more veterans leave military service and decide to use their post 9/11 education benefits, more needs to be done to help them make the transition from military to civilian life. If institutions are going to help student veterans transition successfully into the higher education environment, there needs to be a greater understanding of the military experience on the part of the institutions themselves.

Many student veterans struggle with the issues of how to navigate through the higher education system, which is so foreign to many of them. Along with maneuvering through the complexities of higher education a number of student veterans question whether or not they are college material (Callahan & Jarrat, 2014). Specifically, this is true for students who did not think they were cut out for college before they entered the military and are now struggling with the same issue. The reality is that the majority of these students are entirely capable of completing their degrees, however, without early proactive support, they may not give themselves a chance to do so (Callahan & Jarrat, 2014). Specifically, veterans tend to retain their values from the military as they transition to college, only to find college more chaotic, less structured and less authoritative than the military (Rumann & Hamrick, 2010). Consequently, veterans tend to experience college differently than nonveterans and experience more transition issues than their nonveteran counterparts. Therefore, veteran- specific first year transition
courses need to be implemented to address the identified issues of this unique population of students and help them achieve success (Cook & Kim, 2009).

**Significance of the Problem**

The nation’s colleges and universities are encountering an inflow of student veterans (Measuring the success of student veterans, 2013). According to an American Council on Education report in 2008, a minimum of 2 million students with military experience were expected to take advantage of their educational benefits and attend postsecondary institutions of higher education this decade (Diramio & Jarvis, 2011). The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) spends approximately $9 billion annually on education benefits through the Post-9/11 GI Bill, supporting roughly 600,000 service members, veterans and their families (Measuring the success of student veterans, 2013). This influx of students is occurring at a time when colleges are facing enrollment and retention issues with their civilian population of students. Therefore, institutions have financial incentives for making themselves more veteran friendly, hoping to attract and retain student veterans. According to the College Board Advocacy & Policy Center (2012) federal student aid for veterans increased 424% from 2001-2012. In the academic year 2008-2009 the federal government provided $4.1 billion in aid to veterans, and this amount nearly tripled to $12.2 billion by the 2011-2012 academic year (College Board Advocacy & Policy Center, 2012). Colleges and universities are realizing the need to design programs that will ease the transition from military life to the classroom.

Despite the fact that previous research has well documented the relationship of student attributes and college experiences to student success, little attention has been paid to these types of relationships among veterans in college (Durdella & Kim, 2012). Only now are scholars
beginning to consider veterans’ special needs and how they experience college as compared to their civilian peers (Durdella & Kim, 2012). In addition, research is also lacking pertaining to how being a veteran affects student outcomes, specifically college GPA and sense of belonging in college (Durdella & Kim, 2012). Past research on non-veteran students suggests that first-year college GPA predicts retention, persistence, and achievement, and that a sense of belonging is a key outcome of college students’ experiences and persistence (Allen & Robbins, 2010, Bollen & Holye, 1990, Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). However, research is limited and contradictory in the area of student veterans and their student experiences and persistence rates (Connelly, 2012, Litz & Orsillo, 2004, Military Family Research Institute, 2012).

The population of student veterans is growing rapidly and will continue to increase as more and more veterans return to civilian life. The increase of this population is due to the expansion of the post 9/11 GI Bill. The new Post 9/11 GI Bill constitutes a major expansion of veterans’ education benefits (Hamrick & Rumann, 2013). In 2013, that number rose to over 1,000,000, and continues to increase, there is a need for institutions to understand how student veteran characteristics and first year experiences affect their success in college. At a time when fiscal resources are tight for colleges and universities, institutions that manage to successfully recruit and retain student veterans will find themselves at a competitive advantage (Kelley, Smith, & Fox, 2013). Returning student veterans possess qualities that have the potential to strengthen higher education. They are mature, have had major life experiences and bring cross-cultural awareness to the college campus (Cate, 2014, Connelly, 2012, Kelley et al., 2013). Perhaps one of their greatest strengths is that veterans are highly motivated to serve others (Kelley et al., 2013). Institutions of higher education can help student veterans succeed by acknowledging and addressing both their strengths and their challenges.
Veterans’ and higher education

The corpus of literature on student veterans suggests that as a group, veterans achieve lower levels of degree attainment than their nonveteran counterparts (Durdella & Kim, 2012, Teachman, 2005). Rumann and Hamrick (2010) found that veterans’ college experience and outcomes tend to fluctuate by their precollege characteristics such as, demographics, pre-service experiences, and service related experiences. Reiterating themes in recent qualitative research postulates that policies and procedures deemed to be unfair create negative sentiment towards the campus, which may relate to student veteran persistence (Diramio & Jarvis, 2011, Rumann & Hamrick, 2010, Vacchi & Berger, 2014). Unfortunately, existent research has not made the connections between how theories of college persistence impact rates of veteran degree attainment (Vacchi & Berger, 2014).

The inflow of veterans who want to go to college combined with colleges and universities need for enrollment and the paucity of research on effective programs to support student veteran retention represents a need for programs and courses that will benefit both the student veterans and the institutions. Research is in the preliminary stages of addressing the needs of this unique student population (Durdella & Kim, 2012, Kelley et al., 2013, NASPA, 2013, Vacchi & Berger, 2014). Institutions will benefit from an empirical review of widely known and respected programs designed to address veterans’ transitions to institutions of higher education. However, for real progress to occur collecting and analyzing data at the national level across institutions is not enough. According to a recent survey by the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA): Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education and Inside
Track, *Helping Student Service Members and Veterans Succeed*, approximately three-quarters of colleges and universities have specialized personnel and resources specifically for service member and veteran student affairs, however, the majority do not have the disaggregated retention and completion data needed to measure the effectiveness of these interventions and investments (Callahan & Jarrat, 2014). Better systems need to be developed at the institutional level to identify students with military backgrounds, track their success, assess their potential obstacles, and measure effectiveness of various interventions (Callahan & Jarrat, 2014). Potential programs can drive institutional behavior in ways that should enhance the success of military students.

**Elements of a successful transition course**

In an effort to gain a greater understanding of what institutions are doing to help student veterans transition from the military to college, this qualitative study evaluated existing university veteran transition programs and/or courses and determined factors that appear to be successful. To help assess the elements of a successful transition course for veterans, the researcher interviewed three experts in the area of student veterans’ transition. The researcher conducted a document review by looking at publicly available information about student veterans’ programs and courses at colleges and universities. The researcher began by looking at the websites for the top 50 schools for veterans selected from the *Military Times 2015 Best for Vets list*. The *Military Times* is a widely used resource for veterans that offers information about education, jobs, career exploration and veteran specific news and reports. That list was further narrowed down to thirty schools that provided some form of a transition/success program and/or course. Once those schools were identified, the list was again narrowed down and ten schools that appear to have the most comprehensive existing transition type program were selected by the
researcher to be included in this study. Based on the information gathered from the interviews with experts and the document review, a pilot course was designed as an early intervention program to improve the rate of success for veterans within their first year of college.

Colleges and universities will benefit from the results of this study as it potentially provides integral information for student veterans’ success and retention. First year student veterans will benefit from the results of this study as it provides intrinsic information to assure their rate of success in their first year of college and in their future career endeavors.

**First year courses for veterans**

Veteran-specific first year success courses need to be designed and implemented to address the identified issues of this unique population of non-traditional students and help them achieve success. A number of colleges and universities have started implementing student veterans’ first year transition courses. For instance, John Carroll University requires student veterans to participate in a one credit transition course that connects student veterans with their peers, teaches practical and necessary skills to be successful in higher education, and helps them begin career planning so that they can choose an appropriate major and plan a career path. Northern Arizona University is one of the institutions that offers a first-year seminar course entitled *In Supporting the Transitional Resilience of the Student Veteran* where students are asked to compare and contrast the military culture in American society, define concepts of transitional resilience, and follow best practices towards academic success and career development. Illinois State University offers a First Year Learning in Communities (LinC) course, which is a 16 week, one credit veterans’ seminar designed to assist student veterans in their transition to the university community and civilian life. The three themes of the course are: successful transitions within the university, major/minor and career exploration and
campus/community involvement. The aforementioned three examples offer well designed and necessary first year courses for veterans. However, the pilot course designed in this study goes beyond what is currently offered at colleges and universities and focuses on helping student veterans incorporate their personal journey of transition from military to college. The pilot course incorporates scientifically proven psychological measures, such as the Myers Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) and Holland’s Career Inventory, which will help students discover their personality traits and apply them to their learning style, major choice and career aspirations. The pilot course is meant to be complimentary to existing courses and work with existing courses to ensure student veterans’ first year success.

**First year seminar courses**

One way to address the concern for facilitating student transitions into postsecondary education is a common institutional approach known as the first-year seminar (FYS). These types of seminars are not new in higher education. FYS have been offered since the 1980’s as a way to address freshman student transition issues during periods of less than satisfactory enrollment growth (Dwyer, 1989). Sometimes described as a “movement,” the FYS approach advances the belief that continuous contact with first year students centered around the concepts of transition and retention in a classroom will have beneficial effects on student academic success (Mamrick, 2005, Hunter & Linder, 2005, Tampke & Durodoye, 2013). First year seminars focus on improving academic skills, increasing resource awareness, facilitating interactions among faculty and peers, and connecting coursework with career objectives (Sommers, 1997). More recently, freshman year seminars have been redesigned to specifically address transition issues of non-traditional students, advancing students’ institutional knowledge, helping them acquire learning and self-awareness abilities, and integrating them into the campus
community (Boswell, 1996, Hoff, 1996). These courses have been used as a tool in improving student retention and student success.

**Conclusion**

Despite the fact that institutions have responded to student retention issues by implementing programs and services, retention rates have continued to linger at approximately fifty percent (50%) (Seidman, 2005, Swail, 2004, Tinto, 1993, College Board Advocacy & Policy Center, 2012, Ishler & Upcraft, 2005). The research focusing on retention rates reveals that the largest percentage of students leaving the institution occurs during the first year and prior to the second year (Ishler & Upcraft, 2005). Consequently, colleges are realizing that keeping students enrolled is more cost-effective than recruiting new students. Motivated by declining state support, fixation on college rankings or competition, colleges are deciding to focus their efforts on retaining their existing students by investing in first year intervention programs (Noel-Levitz, 2014, Levitz, Noel, & Richter, 1999, Allen & Robbins, 2010, Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

There have been mixed results with regard to how successful first year seminars have been in improving students overall retention rates (Hoff, 1996, Hunter & Linder, 2005, Mamrick, 2005). While there are certainly some positive outcomes in terms of retention for students who have completed a first year seminar program, persistence and retention continue to be issues for institutions of higher education. Accountability and increasing concerns about access are triggering educators to re-think traditional approaches to retention management and look for new strategies (Culver, 2008). It is one thing to identify the problem, but it is another to implement a solution in a way that will substantially improve retention over time (Tinto, 2005). According to
Tinto (2005) first year seminars are not enough to improve institutional retention rates. Tinto (2005) suggests that there are three changes that need to take place for retention programs to be a success. First, programs must relate developmental education and study skills courses to content courses in a coherent way. Second, programs must engage in cooperative teaching strategies that require students to learn together in a consistent collaborative manner. Students who learn together become more academically and socially engaged and persist at a higher rate (Tinto, 2005). Third, programs must link classroom activities to support services on campus because developmental learning communities are most effective when they serve as a passage to other support services (Tinto, 2005). These programs can provide support in these areas by helping student veterans address the challenges of transition and link them to the broader veterans’ community (Kelley et al., 2013). First year programs specifically designed for student veterans need to focus on increasing retention and the success of the student veteran, but much research needs to be done in this area. Since there is so little research on student veterans, research needs to be conducted to ascertain what institutions are doing to help student veterans succeed and what type of measures institutions can take to help student veterans succeed in their first year. First year seminars for veterans need to address the unique needs of this population, such as, transitioning from military to college, transferring military training and experience to succeeding in college and civilian careers, and finding the correct major early in one’s academic career.

**Positionality Statement**

As a professional in the field of education for the last decade I have seen the positive effects of personality type assessment in career planning and educational consulting. In my private practice as an educational psychologist, I work with many college students who are approaching graduation and seeking guidance on graduate schools and/or career consulting.
Many of these clients have chosen a major, but have little idea why they chose it or what to do with it when they graduate. Some of the clients are students who are struggling in their course work and are on the verge of academic probation. I work with a diverse group of clients that include Ivy League students, public and private college students, and veterans. Regardless of which university they attend, there is a similarity to their concerns. Once the clients have completed a personality type evaluation they should have a clear picture on how to improve their study habits and/or what they hope to do when they graduate. My goal was to design a pilot veterans’ success course that can be adopted and adapted by colleges to improve student success and retention rates for college veterans. Since this is a pilot course, and has not been tested at this time, it is designed in a way that it can be adjusted to fit the individual needs of institutions on a case by case basis.

In my role as a professor and academic success specialist I teach and advise traditional and non-traditional students. Specifically, in my role as an academic success specialist, I consult to colleges in the New England area and design and implement psychology of success courses constructed by me and tailored for each specific institution. In both these roles, I quickly realized that some of my students lacked certain skills necessary for success. These skills include areas such as, writing and reasoning skills, research skills, study skills, and critical thinking skills. Knowing how one learns also teaches the individual about areas where they may have difficulties. This knowledge is important in succeeding and progressing in college. In working with non-traditional students, specifically veterans, I have become aware of the lack of specialized programs that help veterans identify their transferable skills and leverage them towards degree completion and a civilian career. Specifically, my veteran students have told me that they have a hard time relating to their non-veteran peers. They have expressed that they are
frustrated when they see other students disregard due dates of assignments and think that many other students do not take their education seriously enough. I consulted with experts in the areas of student veterans’ transition to examine transition issues and potential solutions for those issues.

Based on my experience, I believe that human beings are inherently different and possess different traits that make each of us unique. These traits need to be understood and used as tools to achieve happiness and success. It is imperative to know one’s strengths and be aware of one’s weaknesses. Possessing this awareness of transferable skills and applying them towards college success and career exploration can be the key to success. My experience as a college professor and educational consultant provides me with a unique ability to understand student veterans and still remain objective in conducting this study. However, my own personal biases on the effectiveness of personality trait evaluations and my personal experiences with student veterans over the years in my role as a professor, may have produced some bias that I was not aware of as I designed the pilot course. I have tried to be conscious of these biases and keep in mind that not every veteran is like my past students or former clients and that each college that may potentially adopt my course will have specific needs. This is why the course is designed as a pilot course, so that I can assess what aspects of the course are working and where improvements need to be made. The design of the pilot course is to learn how to address the needs of student veterans and adjust the course material as needed.

**Research study question**

Student veterans face particular challenges not typical of the general student population. Colleges and universities play a vital role in the effort to assist them in achieving their academic and career goals (ACE, 2009). The purpose of this qualitative study was first to explore the
need for a student veterans’ success course. Second, the goal of the study was to assess the kind of success programs/courses that are currently available to student veterans. Third, the goal of the study was to ascertain what should be included in a student success course intended for student veterans and to design a pilot course that offers solutions to what should be included in a veteran’s success course. The objective of this pilot course is to help veterans transition from the military to the classroom and succeed in their educational and civilian career goals. The objective of the pilot course is too see if it is a successful transition course that has the potential to help veterans succeed in their first year of college and to adjust issues that may arise from the course so that it can eventually be offered as a requirement for first year student veterans.

A central question
● What is the need for a student veterans’ success course?

Sub-questions
● What kind of success programs/courses are currently available to student veterans?

● What should be included in a student success course intended for student veterans?

The proposed research questions were examined through the lens of Tinto’s student integration model and Schlossberg’s theory of transitions. These two theories were specifically chosen to address the issues of retention and transition for student veterans. The following section will explain the reasoning for using each of the aforementioned theories and how they apply to student veterans’ success.

Theoretical Framework

This qualitative study first explored the need for a student veterans’ success course. Second, this study investigated what kind of success programs/courses are currently available to
student veterans. Third, this study identified what should be included in a student success course intended for student veterans. The theoretical framework of this study bridges the student integration model and theory of transition.

**Tinto’s Student Integration Model**

Research studies have identified critical factors related to veterans transitioning from the military to college (Griffin & Gilbert, 2011, ACE, 2009, Callahan & Jarrat, 2014, Durdella & Kim, 2012). In an effort to understand student persistence, Tinto’s (1993) model of institutional departure provides a framework for persistence and academic success. The model delineates six components that factor into a student’s decision to persist (transition, goals, institutional experiences, development and integrations, reformulate goals/commitments, outcome). Student veterans manifest these components in issues of financial matters, health concerns and physical disabilities, psychological and adjustment difficulties, family background, skills and abilities, and prior schooling experience (Diramio, 2011). College administrators need to have an awareness of the pre-entry attributes and conceive ways to help alleviate some of the difficulties faced by student veterans who are transitioning to college (Diramio, 2011). Failure to address these student veterans’ attributes may result in an increase of veteran students’ departures prior to graduation (Diramio, 2011).

These factors or attributes are characteristics of a student that are present when the student first considers attending college (Tinto, 1993). These attributes include family background, socioeconomic status, prior schooling, and skills and abilities that all affect a student’s initial objectives before entering college and bring attention to shaping the students’ goals (Tinto, 1993). Tinto (1993) further suggests that academic integration (the student’s academic performance) is keys to persistence of college students. Students who are not able to
make a connection with the academic subsystems of their institutions are likely to leave (Tinto, 1993).

Student veterans bring different attributes to higher education than their traditional student counterparts. Veterans’ attributes include different concerns about financial matters, health concerns and physical disabilities, psychological and adjustment disorders, family background, skills and abilities and prior schooling (Diramio, 2011). Tinto (1993) observed that individual commitments take two major forms, goal and institution. Goal commitment is defined as a student’s dedication to his or her own occupational goals and the determination to achieve the educational objectives required to reach those goals (Tinto, 1993, Diramio, 2010). Specifically, the higher the level of commitment one has to the goal the higher the rate of persistence they will have to achieve the goal. Because of their background student veterans are likely to come to college with specific job-related goals. Based on Tinto’s theory, it would seem that those student veterans that have identified and defined their goals prior to coming to college would have a better rate of persistence than those students without defined goals prior to enrollment.

Another component of the theory is institutional commitment, which represents the students’ loyalty to the college or university that he or she is attending (Tinto, 1993). External commitments contribute an important role in the “departure puzzle”, which has been described as a phenomenon in American higher education where more than 25 percent of students who enter four year institutions depart by the end of their first year (Braxton, 2000). According to Tinto (1993), the level of a student’s commitment to the university plays a role in whether or not they will persist at that university. Student veterans vary in age, some are older and are likely to be married, have children, and have ongoing obligations to the military, while others have only
served a few years and are only two to three years older than their non-veteran peers. Clearly, these external forces affect goals and commitments, thereby further complicating the chances for premature departure from college and may make it difficult for veterans to have a high level of commitment to the institution.

**Peer relations**

Research suggests that the idea of helping students with military backgrounds meet each other on campus and form strong peer ties and meaningful relationships may be related to smooth transitions and adjustment to college (Diramio, 2010, Callahan & Jarrat, 2014, Kirchner et al., 2014). These types of peer connections for student veterans are accordant with Tinto’s model and are referred to in Figure 1 as “Time One” institutional experiences and activities. However, while student veterans may make initial connections with other veterans on campus they may fail to fully transition and integrate with the broader “civilian” student body (Diramio, 2010). Studies on persistence indicate that if a student is unsuccessful in integrating both academically and socially with the broad campus community, he or she is likely to withdraw from the institution (Tinto, 1993, 1997).

Transition 2.0 or T2 in Tinto’s model asserts that some level of social and intellectual integration and membership in academic and social communities must exist as a condition of continued persistence (Tinto, 1993). Figure 1 illustrates this component as the college’s career services unit serving as an important role for integration and development for student veterans, specifically, for civilian career development. By the same token, it is also important to understand how a student veteran who has segregated himself or herself with fellow veterans begins to move forward into the broader campus community. Tinto (1993) makes the connection that the experience of adult students is similar to that of minority students, in that, adult students
may feel marginal to the mainstream of institutional life. Being marginalized from mainstream university life may potentially be challenging for those student veterans that have more outside obligations such as family, jobs and remaining committed to the military.

This qualitative study applies Diramio’s adapted model *Adaptation of Tinto’s Longitudinal Model of Institutional Departure for Student Veterans*, because it is useful for further discussion of student veterans’ persistence and academic success. A graphical representation of the adaptation of Tinto’s model is presented in Figure 2.
Figure 2: Adaptation of Tinto’s Longitudinal Model of Institutional Departure for Student Veterans (Diramio, 2010)

Academic System

**Formal**
- Academic Performance
  - Transition & orientation classes for veterans
  - Learning community
  - Other classes w/peers
  - Vets tutoring vets
- Faculty/Staff Interaction & Mentoring
  - Those w/prior military service

**Informal**
- Emphasize at “Commuter School”
  - Academic Development
    - In Campus Community
      - Student-Faculty Interaction
        - Faculty w/o military service
    - Student-Student Interaction
      - Students w/o military service

**External Commitments**
- Spouse & Children
- Guard or Reserve Duty?

**Campus Career Services**
- What employers want
- “Civilian” version of military skills

**Social Development**
- In Campus Community
  - Peer Group Interaction
    - SVO & Campus Community
  - Individual Integration
    - Join another student org.
    - Campus job (Student worker)
    - Intramural sports

**Intentions**
- Goal & Institutional Commitments
  - Reformulate Goals/Commitments
  - PERSIST or DEPART?

**Outcome**
- Reformulate Goals/Commitments
- PERSIST

**Intentions**
- Goal & Institutional Commitments
  - Reformulate Goals/Commitments
  - PERSIST or DEPART?

**External Commitments**
- Spouse & Children
- Guard or Reserve Duty?
  - Add’l res. since T0?

**Financial Matters**
- Health Concerns & Physical Disabilities
- Family Background
- Skills & Abilities
- Prior Schooling

**Goal & Institutional Commitments**
- Intentions
  - Reformulate Goals/Commitments
  - PERSIST or DEPART?

**External Commitments**
- Spouse & Children
- Guard or Reserve Duty?
  - Add’l res. since T0?

**Intentions**
- Goal & Institutional Commitments
  - Reformulate Goals/Commitments
  - PERSIST or DEPART?

**External Commitments**
- Spouse & Children
- Guard or Reserve Duty?
  - Add’l res. since T0?
Schlossberg Model for Analyzing Human Adaptation to Transition

While research has identified important factors related to transitioning veterans from the military to civilian life and college, Tinto’s model provides a structure for examining veteran students attributes as they relate to student success and persistence. Schlossberg’s transition theory provides a malleable structure to apply to a lifestyle change of this kind. Schlossberg (1981) believes that it is not the transition itself that is of immediate importance, but rather how the transition fits with an individual stage, situation, and style at the time of the transition. For the purposes of the current study, the transition process is the student veteran adjusting from the military to the dual role of civilian and student going to college.

The model presented in Figure 3 asserts three major sets of factors that influence adaptation to transition: (1) the characteristics of the particular transition, including role change (gain or loss), affect (positive or negative), source (internal or external) timing (on-time or off-time), duration (permanent, temporary, or uncertain), and degree of stress (2) the characteristics of the pre and post transition supports and physical settings (3) the characteristics of the individual experiencing the transition, including, psychosocial competence, sex (and sex-role identification), age (and life stage), state of health, race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, value orientation, and previous experience with a transition of a similar nature (Schlossberg, 1981). Schlossberg (1981) defines transition occurring if an event or non-event results in a change in assumptions about oneself and the world and requires change in one’s behavior and relationships. For student veterans this transition is leaving the military life and transitioning into civilian life, specifically going to college.

Adaptation to transition is a process where an individual moves from being totally preoccupied with the transition to integrating the transition into his or her life (Schlossberg,
Veterans go through the process of adaptation to transition when they leave the military and integrate back into civilian life where the structure and routine is different from what they have become accustomed to. Adapting back into civilian life, specifically attending college, is a major transition in a veteran’s life. If the transition is not successful adaptation may not occur and their college experience may not be successful.
Figure 3: A Model for Analyzing Human Adaptation to Transition

(Schlossberg, 1981)
Relevance to the present study

The adaptation of Tinto’s model of student departure for use with student veterans provides a framework for the study. Schlossberg’s model is of particular importance to this study because it takes into consideration strengths and weaknesses based on personal and psychological factors, the social supports available and coping strategies the individual could use to modify the situation, control the meaning of the transition, and manage the stress it may cause (Schlossberg, 1981).

Chapter I Conclusion

Veteran student success and retention are of major concern to institutions of higher education. While there are multiple factors that may influence student success and retention, it seems that an investigation into the transition issues of student veterans warrants further examination. Tinto’s model of departure and Schlossberg’s transition theory were used in designing this research study to assess ways to help veterans identify their transferable skills and leverage them towards degree completion and a career as a civilian. Tinto’s model of departure and Schlossberg’s transition theory was also used as the framework for developing a pilot course for student veterans in their first year of college.
Chapter II: Review of the Literature

Soldiers returning from Afghanistan and Iraq who plan to pursue a college education are facing new and unparalleled challenges rarely faced by their predecessors (Cunningham, 2012). These difficulties are rooted in the social isolation they often feel upon return, mental and physical disabilities, and familial obligations, in spite of the billions of dollars that have been allotted under the new GI Bill (Cunningham, 2012). The combination of all these problems has resulted in veterans showing lower graduation rates from four-year universities (Cunningham, 2012, Planty, Snyder, Kena, & Kemp, 2009). The national average for graduation for students from a four year university has been around 50% - 57% (Planty et al., 2009). The graduation rate for student veterans is an estimated 3% (Cunningham, 2012, Planty et al., 2009).

Today’s GI Bill

In an effort to gain a better understanding of student veterans, it is beneficial to reflect on the historical support of student veterans through the GI Bill. Whereas, the Word War II GI Bill dominates the history of veterans, specifically, student veterans, this is only one example of many in US history (Vacchi & Berger, 2014). Other examples include the Pre-GI Bill era, the WW II era, the Korean War era, the Vietnam era, the Cold War era, and the Post 9/11 era (Vacchi & Berger, 2014). The U.S. government has consistently shown its commitment to veterans through investment in higher education (Griffin & Gilbert, 2012). Educational benefits for veterans grew out of necessity and fear from a country coming out of a great depression and war (Cunningham, 2012). The fear throughout the country from economists and bureaucrats was that with millions of soldiers returning from World War II, the already weak job market would be flooded and generate an even worse depression (Cunningham, 2012, Griffin & Gilbert, 2012).
GI bill benefits became a way to delay veterans’ integration into the job market while at the same time preparing veterans for professional jobs that the country would ultimately need (Altschuler & Blumin, 2009). Altshuler & Blumin (2009) point out an unlikely coalition emerged to shape and pass the bill, combining both New Deal Democrats and conservatives who had passionately opposed Roosevelt’s social-welfare agenda. In other words, the bill was the result of what certain leaders and politicians saw coming, not because there was widespread fear throughout the country that another depression could be coming because of the vets’ return.

Over decades, the GI Bill has evolved from allocating hundreds of dollars to thousands to millions and eventually billions of dollars in educational assistance (Altschuler, 2009). The Post 9/11 GI Bill, the Veterans Educational Assistance Act of 2008, is the most significant increase in educational funding for veterans in decades (Griffin & Gilbert, 2012). The new Bill entitles honorably discharged military men and women to tuition and fees comparable to the most expensive rate of in state tuition at a public college or university in their state, a monthly housing allowance, and a yearly book stipend (Griffin & Gilbert, 2012). Those veterans attending private colleges or public colleges as a non-resident may be eligible for the Yellow Ribbon Program and may be entitled to additional education related costs not covered by the VA, however, in these cases not everyone is eligible for this assistance (www.benefits.va.gov). Institutions of Higher Learning (Degree Granting Institutions) may elect to participate in the Yellow Ribbon Program to make additional funds available for the veterans’ education program without an additional charge to their GI Bill entitlement. These institutions voluntarily enter into a Yellow Ribbon Agreement with the VA and choose the amount of tuition and fees that will be contributed. The VA matches that amount and issues payments directly to the institution (www.benefits.va.gov). Only veterans entitled to the maximum benefit rate, as determined by service requirements, or
their designated transferees may receive this funding. Active duty Servicemembers and their spouses are not eligible for this program. Child transferees of active duty Servicemembers may be eligible if the Servicemember is qualified at the 100 percent rate (www.benefits.va.gov).

According to the Veterans Affairs Performance and Accountability Report (2013) the federal government had invested more than $7.7 billion in education benefits in fiscal year 2011 for 555,000 veterans and their dependents.

To receive benefits under the Yellow Ribbon Program:

- The veteran must be eligible for the maximum benefit rate under the Post-9/11 GI Bill
- The veteran must not be on active duty or a spouse using transferred entitlement
- The school must agree to participate in the Yellow Ribbon Program
- The school must have not offered Yellow Ribbon to more than the maximum number of individuals, as stated in their participation agreement
- The school must certify the students’ enrollment to VA and provide Yellow Ribbon Program information

Veterans may be eligible if they fit the following circumstances:

- The veteran served an aggregate period of 36 months in active duty after Sept. 10, 2001
- The veteran was honorably discharged from active duty for a service-connected disability and you served 30 continuous days after Sept. 10, 2001.
- The veteran dependent eligible for Transfer of Entitlement under the Post-9/11 GI Bill based on the service eligibility criteria listed above (www.benefits.va.gov).

Nevertheless, there are several distinctions for today’s veterans from their post WWII counterparts. In 1947, half of American college students were veterans. Today post 9/11 GI Bill recipients make up only 3% of American undergraduates (Sander, 2012). Today’s student
veterans as a population are difficult to classify. Some have been to college before, some are first time college students, some are married, with families, and others are older than the traditional college student (Sander, 2012). Regardless of their classification, higher education, perhaps more than any other business entity, has a stake in student veterans’ success (Sander, 2012). According to the Department of Labor, the percentage of unemployed veterans in any age category recently increased from 7.7% to 8%, while Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) and Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) veterans’ unemployment exceeded 20% (Lang & Powers, 2011). Veterans without a degree face even more alarming barriers since the unemployment rate for high school graduates is twice that of college graduates (Lang & Powers, 2011). These barriers include but are not limited to low income potential, lack of prospects in the job market and lack of potential resources. According to the College Board (2008) the median income for a college graduate who worked full-time, year round in 2008 was $55,700, $21,900 more than the median income of a high school graduate ("The College Board," 2008). What seems pertinent for this unique population of college students, veterans entering college for the first time or returning to college, is not merely whether they are able to begin college but whether they are able to finish college.

**Transition for student veterans**

Student veterans’ experiences in the military, their transition from a highly structured military environment to a non-structured civilian environment, and their status as returning students who often lack preparation in using academic skills, present difficulties that need additional institutional support (Griffin & Gilbert, 2012). Some veterans enter college with hope for a smoother transition to civilian life (Callahan & Jarrat, 2014, Kingsbury, 2007, Lang &
Powers, 2011). Unfortunately, due to the particular characteristics of this population of incoming students barriers and challenges exist.

The military provides a number of end-of-deployment debriefing opportunities as military members process out of service. The Transition Assistance Program (TAP) provides transitional support for service members, including career counseling, assistance with resume writing, and introduction to other job search resources ("MyArmyBenefits," 2015). The TAP program offerings provide helpful information, but are a last stop before veterans reunite with family and often are not utilized to their full potential (Kelley, et als., 2013). The cultural differences between military and civilian life make for a difficult transition. Reclaiming a civilian identity may seem uncertain and contradictory to the well-designed and executed process that military personnel experience while in the military. Research indicates that student veterans face difficulties when they adjust to civilian life and transition to college (Cook & Kim, 2009, Cate, 2014, Kelley, et als., 2013). These difficulties have been attributed to the issues involved in working with two bureaucracies, that of the military (including the VA), and higher education. While many service members praise TAP for providing information about interviewing and resume writing, some military service members believe that TAP does not fully address the reality of finding a job as they transition to civilian life ("Transition assistance program help," 2015). In addition to the TAP program, service members can use online resources such as Military.com’s Transition Center, which provides information on interviewing, military-friendly companies, and using the GI bill to get an education.

However, the culture and behavioral norms of the military and higher education are so completely different, and former members of the military must quickly learn to navigate through many inconsistencies when transitioning into higher education. Kelley, et als. (2013) Table 1 on
Incongruities Between Military and Academic Cultures provides an explanation of the cultural differences between military and higher education.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cultural Reference</th>
<th>Military</th>
<th>Higher Education</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Structure</td>
<td>Strict chain of command</td>
<td>Loose, collegial</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Authority</td>
<td>Absolute</td>
<td>Relative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Response to authority</td>
<td>Oriented toward obedience to superiors</td>
<td>Oriented toward critical assessment of leadership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching and Learning</td>
<td>Transfer of information through briefings</td>
<td>Knowledge is constructed through experience and discussion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender Stratification</td>
<td>Heavily weighted toward the masculine</td>
<td>More egalitarian-gender neutral values espoused</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community Cohesion</td>
<td>Based on group loyalty and conformity</td>
<td>Based on varied interests and individuality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sense of Purpose</td>
<td>Mission is given, mission is accomplished</td>
<td>Discover your own path</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Norms</td>
<td>Conservative</td>
<td>Liberal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institutional Norms</td>
<td>Rooted in history and tradition</td>
<td>Rooted in history and tradition</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the military, transitions come with specific labels, training, and support called standard operating procedures. Examples of these labels are illustrated in Kelly, et al's (2013) table 1.

The transition to higher education is much less directed. Student veterans must quickly learn to
negotiate the complexities of their benefits, apply and be accepted to an institution of their choice, and register for courses in an often highly unstandardized environment (Kelley, et al., 2013). While some institutions have started to take initiatives to make themselves friendlier for incoming veterans there is a great imbalance on how student veterans are served. Many student veterans have difficulty maneuvering through the unstructured environment of higher education, as well as, fitting into their new environment, because they have lost their social support they were so used to having in the military.

Diversity of the student veteran

Student veterans are a highly diverse group. There are few generalizations about this group, other than the shared aspiration many have that more education will make their lives and their families lives better (Lighthall, 2012). Because of the diverse nature of this group it is difficult for college faculty and staff to understand the best way to approach this population. One of the main barriers that student veterans experience is that they can feel very alone on a college campus (Lighthall, 2012). Veterans have spent several years completely tied to some type of social system, whether it was a brigade, battalion, company, platoon, squad, team or battle buddy, then all of a sudden they are no longer attached to those systems and are left completely vulnerable (Lighthall, 2012). With a loss of structure and comradery, student veterans are thrown into an unfamiliar social system that bears no resemblance to the military, has no clear chain of command, and is made up of students and faculty who cannot fathom the student veterans’ experiences, resulting in an alienating environment for many of them (Lighthall, 2012, Cunningham, 2012). A study by Indiana University’s National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), a survey of 11,000 veterans, found that first year veterans were less engaged in reflective learning, less engaged with faculty, and perceived less campus support
than their non-veteran peers (National Survey of Student Engagement, 2010). Student engagement represents the amount of time and students apply to their studies and how the institution utilizes its resources and organizes learning opportunities for students (NSSE, 2015). The National Survey of Student Engagement (2015) collects information at hundreds of four-year colleges and universities about first-year and senior students’ participation in programs and activities that institutions provide for their learning and personal development. The results provide an estimate of how undergraduates spend their time and what they gain from attending college. These reports compare students’ responses with those of students at self-selected groups of comparison institutions. The survey items on *The College Student Report* represents empirically confirmed “good practices” in undergraduate education. Reflecting behaviors by students and institutions that are associated with desired outcomes of college ("About NSSE," 2015). The NSSE (2010) findings about student veterans support the notion that colleges and universities need to make a concentrated effort in identifying and addressing the needs of student veterans. In doing so, it seems that colleges and universities may want to focus on providing services and programs that help veterans transition from the military to academia.

Student veterans have reported trouble fitting in, loss of the social support they had in the military, and cultural differences from traditional college students and higher education in general (Kelley et al., 2013, Kim & Cole, 2013, Rumann & Hamrick, 2010). Weber (2012) investigated the emotional and mental health issues related to student departure in one of the first studies that examined the effect of retention of veterans. In a sample of 490 student veterans and service members, including 323 who had been deployed at least once post 9/11, Weber (2012) found that social support and cultural consistency were primary factors that contributed to student veteran retention. The results of this study support the need for comprehensive training
programs for faculty and staff that help higher education personnel understand military/veteran transition issues (Weber, 2012).

The context for transition from military services to college involves the individual, close family and friends, and the campus community (Diramio, 2011). Campus communities address this by becoming veteran-friendly campuses where programs and staff are put in place specifically to assist with transitions between college and military (Diramio, 2010). The definition for “veteran friendly” institutions varies a great deal. Campus culture and location, academic environment, student body, size and composition, and location all play a role in characterizing “veteran friendly” institutions (ACE, 2012). The American Council of Education study, From Soldier to Student (Cook & Kim, 2009), uncovers some interesting facts about the services colleges and universities provide for students veterans. From Soldier to Student: Easing the Transition of Service Members on Campus is one of the large scale quantitative reports that providing extensive data that looks at programs and services that public and private institutions offer to assist student veterans pursuing their postsecondary education. Findings are based on data from 723 institutions, along with focus group meetings with student veterans. Some of the findings of the report are as follows:

- More than half of respondent institutions (57%) currently provide programs and services specifically designed for service members and veterans, and nearly 60% of respondents indicated that such programs and services were part of their long term strategic plan.
- Public four-year (74%) and public two-year (66%) institutions are more likely to have programs specifically designed for military veterans than private nonprofit colleges and universities (36%).
- Fewer than half of the schools with military and/or veterans’ programs offer opportunities for faculty and administrators to acquire information about the unique needs of military student populations, existing campus resources, and promising practices to create a positive campus environment (Cook & Kim, 2009).
Mcbain, Kim, Cook & Snead (2012) performed a follow up study, *From Soldier to Student II* study found that substantially more institutions now provide programs and services specifically designed for military service members and veterans than in 2009 when the first study was released. More than half of all responding institutions (62 percent in 2012, a slight increase from 2009’s 57 percent) currently provide programs for military service members and veterans, and approximately 71 percent of all responding colleges and universities (versus 57 percent in 2009) indicated that providing programs and services for military service members and veterans is a part of their long-term strategic plan (Mcbain, Kim, Cook, & Snead, 2012). Mcbain et als. (2012) *The From Soldier to Student II* study further finds that sixty-four percent of all responding colleges and universities reported engaging in recruiting efforts specifically designed to attract military service members and veterans. Lastly, the study also found that almost all campuses that have services for veterans and service members offer some type of student services or academic support designed specifically for these students (Mcbain, et als., 2012). Cook & Kim (2009) found that 57 percent of the 723 institutions surveyed indicate that they provide services and programs specifically for student veterans but there is a great disparity in how institutions serve veterans, the variety of services and programs offered, and where the services and programs belong within the administrative infrastructure. Based on this survey of 723 institutions, the programs that exist seem to provide certain services like help with financial aid and registration but they are limited and institutions do not appear to have figured out how to address the needs of the unique population of student veterans (Cook & Kim, 2009, Griffin & Gilbert, 2012). Based on the survey, it appears that there may be a need for specific courses or programs that are designed especially for easing student veterans transitions to college and helping them succeed in their first year.
Misconceptions about student veterans

The majority of the information available on the preferences and trends of student veterans and active duty military students comes from surveys and informal accounts (Callahan & Jarrat, 2014). For instance, the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA) research and policy institute partnered with Insidetrack (Insidetrack is a consulting organization specializing in student success) to measure the success of student veterans and active duty military students (NASPA, 2013). According to interviews conducted in partnership with NASPA and InsideTrack (2013), several misconceptions about student veterans were found:

Myth #1: Student soldiers and veterans have lower success rates than other adult populations. Generally, institutions rarely assess which of their current students are service members or veterans, apart from looking at which students are using DOD or VA funding to pay for their education. Therefore, data collected by institutions is not an accurate portrayal of student veteran success rates, resulting in a disparity between figures of success rates. The main issue in this disparity is that at the present time there is no way to track student veterans separately from other students and current tracking methods do not take into account issues of redeployment or relocation.

Myth #2: Student soldiers and veterans are less well prepared to succeed in college than other adult student populations. Interviews with those that work directly with students to support their success reveal that active duty military and student veterans are often the best prepared academically. The difficulty lies in finding ways to help these students translate the skills and attitudes they have developed through their military service into the academic setting. The majority of student veterans were knowledgeable in establishing a goal and identifying the
steps necessary to achieve it. The students did need guidance in leveraging these skills toward earning a degree and preparing themselves for a civilian career.

**Myth #3: Student soldiers and veterans are resistant to support.** While it may be a fact that the military encourages self-reliance, it also promotes teamwork and mutual trust. The findings of the study suggest that the student veterans are just as likely to engage with support services as other students when engagement with these services does not carry a negative connotation and is presented in a timely fashion with clear expectations. The issues, then, are with support services themselves, not student veterans. Meaning that support services should be incorporated into the first year curriculum instead of having student veterans seek services themselves, including transition services, as well as, academic resources and financial aid resources.

**Myth #4: Student soldiers and veterans are proactive and direct in expressing dissatisfaction with their educational experience.** Findings revealed that the majority of student veterans have experienced a number of situations where they were expected to fulfill their duties without complaint, regardless of the poor conditions or undesirable circumstances. Subsequently, they are sometimes reluctant to advocate for themselves or question authority. These support professionals indicate that a number of student veterans need guidance on when it’s appropriate to express their concerns and how to raise these concerns in a constructive way to meet their educational goals.

The aforementioned NASPA study certainly sheds some light onto the issues that institutions need to address in an effort towards understanding student veterans. However, even though attention is being paid to enhancing the experiences and educational outcomes of student veterans, this is still an area of research that is very much limited (Callahan & Jarrat, 2014). It
would appear that real progress in institutional support can only be made by carefully analyzing the factors that promote veteran students’ college success.

**Retention**

In the present competitive educational market, institutions are paying attention towards retention efforts and student success (Levitz & Noel, 2000). Noel-Levitz is a recognized leader in higher education consulting. Noel-Levitz is committed to helping institutions meet their goals for enrollment and student success by supporting the notion that the success an institution and of its students are inseparable (Levitz & Noel, 2000, Tinto, 2005). Institutional budgets are tightening, pools of potential students are shrinking, competition for all resources are increasing and stakeholders are holding institutions accountable, which can only mean one thing, schools that put students first will thrive just as their students will (Levitz & Noel, 2000, Culver, 2008, Ishler & Upcraft, 2005). Student retention is the main indicator for assessing the success of the student, and accordingly the institution. Retention is not the primary goal, but the best gauge that the institution is meeting its goal of student satisfaction and success (Levitz & Noel, 2000, Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005, Tampke & Durodoye, 2013). Successful retention management emerges with deliberately making the areas of student learning, growth and development the priority for the institution (Levitz & Noel, 2000). It seems clear that institutions need to make calculated efforts to meet the expectations of their incoming students. Levitz & Noel (2000) suggest that figuring out what individual students need early on is the key to students’ success.

The main issue that institutions face is implementation of retention strategies (Tinto, 2005). Identifying an effective action is one thing, putting the plan into action and executing a program is another and takes time to make a significant change in the area of retention (Tinto, 2005). Furthermore, far too many university faculty members see the issue of student retention
as primarily a reflection of student abilities and motivation (Tinto, 2005). Tinto (2005) postulates that faculty have the misconception that only poor students cause retention problems is wrong. Specifically, if faculty believes this assertion, they do not associate their actions with a solution to student retention and see the problem as the business of student affairs professionals (Tinto, 2005). This suggests that faculty need to view retention from a broad spectrum as a university issue not an issue faced by students who perform poorly. Faculty needs to further understand that students depart from institutions for reasons other than poor academics. While the research is not clear as to why some student veterans are not completing their degrees, it seems clear that issues of transition from the military to college does exist. It would appear that there needs to be institutional initiative to support the student veteran population early in their college careers. The pilot course developed in this thesis is part of that initiative. Faculty education is a large component of the success of veteran students and initiatives are slowly being taken to educate faculty on the needs of this population but more needs to be done.

Problems of retention programs

The problem actually lies in the fact that the majority of retention programs are solely run by student affairs and not the faculty (Tinto, 2005). In an effort for institutions to be successful in supporting student veterans, faculty must be part of the initiative that plans for the success of student veterans. The solution lies in a broader educations effort of all institutional personnel including the faculty (Tinto, 2005). The restructuring then, can be said to be based on the institution as a whole, not solely in terms of student retention efforts. Therefore, programs must systematically relate developmental education and study skills courses to content courses (Tinto, 2005, Levitz & Noel, 2000). This type of relationship makes it possible to apply skills learning in developmental education courses to what is being learned in the content specific course. The
proposed pilot course will be taught by a qualified faculty member with a background in psychology and knowledge and experience of working with this population and have institutional support. The hope is that with institutional support for the proposed pilot course and the involvement of the university as a whole, student veterans will feel connected and understood in the institution and retention and student success will improve.

Additionally, addressing the academic and social adjustment of students to their campus environment has been associated with higher levels of commitment to the institution (Grant-vallone, Reid, Umali, & Pohlert, 2003). Grant-vallone, Reid, Umali & Pohlert (2003) found that both social and academic adjustment were predictors of commitment. Specifically, those students who were more adjusted to academic coursework were more committed to the goal of completing their degree. Therefore, academic adjustment appears to be an important factor for university commitment (Grant-vallone et al., 2003).

**First year experience courses**

One way institutions facilitate student success in the first year and address students’ transition into postsecondary education are first year seminars. Institutions that have initiated programs that help students adjust to college do so with the belief that first year experience programs will improve student learning and persistence (Cavote & Frye, 2004). First year experience (FYE) course objectives primarily include improving academic skills, increasing resource awareness, promoting interactions among faculty and peers, and connecting coursework with career objectives (Cavote & Frye, 2004). Generally, FYE courses concentrate on students’ educational experiences by advancing students’ institutional knowledge, increasing students’ self-awareness, and integrating the students into the campus community (Caote & Frye, 2004, Tinto, 1993).
Clark and Cundiff (2011) conducted a study of a three hour extended orientation course. Extended orientation courses are used by some institutions instead of a FYS. These courses range from a few hours to a weekend, depending on the institutional format. Clark and Cundiff (2011) compared the academic success outcomes of a cohort of students completing the FYS with the outcomes for similar students who had not enrolled in the course. The findings implied a positive relationship between completing the FYS and retention, but there was no statistically significant relationship to GPA (Clark & Cundiff, 2011).

Barton and Donahue (2009) explored the effects of an FYS course compared to less intensive success-oriented first year interventions. The student success analysis was concentrated on GPA and retention. The findings showed that there was no connection between completion of the FYS and persistence to the second year, but there was a positive connection between a higher GPA for the students in the FYS course compared to the students in less intensive interventions (Barton & Donahue, 2009).

The research in the area of the efficacy of FYE courses is inconclusive and rigorous assessment of first-year seminars is still a work in progress (Goodman & Pascarella, 2006). Cavote & Frye (2004) examined academic performance and retention differences between first-term students who completed a subject based first year experience course (n =381) and comparable students (n=332) who did not enroll in a FYE course. They looked at actual grade point averages and re-enrollment rates across three semesters and found that differences in academic performance and persistence were not related to the completion of a FYE course. On the contrary, Tampke & Durodoye (2013) explored the efficacy of first year seminars and learning communities for undecided undergraduate students considered “at risk” for lower academic performance and lower retention rates than students who have declared majors at
University of North Texas. The preliminary data suggests that there are better outcomes, in terms of GPA and academic standing, for students participating in the intervention than in the control group (Tampke & Durodoye, 2013).

Keup (2005) explored the relationship between three curricular interventions: first year seminars, service learning, and learning communities. The findings from descriptive analyses showed that there are multiple positive relationships between these three interventions (Keup, 2005). The largest and most consistent positive relationships from the descriptive analyses were found with measures of students’ interaction with faculty. Furthermore, findings suggest that service-learning may be a particularly notable means of facilitating interaction with faculty (Keup, 2005). These finding suggest that first year seminars, learning communities and particularly service-learning initiatives may be helpful in overcoming aspects of students’ adjustments in their first year. Service learning is a pedagogy that connects community service and academics so that each strengthens and transforms the other (Simonet, 2008). Keup’s (2005) supports the notion that students’ who are actively involved in the learning process are more likely to learn and more likely to stay at their institution (Tinto, 1998, Simonet, 2008). These findings further support the perception that student veterans’ relationship and connection to faculty may provide a positive impact on retention and success.

As previously mentioned the research on the efficacy of FYE is at best inconclusive. In an effort to answer the question of how much attitudes and needs of college freshman change after receiving targeted intervention directed at success in college, Noel-Levitz (2014) compared pre and post survey data from more than 10,000 first year undergraduate undergraduates in 2013. Students completed an initial motivational survey at the start of their first year, received interventions during their first semester, and then completed a follow up survey at the end of
their first semester. The study explored non-cognitive freshman attitudes that may pose barriers or opportunities as students’ transition to college. Findings suggest the following:

- After one semester of classes and interventions, freshmen in this study grew the most in their academic confidence, in their tolerance of other people’s opinion, and in their sociability.

- In the middle of their freshman year, the largest demand for services among freshman respondents from four-year private and public institutions was for individual career planning discussions on the qualifications and salaries of certain occupations.

- The most significant unfulfilled student requests by the midpoint of the freshman year were requests for financial guidance, requests for career services, and requests for academic support (Noel-Levitz, 2014).

This Noel-Levitz (2014) study supports Tinto’s (2005) assertion that it is not enough to simply design a freshman program and hope that it helps retention. In order for an institution to truly improve their retention rates and student persistence rates they must include all aspects of the institution (Tinto, 2005). This is specifically important due to demands for accountability and growing concerns about the unprecedented changes of the student veterans that colleges and universities are encountering. While the First Year Experience or First Year Seminar model has been successful with traditional students, it needs to be adjusted for this particular population (Kurzynski, 2015). Research suggests that student veterans need help maneuvering their way through the institution, re-learning academic skills, familiarizing themselves with campus resources, and translating military service (Kurzynski, 2015, Osborne, Arndt, & Coleman, 2015).

Colleges and universities are now being challenged with the problem of the rising attrition rates among minorities, under-prepared adults and veterans (Brown, 2002). The majority of colleges are failing to track the performance and retention rates of their students who
are veterans or active duty members resulting in a lack of understanding of retention issues with this population (Fain, 2012). What we know is that there is an inpouring of student veterans entering colleges at the present time and that this number will only continue to rise. We also know that this is a new population of college students and institutions need to develop veteran specific programs and success courses to help student veterans succeed.

**Student veterans’ needs – what matters?**

The reality that is faced by the majority of veterans who use their GI Bill benefits to complete their post-secondary education is that they fail to obtain their degree within a decade (Troutman & Andrews, 2014, Sander, 2012, ACE, 2009). One of the reasons for low retention of student veterans is arbitrary choice of college major (Troutman & Andrews, 2014). Like their traditional student counterparts, veterans can be too quick to choose a major that is popular with their peers, in spite of the fact that such a major has limited career opportunities (Troutman & Andrews, 2014). Student veterans also tend to choose majors that prepare them for a civilian career that is most closely related to their former military occupation, even if it was work that they did not particularly enjoy (Troutman & Andrews, 2014). The result is a less than favorable choice of a course of study and career that leads to underemployment or unemployment.

Trourman and Andrews (2014) identify ways in which institutions can help veterans achieve better outcomes by connecting with career counselors early in their college experience in a seven step process:

*Step 1: Investigate how a military occupation can translate to various civilian careers*

Student veterans need to evaluate how their military occupations can translate to a civilian career.

*Step 2: Help student veterans ‘CLEP’ as much as they can*
Career counselors should know how CLEP (College Level Examination Program) can be applied to military experience. These exams can provide veterans with credits needed for an academic concentration or broader requirements. High performance on CLEP exams may also be used as a guide for career direction and major choice.

**Step 3: Uncover aptitudes and interests that returning veterans may overlook**

Assessments such as the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator and the Strong Interest Inventory can help returning veterans understand their personality types, major choice and learning preferences.

**Step 4: Help student veterans explore labor-market factors in the career decision**

Career counselors need to show student veterans how to research the marketability of various majors and assess the market demands of fields of interest.

**Step 5: Encourage veterans to choose a college major as early as possible**

Post-secondary counselors should encourage returning veterans to choose a major as soon as possible in order to prepare themselves for their career choice.

**Step 6: Help veterans find internships tied to their major and choice of occupation**

Student veterans can benefit from guidance on how to present themselves for internships. For example, avoiding military jargon and representing their skills in a way that civilian hiring managers will be able to relate to.

**Step 7: Prompt veteran students to start their job search early on**

Veterans should be encouraged to start their job search early in the final year of their education. Career counselors should take an active role in helping student veterans in their job search endeavors. The proposed pilot course will help students develop their career aspirations from the first day through self-analysis and exploration of interests and goals. By developing a
career and goal plan in the pilot course, student veterans will be on their way to obtaining a civilian career early in their academic careers.

While Troutman & Andrews (2014) make important suggestions in their seven step approach, the issue still remains that institutions of higher education are not implementing solutions such as the one described above. Efforts need to be made to help student veterans succeed, graduate and obtain civilian employment.

**Current programs serving student veterans populations**

At the present time there is great disparity in institution’s programs addressing the needs of student veterans (Snead & Baridon, 2010). The two largest areas of emphasis are new programs and services for student veterans and marketing and outreach strategies to attract them (Sneed & Baridon, 2010). However, these efforts still need improvement to serve this unique population. *From Soldier to Student: Easing the transition of service members on campus* (2010) has identified five specific areas of that need improvement: (1) assisting military students with their transition to the college environment. Only 22 percent of postsecondary institutions with specific programs/services for military students and veterans report transition assistance; (2) providing professional development to faculty and staff on the transitional needs of military students. About two out of five schools that serve military students and veterans provide training opportunities for faculty and staff to assist students with their transitional issues; (3) training staff to meet the needs of military students with brain injuries and other disabilities. While most surveyed institutions imply that they serve disabled veterans, many of them provide services by working through the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) for their entire campus, instead of a program dedicated specifically towards veterans; (4) streamlining campus administrative procedures for veterans returning from military deployments. Only 22 percent of institutions
with programs and services for military students with disabilities such as brain injuries and 33 percent have staff trained specifically to assist veterans with other physical disabilities; (5) providing opportunities for veterans to connect with peers. Only 32 percent of institutions with services for veterans and military personnel have organizations specifically for these students.

**Literature review conclusions**

Because of the sparse literature on student veterans’ success and retention, it appears that institutions are beginning to have specific programs designed exclusively for student veterans’ success. However, institutions are only in the preliminary stages of understanding the very specific needs of veterans. Based on this literature review, there is a clear need for a student veterans’ transition course, as well as, a deeper understanding and analysis of programs that will enhance the success of student veterans in their first year of college. It seems clear that the numbers of student veterans entering post-secondary institutions will continue to increase. It seems equally clear that institutions are not fully prepared to deal with this influx of students and specific success programs that are proven to work have yet to be designed. This literature review supports the notion that the veteran experience in higher education has yet to be effectively understood in the educational arena. Furthermore, this literature review supports the need for more research in the area of existing programs that attempt to improve the student veteran experience, as well as, the need for new program and course development.
Chapter III: Research Design

Rationale for the Study

As illustrated in Chapter Two, the existent literature provides approaches to student veterans’ transition courses and some limited explanations of existing programs for student veterans. It seems clear that there is in fact, a need for an understanding of what elements have been successful in student veterans’ transition courses to date. A greater understanding of these elements will lead to an ability to assess student veterans’ transition courses success on student veterans’ success in higher education.

Research study question

The purpose of this qualitative study was first to assess the need for a student veterans’ success course. The second goal of this study was to review what kinds of success programs/courses are currently available to student veterans. The third goal of the study was to ascertain what should be included in a student success course for student veterans and design a pilot course that helps veterans transition from the military to the classroom and succeed in their educational and civilian career goals. Accordingly the underlying research question for this critical theory exploratory case study analysis is “What is the need for a student veterans’ success course?” This question was further examined using the following sub-questions:

- What kind of success programs/courses are currently available to student veterans?
- What should be included in a student success course intended for student veterans?
Critical theory is based on challenging the status quo (Ponterotto, 2005). It is the most recent theoretical development and most critical (Butin, 2010). This paradigm is established on the notion of liberation and metamorphosis, where the researcher’s proactive values are at the core of the task, purpose, and research methods (Ponterotto, 2005). Critical theorist reality is framed within a social-historical context, wherein, the conceptualization of reality and events are within power relations (Ponterotto, 2005). Critical theorists hope that their value biases influence the research process and outcome (Ponterotto, 2005). This framework inspires change and transformation (Ponterotto, 2005). This study has identified an existing gap in the literature between what veterans need to be successful students and what is already available to them. The researcher investigated the need for a student veterans’ success course by examining the history of veterans returning to school and their success rate of completion and questioned whether what is offered is truly benefitting veterans. Lastly, the researcher proposed a pilot course that hopes to transforms the student veterans’ first year experience.

A critical framework addressed the aforementioned problem of practice and ascertained the need for a student veterans’ success course at military friendly colleges. A critical framework is important because a key outcome of this perspective is insight and an impetus for change (Butin, 2010). The purpose of this study was to assess the need for a student veterans’ success course and gain insight into existing programs, examine what kinds of programs and courses are currently available to student veterans, investigate what should be included in such a course and propose a pilot course that could be adopted by colleges and universities to improve veteran students’ success and retention rates.
**Role of the Researcher**

Due to this critical framework, the investigator, Karina Money, was the primary instrument for data collection, verification and analysis (Creswell, 2012). Critical ethnographies are a type of ethnographic research wherein the researcher is interested in advocating for the emancipation of groups marginalized in our society (Creswell, 2012). While student veterans may not be marginalized by society, they are a minority population on college campuses that requires a greater understanding as a subculture (ACE, 2010, Characteristics of Student Veterans/ VA Campus Toolkit handout, 2014). Critical researchers position themselves to be self-aware of their role and identify their biases and values (Creswell, 2012). The researcher is a faculty member and educational and career consultant. As stated in the positionality statement, the researcher has extensive experience teaching student veterans and working with student veterans on an individual basis and designing and implementing a first year success program for non-traditional students, as well as having professional affiliation with student veterans groups and organizations. This personal frame of reference allowed the researcher to further inquire with experts in the field of student veterans’ affairs and gain an understanding of existing programs for student veterans, with the anticipation of effectively answering each research question, while being conscious of certain biases that the researcher may have because of her professional experience.

The goal of the research was to explore the essential components that need to be included in a veterans’ success course. This was achieved by interviewing experts in the area of student veterans’ transitional course design and examining existing student veterans’ success programs in ten colleges, exploring their benefits and assessing gaps that will contribute in enhancing current practices for working with student veterans. The qualitative study, specifically, a
constructivist exploratory case study design, provides an opportunity for deep insight into the problem of practice because it: (1) explains complex causal links in real-life interventions (2) describes the real-life context in which the intervention has occurred (3) describes the intervention itself (4) explores those situations in which the intervention being evaluated has no clear set of outcomes (Yin, 1984).

**Research Design**

Based on the problem of practice and research questions in this study, an exploratory case study design was selected for the topic. Qualitative studies allow for the exploration and investigation of complex issues (Creswell, 2012). The case study is most frequently associated with the exploratory cases study (Scholtz & Tietje, 2002). Exploratory case studies help gain insight into the structure of a phenomenon to develop hypotheses, models, or theories (Scholtz & Tietje, 2002). In addition, an exploratory study is very similar to a pilot study, in that, the research design and data collection methods are usually not specified in advance (Scholtz & Tietje, 2002). Case studies investigate contemporary real life experience through detailed contextual analysis of a limited number of events or conditions and their relationships (Creswell, 2012, Yin, 1984). Qualitative methodology is unlike quantitative analysis which observes large patterns of detail at the macro level on the basis of frequency of occurrence.

For this study, the researcher believed that there was limited research that looks at student success programs specifically designed for student veterans in their first year of college. Accurate data on postsecondary academic outcomes of today’s student veterans has been very difficult to find. The inconsistent methods of collecting this type of information has led to confusion about the completion rates of student veterans in higher education and factors that lead to student veterans success or failure in their first year (Cate, 2014). A qualitative approach
allowed for an understanding and representation of the current student veterans’ success programs that may exist at top ranking military friendly institutions. This approach provided a deeper understanding of the implications of these programs and sought to make recommendations for a pilot first year student veterans course that cannot be provided in a quantitative study.

Participants

After researching qualified professionals in the field of veteran’s student affairs, three experts were selected for participation. Experts in the area of student veterans’ transition, specifically, student veterans’ transition course design were selected as participants in this study. Experts were identified through professional groups on linkedin and through national professional organizations and representative of geographical locations, as well as both public and private institutions throughout the United States. Experts were selected from a public university in the Northeast, a private university in the Midwest and a public university on the West coast. For the purposes of this study an expert was defined as an individual who meets the following criteria:

- Director of Veterans Affairs at an accredited institution
- Has developed, implemented and taught a veterans’ student transition course
- Has been a leader in student veterans’ transition research

Experts were recruited via email and asked to participate in a phone interview. Semi-structured interviews were then conducted with the identified experts permitting for a discussion of issues that they regard as significant relating to student veterans’ transition to college, factors that contribute to student veterans’ success and student veterans’ transition courses. Yin (2009)
 posits that the case study researcher is interested in “facts as well as opinions” (p. 107), thereby interviews are inclined to be semi-structured and detailed. When conducting semi-structured interviews, researchers construct a loose interview protocol using open-ended questions and follow-up questions for clarification purposes (Arminio, Grabosky, & Lang, 2015). The interview questions were worded in a way that provided the respondent flexibility in answering the questions. Some of the questions constructed in this study were “Do you offer one or more courses intended to assist veterans’ transition to College? If yes, who developed such a course? What is the process to have the course approved? Who approves the course? Do you have results you can share?” “What type of transition issues do you find the veterans at your college tend to experience? Are these kept track of? By whom? How? What is done with this information?” Other questions were more open ended and factored in the experts’ opinions. Examples of these types of questions are as follows: “What are the most important aspects of the institution for helping veterans succeed? Follow up: “what have been the main challenges your institution has faced, is facing, will face in helping student veterans?” “Can you please define student veterans’ success at your institution?” “Is there anything you would like to see in a veteran’s transition course in addition to what is being offered in your institution?”

For this study, a document review was conducted by looking at publicly available information about student veterans’ programs and courses at colleges and universities. These documents included, but were not limited to university web sites, student handbooks, marketing materials, and campus veterans service brochures. Colleges and universities were selected from the Military Times 2015 Best for Vets list, recognized by the military as a comprehensive reliable source of information for veterans returning to college, considered in conjunction with guidelines offered by the Council for the Advancement and Support of Education (CAEL) and the Veterans
Administration (VA). Institutions that are highlighted through coverage by news media and in news articles were also considered.

The Military Times offers information for veterans about education, jobs for vets, career exploration and veteran specific news and reports. The survey based ranking of programs requires schools to document the services, special rules, accommodations and financial incentives offered to military and veteran students and to describe aspects of veteran culture on campus (www.newscenter.sdsu.edu). The Military Times invited colleges and universities across the country to fill out a rigorous survey, about their operations involving current and former service members and their families. School responses were evaluated based on what veterans indicated as important to them, as well as Military Times expert opinion. Military Times also factored in U.S. Department of Education statistics used to track student success and academic quality (Military Times, 2014). Schools were evaluated in five categories: university culture, academic quality, student support, academic policies and financial aid (Military Times, 2014). The Military Times list is the most comprehensive list out there for veterans to use as they are looking into potential college programs. It contains the most detailed school by school data on veteran students’ academic success, including graduation, retention, persistence and course completion rates (www.newscenter.sdsu.edu).

Military Times 2013 survey reported that enrollment data and military enrollment figures were measured similarly and applied to service members and veterans actually tracked by a school, not just by using student military-related benefits (military time, 2014). The schools that were chosen for this study were selected because of their retention rates, transition course, and veteran specific programs, as well as, through recommendations of experts.
Data Collection

“What is the need for a student veterans’ success course?” This question will be further examined using the following sub-questions:

- What kind of success programs/courses are currently available to student veterans?
- What should be included in a student success course intended for student veterans?

The three experts were contacted via email. Semi-structured interviews were scheduled at the convenience of both the researcher and participant. An informed consent form was emailed to each expert. Interviews were conducted by phone and lasted about 90 minutes. All materials provided by experts, such as course syllabi, administrative records, reports and presentations were reviewed after they were received by the student investigator. The student investigator transcribed the interviews. Once the interviews were complete and initial findings were identified, an executive summary of the interview findings was emailed to each participant, participants were then asked to review the summary as part of a member checking exercise. Participants were then asked to email comments or concerns to the student investigator no later than one week after the receipt of this summary. A safeguard was used to protect the storage of the data. The data was stored on the student investigator’s personal computer and an external drive – both password protected. Participants were asked if they would like their identity to remain confidential. All three participants chose to have their identity revealed and gave permission for their names, title and expertise to be identified in the study.

Creswell (2012) posits that a valuable source of information in qualitative research can be documents. Documents are defined as being composed of public and private records that qualitative researchers acquire about a site (Creswell, 2012). In addressing the research question,
‘What is the need for student veterans’ success course?’ interviews were conducted with experts in the field of student veterans’ transition. To address the sub-question ‘What kind of success programs/courses are currently available to student veterans?’ a document review in the form of public information was obtained from college and university websites, as well as, public materials available to prospective student veterans was reviewed. To address the sub-question ‘What should be included in a student success course intended for student veterans?’ expert interviews combined with existing student veterans’ course syllabi provided by the experts were reviewed from each of the three universities along with existing policy literature and recommendations from the experts was used to design the pilot course in this study.

The data for the document review was gathered from the Military Times (2014) 2015 Best for Vets list was examined by the researcher and the schools with the top ranking and highest graduation rate were chosen for further review. Schools from the Military Times list were then be further narrowed down to ten schools based on mention in research articles as having highly successful student veterans’ success programs. Each of the ten schools were evaluated by looking at the schools’ website, specifically, their existing veterans’ success programs and/or courses and how they measure up to criteria established by CAEL as described in the Site Selection section.

Curriculum Design

One of the purposes of this study was to design a pilot course for first year student veterans based on expert interviews and the document review. In order to successfully design a pilot course, the researcher reviewed numerous sources about curriculum design and enrolled in and completed the Magna Publications certification on How to design courses to enhance student
veterans’ success? Magna Publications provides the higher education community with online seminars, publications, and other products that support faculty and staff development. Magna Publications was one of the first to produce online seminars with live streaming video and offer 20 Minute Mentor, which is a focused, intensive program designed to address the needs of faculty.

A review of best practice standards found that there are certain factors that are important in curriculum design: understanding why, defining goals and objectives, designing the plan, identifying assessment methods and understanding and using your results. Based on the Program-Based Review and Assessment Tools and Techniques for Program Improvement, Office of Academic Planning and Assessment, University of Massachusetts, Amherst, these five factors help shape the student experience (Stassen, Doherty, & Poe, n.d.). Understanding “why” involves an overview of assessment. The purpose of assessment is to figure out what students should be learning and in what ways are they growing. This first portion of curriculum design answers the questions: what are you trying to do? How well are you doing it? How can you improve? The second factor is defining goals and objectives. Goals and objectives should incorporate what the course design is trying to accomplish. The third factor is designing the plan. This phase focuses on how the course address the goals and objectives. Within this phase, curriculum mapping can be a useful tool to identify how the goals and objectives will be met throughout the course and that the assessments that are set up are designed to meet those goals and objectives. The fourth factor is identifying assessment methods. Assessment methods should coincide with the course objectives and student perceptions. Examples of assessment methods include, weekly reflective writing assignments, group projects, student presentations, papers and learning measures. The fifth factor is understanding and using your results. The goal
is to have a well-grounded course that serves as an example and guides future revisions and improvements to the material. Given the proposed course in this study is a pilot course this is imperative to determine its success. Student feedback will be a key component of the guidelines for future course revisions.

A review of curriculum design literature suggested the benefits of experiential learning as a component of course development. Dr. Susan Ambrose, curriculum expert, posits that some of the most important findings from learning research that have been piloted and/or integrated support the educational value of building curricula provide:

- courses that promote transfer of existing knowledge and skills to new contexts
- early exposure to concepts lays the foundation for future learning
- meaningful engagement to promote deeper learning
- opportunities for reflection to connect thinking and doing
- experiential learning opportunities to put theory into practice and relate to real world experience (Ambrose, 2013).

Research indicates that students learn what they practice (Ambrose, 2013). Meaning that more in-class opportunities for students to get feedback immediately from both their instructor and their peers allows the instructor to detect and address issues students may be having early on. Furthermore, when students engage in meaningful reflection about what they are learning they are less likely to misunderstand the concepts being taught. One way to foster reflection is through writing. Incorporating writing within the curriculum can help promote student’s ability to retrieve knowledge and relate that knowledge to what they are learning now and how they
may use it in the future. The pilot course incorporates reflective writing as part of the curriculum throughout the term. The focus is for student veterans to reflect on their military experience and relate that experience to their transition to higher education and civilian career.

This type of reflection is at the core of the concept of experiential learning. Experiential learning is learning by doing, thereby combining theory and practice. According to Ambrose (2013) experiential learning opportunities initiate learning when students are in unfamiliar situation for which they are not prepared. This is particularly true for student veterans, who are trying to maneuver their way through the higher education environment which is foreign to many of them. However, by incorporating experiential learning as a component of the pilot course, student veterans will be able to take initiative and responsibility for learning and transfer what they already know into their new environment. The goal is to enhance characteristics such as, motivation, persistence, self-discipline, self-confidence and goal orientation, all of which student veterans already possess. Student veterans will be able to apply their existing knowledge and skills with the new knowledge they are gaining in their first year of their transition to higher education.

As mentioned earlier, the researcher, enrolled in and completed the Magna Publications certification on *How to design courses to enhance student veterans’ success?* The certification entailed course design and redesign methodology. Specifically, situational factors (looking at the specifics of the course, such as, number of students veterans and how their military experience links to course content), assessment (how the military and higher education both emphasize clarity, frequency, and feedback, promoting improvement), teaching and learning activities (how to use military terms to help student veterans succeed). The learning goals achieved through the certification included: using course design to help student veterans enhance their strengths,
using classroom technology to improve course design and delivery, improving educational opportunities for student veterans. This certification, in combination, with the review of curriculum and course design material, provided the researcher with the necessary skills to design the pilot course in this study.

**Data Analysis**

According to Yin (2003) a case study should be an option when: (a) the aim of the study is to answer how, what, and why questions (b) the researcher cannot manipulate the behavior of those involved in the study (c) the researcher wants to cover contextual conditions because they believe they are relevant to the phenomenon under study (d) the boundaries are not clear between the phenomenon and context. Similarly, the aim of the present study is to answer what is the need for a student veterans’ success course? What kind of success programs/courses are currently available to student veterans? What should be included in a student success course intended for student veterans? A case study method was chosen because the researcher cannot manipulate what veterans’ student success courses exist for non-traditional veteran students. The researcher also wanted to cover the contextual conditions of the desirability, feasibility and need for veterans’ student success courses.

The exploratory case study was used to explore situations in which the intervention being assessed has no clear, single set of outcomes (Yin, 2003). This is a current issue and there is not enough data to draw conclusions and outcomes in the current literature. What is known is that there is an influx of student veterans that are enrolling in higher education. Additionally, the literature also suggests that this population is unique and requires special services and support to transition to civilian life, specifically, college life. Therefore, an exploratory case analysis seems to be the appropriate method to explore this phenomenon further and potentially gain insight on
aspects that would help student veterans succeed. In the present study, interview transcripts and publicly available documents were separated into units of data that were pertinent to the research question and sub-questions and notes were taken on the transcripts. The notes were then compared and categories were constructed.

To analyze the document data from the ten schools, a multiple case study analysis allowed the researcher the ability to analyze within each setting and across settings of the colleges in the self-selected data set (Baxter & Jack, 2008). Multiple case studies can be used to either predict similar results (a literal replication) or predict contrasting results but for similar reasons (a theoretical replication) (Baxter & Jack, 2008, Yin, 2003).

The ten schools that were selected were analyzed by looking at the existing programs’ similarities and differences. The investigation of the information gathered from expert interviews and document review served as the basis for the recommendation for a pilot first year student success course designed specifically for student veterans in their first year of college.

Validity and Credibility

Patton (2013) describes the issue of credibility in qualitative research as contingent on three distinct but related inquiry elements:

- rigorous techniques and methods for gathering high-quality data that are carefully analyzed, with attention to issues of validity, reliability, and triangulation;
- the credibility of the researcher, which is dependent on training, experience, track record, status, and presentation of self, and
- philosophical belief in the value of qualitative inquiry, that is, a fundamental appreciation of naturalistic inquiry, qualitative methods, inductive analysis, purposeful sampling, and holistic thinking.

Qualitative analysis is related to the rigor of the techniques involved analyzing data (Patton, 1999). As previously stated in the data collection section of this chapter, once the interviews...
were completed and initial findings identified, an executive summary of the interview findings was emailed to each participant, participants were then asked to review the summary as part of a member checking exercise. Each of the ten participating school’s public information was evaluated for similarities and differences and themes were comprised based on those findings. Triangulation was addressed by incorporating the theoretical framework while analyzing the data.

The credibility of the researcher was established in Chapter One in the positionality statement. As previously stated, the researcher is a professor of psychology and an educational and career consultant that has experience working with student veterans. The researcher is also experienced in designing student success courses and working with non-traditional students. The aforementioned aspects of the researcher’s characteristics provide credibility.

The researcher has expressed her belief in the qualitative method, as well as, an appreciation for naturalistic inquiry. As previously mentioned, purposeful sampling of the ten colleges included in this study was conducted. The researcher took a holistic approach to the problem of practice by designing a pilot course to help student veterans succeed in their first year of college.

**Protection of Human Subjects**

The institutional review board process was followed and approved for this study. A copy of the approved institutional review board application, unsigned informed consent form, recruitment letter and interview questions is attached as appendix A. The document review portion of the study was a secondary analysis of data of public records of schools and colleges and qualifies for exemption because it meets the following criteria: the data is publicly available.
Chapter IV: Research Findings

Campuses across the country are alerted to the influx of student veterans. Many schools are taking initiatives in developing a truly “veteran friendly” campus (Connelly, 2012). However a true definition for “veteran friendly” does not exist. A large number of schools make the claim to be “veteran friendly” but in actuality do not offer programs specifically tailored for their student veterans. While other schools, truly stand behind their “veteran friendly” distinction and work hard to make their campus attractive for potential and current student veterans. A greater understanding of this population by faculty, staff and students is needed to remove the invisibility and ambiguity that many returning servicemen and women feel they experience when making the transition from the military to college and choosing their colleges. This chapter will describe the programs and courses that are currently in place and evaluate whether the programs that are in place are truly what is needed. Program initiatives of ten colleges and universities across the country will be reviewed along with expert interviews, in hopes of identifying the needs of student veterans’ programs and transition courses. This chapter will also outline a pilot course designed by the researcher based on the information gathered from expert interviews and document review.

The ten colleges have been identified by the researcher as having the most comprehensive and innovative programs and services for student veterans. The criteria for selecting the schools for this study was based on the 2014-2015 Military Times Best for Vets list. The Military Times was chosen to be used in this study because it is the source most consulted by veterans and uses data compiled by the U.S. Department of Education, including success measures, along with schools’ survey responses to decide which schools make their list and where they should be ranked. As pointed out in Chapter 2, there is an issue with tracking student
veterans and the one common statistic used to track academic success, the graduation rate, is calculated in a way that completely excludes most current and former troops. However, 2013 was the first time that the *Military Times* has added more than a dozen different measures of academic success, quality and rigor, as reported by the *Department of Education* and the schools themselves, to develop their ranking, making it the most comprehensive ranking system for student veterans. Representatives of approximately 600 schools responded to the *Military Times* Best for Vets: Colleges 2014 survey which consisted of 150 questions that examined the schools’ operations in great detail. The researcher narrowed down the list to the top fifty schools that had the best retention rate and lowest default rate. The researcher then looked at the schools’ websites to determine what programs they offered. Schools that offered some a transitional program were then selected for the current study to answer the research sub-question of “what kind of success programs/courses are currently available to student veterans?”

The schools that are included in this study are (in alpha order): George Washington University, Illinois State University, John Carroll University, Northern Arizona University, San Diego State University, University of South Florida, Syracuse University, Texas A & M University, West Virginia University, and University of Massachusetts – Amherst. These schools are all universities and have large student bodies. Based on available public information, the findings from the document review (university web sites, student handbook, and marketing material) gathered on the ten colleges and universities, this chapter will help answer the research sub-question of “what kind of success programs/courses are currently available to student veterans?”.
Experts

Expert interviews were conducted to answer the research question of “what is the need for a student veterans’ success course?” and the research sub-question of “what should be included in a student success course intended for student veterans?” A document review was conducted to answer the research sub-question “what kind of success programs/courses are currently available to student veterans. The data from the interviews, in combination with the document review, was used to design a pilot first year student success course for veterans.

Findings

Expert Interviews

Experts in the field of student veterans’ transition were consulted to answer the research question “what is the need for a student veterans’ success course” and the sub-question “what should be included in a student success course intended for student veterans?” The following section provides the opinion of three experts that were purposely selected to participate in this study. The following is a description of each expert, their position within their university, background and experience.

Expert 1: Retired Colonel, Andrew Griffin, Director of Northern Arizona University (NAU) Office of Military and Veteran Affairs. Lieutenant Colonel Andrew Griffin received his officer’s commission from The Citadel in 1978. From 2000-2010 LTC Griffin served with the Department of Military Science at NAU where he provided campus liaison, student services, and leadership instruction. Since March 2010, Colonel Griffin has been serving as the director of the office of Military and Veterans Affairs (OMVA). In this position, he serves as the senior advocate for student veterans and their families, providing service and support towards educational transition, retention, graduation, and post-graduation career services. Under his
leadership, NAU was ranked by the *Military Times* as the 2013-2015 top university within the American Southwest for its service and support to the military and veteran student in higher education. Colonel Griffin has recently been appointed as a commissioner for the Arizona Governor’s Veterans’ Advisory Commission serving the 550,000 veterans residing in Arizona.

**Expert #2:** Krysta Kurzynski, LPC-CR, Assistant Director of Veterans Affairs and Student Veteran Transition Advisor, John Carroll University and Co-Chair National Career Development Association Veterans Committee. Kurzynski’s specialty is working with military veterans as they transition from the military to academia, and from academia to their chosen career path. Kurzynski has published extensively in the areas of student veterans, resilience training and military psychology. Her most recent publication “Veterans Services in Higher Education: Going Above and Beyond”, in the *Career Planning and Adult Development Journal*, offers suggestions for ways in which institutions of higher education can go above and beyond basic services for student veterans. She has also recently published an article in *Career Convergence* (April, 2015) entitled “Transition Classes for Veterans: Analyzing Outcome Date for Evidence-Based Approaches”. Kurzynski’s project *Increasing Leadership Potential* (July, 2015) involved a professional development presentation to senior leaders from a U.S. Army recruiting Battalion incorporating positive psychology, emotional intelligence, and personality assessment. She also co-authored and presented *Comprehensive, Holistic Transition Classes from Development to Assessment: Lessons Learned* at the NASPA (2015) Veterans Conference program on the development and assessment of a veteran-specific transition course in higher education.

**Expert #3:** Retired Lieutenant Colonel, David Vacchi, Chair of the Veterans Knowledge Community at Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education (NASPA), Strategic Coordinator, Student Veterans Resource Center and Professor of Military Leadership at

**Transition course offered at institution**

Each of the above experts designed, implemented and taught a transition course at their respective institution that was developed to help veterans transition into higher education. The following information was derived from interviews with the aforementioned three experts. The experts were asked to provide insight on how their transition course was developed, designed, approved and how the course has impacted retention.

*Northern Arizona University – LTC (Ret) Andrew Griffin, EdD*

Dr. Griffin developed a course titled *Supporting the Transitional Resilience of the Student Veteran*, which is a 3 credit liberal studies elective. The transition course is in its fourth year and was developed in partnership with University College. University College at NAU creates programs and courses which support the successful transition of new students to Northern Arizona University (NAU). The course was reviewed and approved by the Academic Dean of the University College and subsequently offered as a 3 credit hour liberal studies elective under the First-Year Seminar (FYS) program of instruction. Meaning that the course was considered
as part of the First Year Seminar program at the University. The course was developed by Dr. Griffin and based on national best practices and local student veteran input. According to Dr. Griffin, input was also solicited and provided by several offices on campus related to disability instructional accommodation, student educational services, academic advising and mental health counseling to name a few. The course is a culmination of work, experience, and lessons-learned over a 4-year period. The course was initially offered as a one credit course that was not accepted toward any academic major. The current course is now 3-credit hours and approved as a liberal studies elective in ‘Humanistic Inquiry,’ of which every undergraduate student at NAU must take 6 credit hours, regardless of their academic program of study. “The transition course is organized and presented as a ‘blended’ course. In a blended learning the student is exposed to face-to-face traditional classroom which is supplemented by on-line assignments. This combined learning structure was chosen to help the new student veteran become comfortable in both the traditional and on-line learning environments during their first academic semester at NAU.”

John Carroll University – Krysta Kurzynski, LPC

At John Carroll University, Kurzynski developed a one credit course entitles Becoming a Strategic Student Veteran, it is a one credit course. The course was designed and developed by Kurzynski by modifying the existing college transition courses offered to traditional students at John Carroll. Kurzynski used the transition courses offered to students and redesigned it address issues faced solely by student veterans. A pilot section of the course was developed. Students were told to register for the course. They were pre-registered and can opt out of the course at any time. The course was approved by the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences. The challenges are that there are different types of veterans (some have past college experience, some
are first time college students, student veterans vary in age). The goal of the pilot course was to determine who this is most helpful for. Specifically, one of the goals was to determine whether this course would be most helpful for first time college students or transfer students. The course has been offered for four complete semesters. The purpose of the course is to ‘introduce the skills and resources for academic success and transition to the University environment specifically for student veterans. By the end of the course, student veterans will: have developed positive academic habits and skills, be introduced to the campus culture and various resources on campus, continue transitioning from the military to university mindset, explore future academic and career plans’ (Course Objectives and Outcomes, Syllabus provided by Krysta Kurzynski). In deciding what type of veterans’ transition course to offer the following methods were used in making those decisions: “assessment and evaluation afterwards, student quantitative assessment, AAR (After Action Report) to assess what we didn’t know, what to add, and then make the appropriate changes”.

University of Massachusetts, Amherst – LTC (Retired) David Vacchi

At University of Massachusetts, Amherst, David Vacchi designed a course title is Veteran Scholars: Transition to civilian life. The approval process involved going through the Honor’s College funding/faculty status and took 6 months. The Honor’s College offers a range of leadership development opportunities, community-engaged research, entrepreneurial initiatives, and international programs, designed to promote global perspectives, diverse viewpoints, dialogue on social justice, and responsible research skills. The course has been offered for one year. In deciding what type of veterans’ transition course to offer Vacchi asked the veterans about their main concerns. Each term, Vacchi revisits the course and incorporates veterans’ feedback allowing student veterans to determine what is important to them thereby
allowing them to have a say in the course. The course is tailored for veterans and military service members joining the UMass community as students. The purpose of the course is two-fold: first, the course is a first exposure to the small class size and quality instruction available to students who join the Commonwealth Honors College; second, the course picks up where the TAP program ends and serves as a transition medium for veterans re-integrating into civilian society. Theoretical and practical application coursework will help veterans maximize their educational experience at UMass-Amherst. The outcomes of the course are: students will gain an understanding of the transitions military members go through when re-integrating into civilian society, students will gain confidence as veterans in a non-veteran world, students will gain self-awareness through reflection and action activities, an understanding and appreciation for the unique dimensions of their own personality and thinking patterns, their strength and weakness, and ways to improve strategies for student success (Course description and outcomes, syllabus provided by David Vacchi).

**Transition for student veterans**

*Northern Arizona University – LTC (Ret) Andrew Griffin, EdD*

In discussing transition issues for student veterans, Dr. Griffin points out that “research and experience have shown that the first year experience is the most critical in the successful transition of our new student veterans from the military to the academic rigor and other demands of a university setting.” He contends that the challenges most commonly facing transitioning veterans include:

- Transfer credit and initial academic counseling
- Being a non-traditional student (families, work part-time, average age of 27)
- The Post 9-11 G.I. Bill and navigating both college and veteran bureaucracies
- Adjusting to the classroom and academic rigor
● Lack of social sense of belonging on campus
● Physical injuries
● Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)
● Being a first-generation student

With the goal of constantly improving the course, a student “veteran climate” survey is conducted each spring. The survey is to identify the transition issues faced by student veterans. Dr. Griffin’s course addresses these challenges and helps students adjust to the academic environment.

*John Carroll University – Krysta Kurzynski, LPC*

Krysta Kurzynki identifies situations and balance as the main transition issues for student veterans. “People who don’t have situations settled (housing, financial life costs, school/life balance and family obligations. Some are overly ambitious in trying to balance school, family illness, stress”. Each term ‘crisis’ situations are kept track of to see if they were positively/negatively resolved. Examples of crisis situations include issues with GI Bill funding, lack of housing, juggling school and family and/or work life. If issues are not resolved students are withdrawn without financial issues informally. The course is revised on an on-going basis according to issues that are identified throughout the term. “For example”, she explains, the first assignment is due in the first two weeks, if they don’t turn it in then we know the issue is time management. We also offer professional development and financial consulting”.

John Carroll appears to be the only school in this study that keeps track of and intervenes in crisis situations early on in the semester. By allowing students the ability to withdraw without financial penalties, students have the ability to return once their issues are resolved and their GI
benefits are not affected. This allows the student time to rectify their situation and/or deal with their transition issue and returning to the university once their situation is resolved.

*University of Massachusetts, Amherst – LTC (Retired) David Vacchi*

David Vacchi identifies organizational structure of higher education and personal interaction as a main transition issue for student veterans. “Overall, organizational structure of higher education takes getting used to. Navigating through higher education is very different than navigating through the military. For example student veterans do not know the nature of the hierarchy in higher education, they may go to the Chancellor of the university to settle an issue because it would be the same as going to a general in the military”. By addressing the nature of navigating through the higher education system, students are made aware of the hierarchy within the system. This is an important factor in a transition course because it addresses the issue of adjustment to a different chain of commands than what veterans are used to in the military.

Personal interaction is another issue faced by student veterans. “There are a number of differences between the typical college student and a student veteran. There are maturity differences, not just age but level of maturity. There are also cultural differences – the student veteran is from a mission-oriented culture and applies the mission culture to identify with transition”. By incorporating the mission culture into a transition course, student veterans are able to relate to their new environment and make the adjustment from military to academia.

**Retention**

*Northern Arizona University – LTC (Ret) Andrew Griffin, EdD*

Retention was absolutely a factor in designing and implementing the transition course at NAU. Griffin states that major themes embedded in the course that supported both transition and retention of the student veteran included:

a. Creating a sense of belonging on campus
b. Student empowerment based on a new knowledge of services and support available both on and off campus

c. Creating academic success in the classroom

The Office of Institutional Research and the Office of Military and Veterans Affairs have been tracking how the veterans’ transition course has helped retention since fall 2012. “The most recent survey of student management data indicated a 100% retention rate for those who took the course last fall.” The Flagstaff campus student veteran population climate survey conducted in spring 2015 had the following results and findings:

- Ten (10) of fifteen (15) students or 66.6% of those in the transition course provided feedback.
- Eight (8) or twelve (12) or 66.6% of those not in the transition course provided feedback.

*Fall 2014 GPA comparison:* Those students that took the course: 3.13; Those students that did not take the course: 2.86.

*What were the top 3 challenges that you faced in your first semester transition?*

1. Lack of sense of belonging due to age differences and life experiences
2. Transfer credit and initial academic counseling
3. Adjusting to the classroom and academic rigor

*The course offered exposure to many services on and off campus. Do you feel this exposure supported your successful transition to NAU? Please explain.*

100% responded “yes.”

*Student quotes:*

“Showed resources on campus that I didn’t know existed”
“The resources being made available allowed for further growth as a student”

At the end of the transition course, which of the following outcomes were you able to obtain?

**Understanding transitional issues:** Mostly or completely obtained: 88.89%

**Understanding available resources:** Mostly or completely obtained: 88.89%

**Learned academic skills to help master academic rigor:** Mostly or completely obtained: 88.89%

*Career Steps for Student Veterans (CSSV) program sought to introduce the student to the Bb-Learn on-line learning environment while exploring topics related to professionalism and career exploration. Was this portion of the class beneficial to you? Please explain.*

100% responded “yes.”

Student quotes:

“Absolutely and I retained copies of the majority of the information for future reference.”

“The course put me in the mindset of thinking about after school”

“This portion familiarized me with the Bb-Learn system. It helped me to get a step ahead of all the other newcomer to the school and begin the rest of my classes with more efficiency.”

*The ART project for this course sought to identify campus and local resources that are available to veterans. Did you find this project to be beneficial? y/n*

88.89% responded “yes.”

Student quotes:

“Not only was the social aspect of working in a team again refreshing, our project helped us feel connected to the university and to Flagstaff, rather than feeling like an outsider looking in.”

“I learned a great deal [about] the local resources available to Veterans and am now able to share that information with the other Veterans that I meet.”

*Post-course student feedback:*
General:

“Overall this class far exceeded my expectations”

“I am very glad I decided to take FYS-121 my first semester back in school.”

“Overall, I learned a great deal about my university, the services they offer to veterans, the services the county offers veterans, and how to be academically successful as a non-traditional veteran student. I greatly enjoyed working with the group on the website and having the opportunity to bond with fellow veterans. I would recommend this class to any future veteran who is attending NAU.”

“I thought that this was an awesome course for first year veteran students. I believe this course did an outstanding job connecting veterans with fellow veterans, taught the basics of the BBlearn platform, and helped many individuals in the class grow professionally and personally. The blend of in class work, online work, group projects, discussions and journals is a great way to keep people engaged and learning.”

Sense of belonging, Transition:

“When I got to Flagstaff and started classes at NAU, I was still technically in the military. I had been on terminal leave for only about 3 weeks before starting school – still very much in a military mindset. The transition was a lot more difficult than I expected: going in to the military was easy. I just had to do what I was told and what was expected of me. But getting out, nobody would be telling me what to do or how to do it: I was at once on my own. Fortunately, I was able to take this class and get to be around fellow veterans who were making the same transition as me.”
“Although I have been out of the Corps for a solid seven years now I still appreciated the instantaneous camaraderie I experienced every Tuesday and Thursday morning with the members of this class and it quickly became a class that I looked forward to attending.”

“It was great to have a class with veterans twice a week to take a break from my other classes with eighteen-year-olds.”

The high levels of retention and positive student feedback from students at NAU supports the notion that there is value to student veterans feeling connected to their campus and to each other. This sense of belonging and sense of comradery provides student veterans with support and connection to their peers and their campus.

*John Carroll University – Krysta Kurzynski, LPC*

While retention was not a factor in designing and implementing the transition course, the concern is greater with anticipating issues students may face and helping them early on in the semester. According to Kurzynski, “prediction is a factor because of the small numbers, retention is not significant – if a student is struggling you can tell in the first three weeks of class”.

*University of Massachusetts, Amherst – LTC (Retired) David Vacchi*

“Retention is a factor, but more importantly supporting an effective transition to the university. The goal is to set people up in a course to make an impact. I asked previous course members what as useful. Examples that were given were: resources on campus, resume writing, frontload it in the beginning of the term. 1 credit, 7 weeks, integrate a reflective process.” As far as the transition course helping with retention itself, “there were 6 students in Fall 2014, 1 transferred for family reasons.” Using feedback from previous students, allows the course to
incorporate issues that are pertinent to incoming student veterans and thereby impacting student retention.

**Student success**

Experts were asked to define success and whether or not the transition course has had an impact on student veterans’ success at their institutions.

*Northern Arizona University – LTC (Ret) Andrew Griffin, EdD*

“Success can be defined as GPA, persistence, retention rate, graduation rate – our biggest challenge is that our data is only as good as the information available in the student management system which is not totally accurate. This is very common among schools in higher education because some data is based on self-reporting which is not always done by the students”. The transition course has helped with student veterans’ success rates “in our pilot course last fall students who took the course had a CGPA or 3.12 and those who did not take the course have a CGPA of 2.72”.

*John Carroll University – Krysta Kurzynski, LPC*

“Success is defined by what is best for the individual’s best situation. If the person’s life goal is to graduate, then that is success; if their life goal is to get a job two years after taking classes, then that is success. Failure is when someone wanted to do this and was not successfully able to (academic dismissal, drop out).”

The transition course at John Carroll has helped with student veterans’ success rates. At the end of each term an assessment is conducted. “One of the questions on the assessment is ‘should all student veterans take this course?’ Of all four terms this course has been offered only one student said ‘no’ and he was an 18 year old. Two said ‘not sure’ and the rest said ‘yes’. In the beginning of the semester we do a career assessment. Students are assessed on how
comfortable they are in their major. We use: identity, exploration, MBTI, work value and research career. We redo this at the end of the term. For the major component those that like their major, their confidence level increases; those who hate their major their confidence level may be lower.”

*University of Massachusetts, Amherst – LTC (Retired) David Vacchi*

“Success is when the student veteran gets whatever they need out of coming to college. Courses that result in a job, a degree – either way that student is successful. As long as they are not wasting their GI Bill then they are successful. Informal connections in the Veteran’s office help a great deal. There is no need for a formal transition coach (like DiRamio suggests). Vets won’t say they need a mentor. The factors that truly help are the informal connections such as sitting together and talking and helping each other in the process. The top factors that help veterans succeed are a safe space, cheap/free coffee, computer access, CAC card ready computers, video games and peers.” Other contributing factors are “processing education benefits on time, a vet center staff and professionalism of faculty. Faculty being respectful of students results in a good academic experience. While faculty training and education towards veterans cannot be made mandatory, I suggest making it incentive based. For example, having a self-paced online faculty education course and providing tablets or research stipends as incentive for completing. Making vet education a part of a new employee orientation is another way to go”.

**Institutional challenges**

*Northern Arizona University – LTC (Ret) Andrew Griffin, EdD*

“The major challenge we face at NAU is full-time staff funding. The state cut the university budget another $18 million for the next fiscal year. This translates to staffing cuts or, as a minimum, limited staff increases. There is a recognized need for a full-time academic
adviser for the VSC. This person would focus on the academic transition surrounding transfer credit evaluation, priority enrollment, and academic plan development for first-year student veterans. However, given the current fiscal situation this position cannot be funded”.

*John Carroll University – Krysta Kurzynski, LPC*

Some of the main challenges faced by the institution are: “reaching veterans who want to go to school. The TAPS process is improving but it’s not perfect – there is a lot of misinformation (for example using the bill to go to tech school, what will transfer to a 4-year school). A solution would be to get them better information and make them aware of predatory practice.”

Faculty and staff who work with student veterans have identified the following challenges for student veterans:

1. “Time away from school – there is an adjustment period.
2. Time management
3. Military to school transition – some want a choice meaning they decide not to do anything they did in the military.
4. Writing is an issue, especially if the student veteran has been out of school for a number of years.”

*University of Massachusetts, Amherst – LTC (Retired) David Vacchi*

The main challenges that the institution has faced are “identifying veterans, making sure matching help services to vets that need them – if the needs are not known they continue to be unmet. One way to meet the needs of veterans is to have the certifying official (ours works for the Bursar) work for vets services. This way every veteran will pass through vet services. Another way is to follow up at the end of the year.”
Recommendations for pilot transitional course

Northern Arizona University – LTC (Ret) Andrew Griffin, EdD

“We are always seeking to improve the course – for the fall we are adding a one-hour block to the transition course that will focus on mental and physical wellness for veterans.”

John Carroll University – Krysta Kurzynski, LPC

“Right now our course is a 1 credit course because it is a reasonable schedule and because of the GI Bill. However, there is enough content to have a 3 credit hour course.” Recommendations for the pilot course would be to include the following: “translating military in general, veteran identity with civilians, practice in talking in civilian terms in jobs, include the major component at the end of the term.”

University of Massachusetts, Amherst – LTC (Retired) David Vacchi

A pilot transitional course should include: “how to be on a team project, resume building, translating military experience, a career portion where military experience scenarios of team based projects ‘situations’ so that vets realize that what they did in the military is valuable.” The aforementioned information and recommendations will be incorporated in the pilot course section of this chapter.

Document review

The document review section of this chapter addresses the research sub-questions “what kind of success programs/courses are currently available to student veterans?” and “what should be included in a student success course intended for student veterans.” Academic programs for student veterans appear to be focused on two goals. First, to assist student veterans through the transition process of moving from the military into higher education and second, to establish social support by creating student veteran courses and programs that allow student veterans to make contact with other student veterans (Kelley et al., 2013). The institutional goal for colleges
and universities is that transitional support and social support will dramatically improve retention and graduation rates and overall academic success within the student veteran population (Kelley et al., 2013).

The literature review identified four key elements of student veteran program success: student veterans’ campus support, veterans’ transition courses, veterans’ learning communities, and veterans’ curriculum (ACE, 2012, Ackerman et al., 2009, Cate, 2014, Cook & Kim, 2009, Kelley et al., 2013, Kim & Cole, 2013). Kelley et al., (2013) definitions for these four elements will be used to organize the findings from the ten schools described in this chapter and assess how the identified top ten schools fit into these criteria.

(1) Student Veterans’ Campus Support – The existence of a dedicated office for student veterans is seen as a strong indicator of an institution’s commitment to serving veterans and military students.

*George Washington University* appears to be one of the leader in institutional commitment. The institutional commitment in support of Veterans Accelerate Learning Opportunities (VALOR) students was re-affirmed by the GW senior leadership. Operation VALOR is a comprehensive, collaborate, and unified effort by hey stakeholders to ensure that the University provides the highest level of services to veterans and their families (Military George Washington University, n.d.). The goal of GW VALOR is to bring together university stakeholders who interact with military and veteran students, and help the university focus initiatives in their home departments to better serve student veterans (Military George Washington University, n.d.). Institutional commitment included the establishment of the Office of Military and Veterans Student Services, and in April 2013 establishment of the Associate Provost for Military and Veterans Affairs. Collaborative VALOR Teams enhance support on a
university wide basis. The Ribbon Project is a training program hosted by GW’s Office of Military and Veteran Student Services for GW faculty and staff. The goal of the training program is to bridge the gap in the communication between faculty and staff with military personnel and student veterans.

*Illinois State University* student organization has a chapter of the Student Veterans of America and is aimed at creating and promoting camaraderie amongst veterans while generating awareness of veterans on campus. Veterans’ Services, Veterans at Illinois State, and Diversity Advocacy sponsored a Tying All the Links (T.A.L.K) discussion that focused on the issues surrounding returning veterans (Ray, 2015).

*John Carroll University* veterans support program is unique in that it is staffed by two individuals, a retired Army officer with 20 years of experience and a licensed counselor (civilian) with experience in career counseling and military transition. The office of Veterans Affairs is a one stop shop for questions or problems throughout the students’ entire time at John Carroll.

*Northern Arizona University* offers assistance in the areas of: transfer credit and initial academic counseling, concerns about career and education goals, adjusting to the classroom and academic rigor, military reserve/National Guard obligations conflicting with class schedules, isolation issues due to age differences, marriage, family and work stressors, physical and emotional impacts from combat stress. The Veteran Educational Transition Success (VETS) Program, or VETS for short, incorporates national best practices into a comprehensive new student veteran transitional program.

*San Diego State University* Joan and Art Barron Veterans Center supports students through the admission and transition process, assists them in obtaining their state and federal VA
educational benefits, and strives to offer an environment that will help them pursue their chosen fields of study and start their careers. SDSU is a participant of VetSuccess on Campus (VSOC) which has more than 90 sites across the country. The VSOC program objective is to help student veterans and their qualified dependents succeed and thrive through a coordinated delivery of on-campus benefits assistance and counseling leading of their education and preparing them for their career endeavors (VetSuccess on Campus (VSOC) Fact Sheet, n.d.). VSOC on Campus at SDSU was one of the three programs implemented in 2010. The full-time program counselor assists all military and veteran related students with federal benefits. This includes educational benefits, disability compensation claims, state and deferral employment opportunity assistance, vocational advising. SDSU has developed a cross campus Troops to College Committee designed to promote the services SDSU offers to its veterans. The working group is comprised of approximately 24 departments / representatives including the SVO.

*University of South Florida’s* Academic Enhancement Program works with the student veteran to determine what resources are needed to improve their academic standing and eventually graduate from USF. USF also offers a Veterans Tutoring Network tailored to meet the unique needs of student veterans. USF has implemented the Student Veteran Employment Project, which is designed to prepare student veterans to compete for employment in the civilian job market and provide veterans with avenues that lead to job or internship placement. The office of Veterans Services collaborates with employers in the local Tampa Bay Region to develop a Program of Instruction (POI) that teaches critical skills needed for a successful job search.

*Syracuse University’s* Veterans Career Transition program (VCTP), operated by the Institute and Military Families and paid entirely by a grant from JPMorgan Chase and Co, offers
solutions to challenges faced by military students, as well as provides connections to specific education and training programs, business/industry coalitions focused on veteran employment and information about national and state-level opportunities and benefits for veterans and their families. Specifically, the VCTP helps veterans with challenges in translating their education, experience, skills and training from military to civilian environment and developing the soft skills necessary to succeed in a civilian corporate or government environment, specifically, in business sectors not closely related to the military (Veterans Career Transition Program (VCTP), n.d.). Through online courses – accessible from any location – participants have the opportunity to gain an understanding and insight into the corporate culture of civilian sector employment opportunities.

*West Virginia University’s* Military to Mountaineer Program creates proactive services and transitional support so that the responsibility for a successful transition. The Military to Mountaineer Mentor program, faculty and staff are provided opportunities and tools to better understand the kinds of military experiences that they may not be aware of in their own set of experiences or knowledge base. This program addresses the needs of veterans transitioning from the military to colleges and extends beyond required documentation and educational benefit assessment, mentoring student veterans provides this partnership: assists student veterans with successful transitions, honors student veterans’ perspectives and creates a seamless transition so student veterans can navigate the path of higher education and the challenges that it entails.

*University of Massachusetts, Amherst* has a number of veterans support programs such as: flexibility of online learning options, extent of transfer credits accepted by degree level, on-campus ROTC, ‘Service-member Opportunity Colleges’ participation, on-campus active duty/veteran assistance, support provided to the families of service members, faculty trained in
veteran reintegration issues, presence of military installations, full-time counselors trained in veteran-specific mental health concerns.

**Veterans’ Transition Courses** – The veterans’ transition course takes on many different designs but has a similar goal of allowing student veterans to explore difficult topics from an academic perspective and understand that they are not alone in the process of transitioning from the military to academia.

*Illinois State University* provides a first year seminar for military veterans to assist student veterans in their transition to the University community and civilian life. Student veterans gain an understanding of how to maximize the resources provided at the University and surrounding community. The three major themes of the seminar are: (1) successful transitions within the University, (2) major and minor and career exploration, (3) campus and community involvement.

*John Carroll University* has a transition course which incorporates several objectives: connecting student veterans with their peers, teaching practical and necessary skills to be successful in higher education (time management, study skills), beginning career planning so that they can choose an appropriate major and plan a career path. The course focuses on the prevalence and realities of post combat stress, resilience, and post-traumatic growth, and the importance of maintaining a healthy lifestyle. A main component of the course is actively encouraging students to connect to academic resources such as tutoring, the writing center, and research assistance. The class emphasizes tools necessary to accomplish the mission of obtaining good grades and graduating. The transition support continues throughout the students’ academic tenure by transition advising, specifically academic and career success.
Northern Arizona University offers a first-year seminar *In Supporting the Transitional Resilience of the Student Veteran*. The course compares and contrasts the military culture in American society, defines the key concepts of transitional resilience, and follows with the exploration and examination of challenges and best practices toward and career development success of newly transitioning student veteran into NAU. The course is multi-faceted, blended, and presented as part of a customized College-based (non-residency) Learning Community (CBLC) for first year student veterans on the Flagstaff campus.

San Diego State University’s Barron Veterans Center staff conducts two courses for newly admitted SDSU veteran students to assist them in successfully transitioning from the military to life as a university student. SDSU’s College of Extended Studies Military and Veterans Service Representative provides personalized advising and service enable eligible students to seek educational opportunities including professional certificate programs, and professional skills courses. As part of the national Troops to Engineers initiative, SDSU launched its Success in Engineering for Recent Veterans through Internships and Career Experience (SERVICE) program in 2011 – initially funded by a grant from the National Science Foundation – to create a clear path for success from military service to a career in engineering through early intervention, internships, mentorship, and other career enhancing opportunities.

University of South Florida’s Student Veteran Academic Enhancement Program focuses on student veterans who leave the military to pursue a college degree and struggle to succeed. Currently, USF has approximately 65 student veterans on academic probation. Many of these students will be academically dismissed from USF if they are not able to satisfy university academic standards. Most veterans believe that they can resolve or fix their own problems, as a result they do not typically ask for help when struggling with coursework. This program is
designed to identify those undergraduate student veterans who are “at risk” of being academically dismissed from the university. At risk students are categorized into three tiers: Tier 1 consists of student veterans who are placed on academic probation by USF, Tier 2 consists of student veterans who have a GPA between 2.0 and 2.4 but are not on academic probation, and Tier 3 consists of student who are in good academic standing, but have failed or are struggling to succeed in a course that is required for graduation. The goal of the program is to reduce the number of students placed on academic probation each semester and attain a 50% graduation rate for all students enrolled in the program.

*Texas A&M University’s (TAMU) VET program is a co-enrollment TAMU and Blinn College partnership. The Texas A&M-Blinn TEAM (Transfer Enrollment at A&M) Program is a collaborative, co-enrollment partnership between Texas A&M and Blinn Community College allows for the admission of hundreds of additional qualified students into the Texas A&M freshman class that would not have otherwise gained admission due to enrollment limitations (Blinnteam partnership, n.d.). The purpose of this program is to better serve the returning student veteran population by: providing a program that improves individual student veteran academic success through a transitional program. Vet Camp is an in depth orientation program conducted prior to the 1st day of classes in January and August. It provides Veteran students with over 35 academic, campus, and local resources to facilitate a successful transition to TAMU. It includes collaboration with Academic Advisors, Faculty, Staff, the Career Center, Financial Aid, mentors and many others. Vet Camp includes current student perspective to TAMU and assists in tying mentor programs to new students. The Faculty, Staff & Advisor Seminar & Awareness Program hosts a seminar to provide awareness and information related to contributions that service members and veterans bring to higher education and challenges they
may face. These seminars facilitate the growth of the Aggie Veteran Network (AVN) as a resource to enhance student veteran success. VetConnect Programming is a group of programs designed to support student veterans in their transition to college and their continued success as a student. These programs promote connecting student veterans to faculty and staff throughout the university.

*University of Massachusetts, Amherst’s* transition course entitled *Veteran Scholars: Transition to Civilian Life* is tailored for veterans and military service members joining the UMass community as students. The purpose of the course is a first exposure to the small class size and quality instruction available to students who join the Commonwealth Honors College, an honors curriculum at *University of Massachusetts, Amherst*, and second, the course picks up where the TAP program ends and serves as a transition medium for veterans reintegrating into civilian society. Theoretical and practical application coursework helps veterans maximize their educational experience at UMass-Amherst. The outcomes of the course are as follows: Students gain an understanding of the transitions military members go through when reintegrating with civilian society. Students boost their confidence as veterans in a non-veteran world. Students increase self-awareness through reflection and action activities, and gain an understanding and appreciation for the unique dimensions of their own personality and thinking patterns, their strengths and weakness, and ways to improve strategies for student success.

**Veterans’ Learning Communities** – Learning communities have two main goals: first, to construct opportunities for collaborative learning through a shared core curriculum and second, to incorporate learning across the curriculum by organizing the core courses around a central theme. Learning communities have been associated with a number of positive educational outcomes for student veterans, such as, transition to college, satisfaction with the
college, greater student-faculty interactions, perceptions of campus environments, and persistence and graduation.

*John Carroll University* incorporates the idea of brotherhood for student veterans through its social network of veteran peers. New students are paired with a team leader during their first semester to assist in their transition process, and the Student Veterans Group provides opportunities to socialize and network with other veterans at the university. In the 2014-2015 academic year, John Carroll was included in a pilot program for an innovative new platform designed by a veteran specifically for veterans in college, “Uvize” is a web-based, peer mentoring platform that is a cross between Facebook and LinkedIn. The unique component of Uvize is that the peer network is limited to other student veterans within their home institution, or their regional area. The platform creates a fast mentor network that can connect students with the right veteran classmate, mentor, or advisor when they need it (Uvize, 2012). Veterans can post questions on any topic and receive an answer from a mentor any time of day. They can also form sub-groups for academic and personal interests.

*Northern Arizona University* – College-based (non-residency) Learning Community (CBLC): Is a formal program to aid the new student veteran with their transition to NAU through activities with other student veterans on campus, learning the academic skills and traits needed to be successful in class, beginning career planning, and learning what services and support are available to student veterans both on and off campus. The CBLC is integrated into the NAU chapter of the Student Veterans of America.

*San Diego State University*’s Student Veterans Organization (SVO) was founded in 2006 and has garnered national media attention. With a continuously increasing membership, the SVO is able to provide a variety of programs to student veterans, active duty military, reservists,
and family members to include mentoring, counseling referrals, lobbying for increased benefits, and conducting various social events to provide networking opportunities and build camaraderie.

**Veterans’ Curriculum** – A number of institutions have developed in-depth curriculum specifically created to help student veterans’ transition into higher education and increase their ability to deal with stress.

*Illinois State University’s* Veteran-to-Veteran Mentoring Program is a webinar that includes a step by step outline on how to create a student veteran to student veteran mentoring program, complete with timeline, types of student veterans to certify and certification materials.

*Northern Arizona University* offers a career steps program. Career Steps: Students in the FYS complete a new Career Steps for Student Veterans (CSSV) program. The program will introduce the student to the Bb-Learn on-line learning environment while exploring topics related to professionalism and career exploration. NAU also offers an In-processing for New Student Veterans session which covers VA benefits, on and off campus resources, academic resources, the Student Veterans of America (SVA) club, and more. The Veteran Student College Success Workshop – just prior to classes beginning for the fall term offers an optional workshop to all incoming veteran students to jumpstart their academic endeavor at NAU. The workshop contains the following sections: college writing and communication, college level math review, library navigation, and money matters.

*San Diego State University’s* Troops to Teachers statewide office is used to transition veterans into teaching positions in California. Incentive bonuses are given to student veterans who qualify and are studying to be educators.

*University of South Florida’s* Mentoring Resource Center provides USF student veterans with additional resources and support that will better prepare them for transition from USF to the
workforce. Veterans are assigned a mentor based on their academic major and the career they desire to pursue.

*Texas A&M University’s PAVE:* A peer mentoring program connects incoming student veterans with veteran peers to provide support, help them navigate college life, identify any challenges they are encountering, and refer them to the appropriate resources on or off campus. PAVE operates in partnership with Student Veterans of America. Texas A&M also has Veteran specific courses. At least once a year the VRSC coordinates funding, professor availability, classroom space and registration procedures to facilitate one section of a core curriculum course that is specified for student veterans only.

*West Virginia University* provides veteran friendly classes as a way to increase the importance of student veterans as members of the campus community. UWV also has a Veteran Success Program which is an academic intervention program specifically designed to help veterans who are struggling academically.

**Pilot First Year Veterans’ Success Course**

Based on the interviews with experts in the field of student veterans’ transition and the document review of the top military colleges, it seems clear that institutions recognize the need for student veterans’ success/transition courses. While a number of colleges offer transition type courses, it seems that the majority of the courses offered are more focused on helping veterans maneuver through administrative functions of higher education (i.e. VA benefits, acclimating to campus, financial aid resources, career services). Although, some of the courses described in the aforementioned examples address the challenges in transitioning from military to civilian and college life, the following proposed pilot first year veterans’ success course focuses further on issues of transition, choosing the correct major, learning style, and career choices.
Embedded at the core of the foundation for designing this pilot course, is the incorporation of the military’s educational experience. The military experience takes civilians from all walks of life and transforms them into a team that is capable of accomplishing complex and dangerous missions in turbulent environments. It transforms them into a strong team shaped by core values. One of the main aspects of the military is education with a purpose. Meaning that the goal is to improve performance through training and achieve excellence in mission completion. Within the military education with a purpose involves: basic training (teaching core values and skills needed), advanced training (different schools within the military with specific expertise i.e. finance, engineering, healthcare), crawl-walk-run (different activities that are low in resources and that are separated out to discreet actions that proceed to complexity making them as close to real life as possible), inclination for action (the military trains to act). Therein lies the main difference between the military and higher education. The military trains to act, while higher education trains to reflect. This course is designed in a way that incorporates military philosophy and integrates it with the reflective ideologies of higher education.

Situational factors related to student veterans were considered in the design of this course. Because this course is a pilot course, it will need to be adjusted based on the following factors:

- Are the veterans in the class first time college students? If so then emphasis will be made to address basic principles of academic writing and study skills.
- Do the student veterans have prior college experience? If yes then adjustments will be made to address issues with returning to school.
- Is this course offered face to face or on-line? Adjustments to the course will be made based on the type of delivery.
Learning goals for the course were designed with two aspects in mind: (1) types of things that students will take away from this course and (2) what factors distinguish students that have taken this course from those that have not. Students who take this course will have the ability to translate their military experience to civilian life by examining their major choice and plan their civilian career. Students will apply coping skills to learning style preference, meaning that, students will gain the skills necessary to succeed when they are in a situation that requires them to complete assignments in ways that are not their learning preference. Students will be provided with tools to maneuver their way through the civilian job market. Students will have the ability to take the training they receive in this course and apply it to their job search years down the road. The students who take this course will have made meaning of their transition and have the tools to enter their civilian career exploration.

Assessment for the course will take into consideration military philosophy. There is a belief in the military that training without evaluation is a waste of time. Feedback and assessment is not just about grades, but it is about assessing the attainment of the learning goals identified in the course. Providing feedback that allows students to improve is critical for student veterans to have the ability to see how they are doing in the course in a structured basis. Therefore, this course has frequent and immediate assessment that is directed at improving towards reaching the course goals. While all assignments may not have a letter grade attached to them, all assignment are provided with feedback. This feedback is built into the course to ensure that students are not seeing the work they are doing as a waste of time and are given the ability to continue to improve throughout the term.

The course goals and assignments are set up in a mission format. The mission identifies the learning goals. The assignments are the means to accomplish the goals and the criteria is the
rubric that assesses the students’ work. Expectations for the course and the assignments are clearly communicated so that students are always aware of what is expected of them and how to achieve their goals. A real life component is incorporated in the course so that students can clearly see how the assignments and the different aspects of the course relate to real life. These aspects of the course are specifically designed to help student veterans view this course as training to a successful transition.

The course syllabus was designed based on the following principles:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Principle</th>
<th>Application for Student Veterans</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Equitable Use</td>
<td>Syllabus recognizes military service by clearly stating that military and VA related absences are excused.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flexibility in Use</td>
<td>Course is designed so that students can demonstrate knowledge in a number of ways (i.e. reflective writing assignments, group projects, individual assignments, class presentations).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simple and Intuitive Use</td>
<td>All assignments are clearly described with rubrics and larger assignments are broken down into 2-3 shorter assignments. All expectations are clearly explained.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceptible Information</td>
<td>Course material is presented in multiple formats so that it is accessible to students with a broad range of abilities (i.e. power point provided to students, videos and lectures posted to learning management system, assignments vary to accommodate all types of learners)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tolerance for Error</td>
<td>Course is designed so that students are able to actively assess and revise their work (i.e. assignments are returned with feedback for improvement and second part of assignment will incorporate the feedback. All assignments and feedback have a purpose).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low Physical Effort</td>
<td>If needed software will be selected to accompany the course for students with disabilities.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In designing the specific components of the syllabus, concept mapping was used as a tool to build the curriculum. The use of concept mapping to plan a curriculum is feasible and helpful (Diramio & Jarvis, 2011). Figure 4 is an example of a concept map for planning the curriculum for students with military backgrounds adopted from Diramio & Jarvis (2011). The curriculum is split into three roughly equal sections: orientation, critical thinking in college and ways of
knowing, and introduction to self-authorship. The orientation portion covers the material that a traditional class for veterans in transition would receive in a one credit orientation course. Students will learn the functions of various offices on campus and become familiar with the hierarchy within their institution. This will help students maneuver their way through the complexities of academia. Expert David Vacchi identified navigating through the structure of higher education as an issue facing student veterans. This section of the course will allow students to become familiar with the functions of the different offices throughout the institution but students will also gain an understanding of their GI benefits and the hierarchal structure of the institution. This will provide student veterans with a way to navigate through their institution. By knowing who to talk to for what issues, veterans may begin to acclimate with their new environment.

The second phase of the map focuses on reflective writing and assignments are directed at the students’ evaluating self in connection with others. The goal is to introduce students to different sources of authority, constructed knowledge, contextual decision making, values and beliefs about themselves and tools for future academic success. The key emphasis is that students are the “knowers” and their experiences are valued. Students will be asked to reflect on their time in the military and evaluate how those experiences can be a benefit to their academic pursuits and future career endeavors. The goal of the reflective assignments is for students to gain a broader understanding of how who they were as military translates into who they want to be as civilians. Academic writing is challenging for most students, but particularly challenging for non-traditional students (i.e. individuals who have been out of school for a number of years). This phase of the pilot course will introduce student veterans to academic writing and familiarize them with proper citation mechanisms. Various assignments will be assigned so that students
can practice academic writing. The students will have a choice on topics for the assignments and will be divided into teams so that they can work together and help each other in the process.

The second phase will also introduce personality type as it relates to learning style, major choice, and careers. Students will be given a personality type assessment at the beginning of the term. They will discover their learning preferences and gain coping skills on how to handle situations when they will have to perform tasks that are not their preference. For example, if a student’s learning preference is to take exams, they will still have to take classes where they write papers even though that is not their preference. They will learn skills that will enable them to learn in environments that are not their preference. For this portion of the course, students will work both individually and in groups, so that they can develop their individual learning plan as well as help one another and learn from one another. Students will also deeply examine their choice of major by incorporating their past military experience, desired career choice and strengths. Personality trait assessments will be used as a tool to help students figure out the appropriate major that will help them obtain their chosen career.

The career portion of this phase will incorporate expert suggestions and address the following issues:

- Veteran identity with civilians
- Practice talking in civilian terms
- Resume building and interview preparation through mock interviews
- Translating military experience

A major component of the career portion of this phase are group projects where the emphasis is placing emphasis on the students’ military experience as valuable. Military experience scenarios of team based projects or “situations” will be conducted so that student
veterans realize that what they did in the military is valuable. The career portion of the course will be divided into the following sub-sections adopted from Murphy and Duke (2014) *Down Range: A transitioning veteran’s career guide to life’s next phase* (p.151):

Step 1: Determine the objectives.
- Clear
- Measurable
- Achievable
- Support the high-definition destination (HDD)

Step 2: Identify the threats (or challenges) to accomplishing the objective.
- Internal and external
- Controllable and uncontrollable threats

Step 3: Identify your resources
- Resources to achieve the objective
- Mitigate or eliminate controllable threats

Step 4: Evaluate lessons learned.

Step 5: Determine a course of action.
- Create a final course of action by determining *who does what, by when.*

Step 6: Plan for contingencies.
- Trigger/action matrix

Each of the aforementioned steps will be addressed throughout the term. Murphy and Duke (2014) will be the guide for the career portion of phase two (Murphy & Duke, 2014).

The third phase allows students to evaluate various theories and themes in personality theory and transitional theory. Students examine their basic personality traits, including values
and beliefs. Students have an opportunity to experientially explore each approach through various exercises such as: personality assessment on themselves, interactive discussions, and group exercises. Students learn about their own personality and how they can use that information as it pertains to their learning style and career choices. Students also have the opportunity to apply theory to their military experiences. They will be asked to write a reflective paper incorporating transitional theory and their own personal experience of transitioning from the military to college. In building a sense of camaraderie students will be asked to give a team presentation about their transitional experience and group discussion will follow to help each student make a smoother transition.

Based on an examination of selected career development theories, students will apply key concepts of their own career development process, focusing on thoughtful self-reflection, major and career process, as well as, translating their military experience to civilian work experience. The final project for the course will be a self-reflective research paper where students will evaluate their personality assessment and incorporate the following aspects: examine their learning style, assess their personality’s strengths and areas of improvement, demonstrate how they will apply their military experience and personality strengths to their academic coursework, integrate their assessment results and assess their major selection and career goals, demonstrate how they can be successful in their chosen career, identify how they will achieve their future goals, and include a five year plan.

The learning and development outcomes for the pilot course “Transitioning from Military to College” are as follows:

- Demonstrate the development of independent knowing skills through reflective writing.
- Evaluate a coherent sense of self through participation in classroom assignments and
group discussion.

- Apply multiple strategies to the issues of transition.
- Examine how personality affects learning style, major choice and career choice.
- Apply methods for improving learning style and succeeding in academics.
- Apply the theories and tools learned in this course towards academic success:
  - Strategies to recall information
  - Time management and goal setting
  - Read textbooks with improved retention
  - Take effective notes
  - Prepare for and take tests
  - Listen to a lecture for comprehension
  - Creative and critical thinking skills

This course is specifically tailored to help student veterans incorporate their personal journey of transition from military to college and design their path to academic and professional success. By emphasizing on their wartime service, making meaning of those experiences and continuing their journey towards developing as an actualized adult and lifelong learner these students will be fulfilled and successful in their transition to civilian life. Figure 4 illustrates the concept map for creating a college course for student veterans with military experience. Figure 5 adopts the concepts of Diramio and Jarvis (2011) and customizes the concept map for the proposed pilot course in this study.
Figure 4: Curriculum Concept Map for Creating a College Course for Students with Military Experience Adapted from Diramio & Jarvis (2011) p.87
Figure 5: Pilot Course Design

Adapted from Diramio & Jarvis (2011) p. 87

Curriculum Concept Map for Creating a College Course for Students with Military Experience: “Boot Camp Success: Transitioning from Military to College”
This course allows veterans to take control of their educational experience which is the primary goal of self-authorship. Self-authorship is the capacity to internally define a logical belief system and identity that coordinates engagement in mutual relationships with the larger world. By allowing students to reflect on their military experience, transition their military experience to civilian careers and situate learning in the student’s own experience, the student veteran is empowered to take their strengths and utilize them for the next phase of their life. This is accomplished through the course in three part:

Part one emphasizes on transition portion of the course. The first few weeks of the course are spent on covering basic issues of transition such as making sure that students’ military experience was transferred for credit at their institution. Students will also become familiar with the structure of their institution. In the military, it is clear who one would see about a particular issue, in higher education that is not always the case. Students will learn how to maneuver through the institution and get a sense of the hierarchy of the institution. Students will also gain an understanding for the purpose of a college education and obtaining such an education will
directly impact their future endeavors. Students will also take a number of assessments to make sure that they are in the right major that aligns with their career aspirations. Civilian careers will be covered at length and students will walk away with a clear understanding of how to take the necessary steps to achieve their civilian careers. This will be done through a number of assignments directly related to this topic in the first few weeks of the course.

Part two focuses on meaning making. Meaning making involves the self-reflection component of the course. Students will be asked to write several reflective papers discussing their military experience and relating it to their civilian life. Students will share their perspectives through active group discussions and presentations. Personality preference assessments will be given to each student to help them figure out their career path. Students will be asked to create self-definition based on the results of their personality preferences and design a goal plan to reach their envisioned career plans. Lastly, similar personality assessments will be used to figure out students’ learning style and preferences. These assessments are useful in helping students become aware of their learning style preferences but also of what their preferences are not. Students will be given coping skills and strategies to help them deal in situations where they cannot use their learning preference. For example, if a student’s learning style is to take multiple choice tests, at some point they will be in a situation where that will not be an option and they will have to write a paper instead. While writing papers may not be their preference, that student will learn how to be successful even when they are in a situation where they have difficulty.

Part three of the course is the civilian career exploration portion. Students will focus on techniques that translate their military experience into civilian careers. A large portion of this part of the course will help students prepare their goals and strategy plan for success both in
academics and their civilian career. A resume building unit will show students how to write and build their resume that will incorporate their past military experience and their current work. A final component will be interview preparation techniques. Students will role play various industry interviews and learn how to respond to anticipated interview questions.

The goal for Boot Camp Success: Transitioning from Military to College is to serve as a transition mechanism for veterans reintegrating into civilian life, specifically, higher education. The theoretical and practical aspects of the course are directed to help veterans maximize their educational experience and have the foundation necessary to obtain a successful civilian career. The literature review, expert interviews and document review all support the notion that more needs to be done to veterans who leave the military to pursue a college degree. Some veterans struggle as a result of readjustment issues, others struggle because they are not properly equipped to handle the transition to academia and some veterans believe they can resolve issues on their own and do not ask for help. Regardless of what these struggles may be, what is clear is that it is essential that colleges and universities provide programs and services that will provide the greatest likelihood of success for veterans to obtain their degrees.

Transition from military to college cannot be complete without addressing the transition from military to civilian careers. Veterans experience different types of career transition than their non-veteran peers. Along with transition to college, veterans experience transition to military retirement and transition to civilian careers. Boot Camp Success addresses career transition by showing students the value of their transferable skills and translating their military experience to civilian occupations. Specifically, the Civilian Career Exploration unit of the course provides student veterans with the skills to maneuver their way through the civilian job market by teaching them how to convert their military background to civilian work experience.
The goal of the course is to have each student design their own plan for success which includes academic success and a strategy to achieve civilian career goals of their choosing. This pilot course is designed to be a proactive, interventional approach to support veterans’ academic progress and provide veterans with the tools necessary to meet their individual career development needs. The objective is to test the course and make adjustments based on factors that are working well and those that need improvement. The goal is to eventually have the course become part of first year curriculum for student veterans, once it is tested and redesigned based on the results of the pilot phase.
Chapter V: Discussion of Research Findings

Notwithstanding the long history of veterans’ education benefits and presence of veteran students on campus, current research on student veterans’ transition is still catching up to the veteran and military student population (McBain, Kim, Cook, & Snead, 2012). Based on the literature and observation, we know that student veterans have a higher chance of success when campuses provide inclusive and supportive environments (Sternberg, Wadsworth, Vaughan, & Carlson, 2009, Tinto, 1993). However, limited research exists on this fairly new population in higher education.

This research sought to establish the need for a student veterans’ success course, examine existing successful programs for student veterans, ascertain what should be included in a student success course intended for student veterans, and design and propose a pilot student veterans’ success course that will help veterans transition from the military to the classroom and succeed in their educational and career goals. Tinto’s student integration model and Schlossberg’s model for analyzing human adaptation to transition provided an analytical framework that complemented the qualitative analysis methodology. While Tinto’s theory is designed for traditional students, the context of which it was used in this study was to emphasize that the focus for veterans is on academic integration not social integration. Schlossberg’s theory of transition was applied under the moving in, moving through, and moving on model. For veterans the moving in component is the transition of leaving the military and moving into higher education, they move through as they continue the process of obtaining their degree and move on when they leave higher education and enter a civilian career.
Research Questions

The primary research question for this study was:

- What is the need for a student veterans’ success course?

To address this question, the following sub-questions were formulated:

- What kind of success programs/courses are currently available to student veterans?
- What should be included in a student success course intended for student veterans?

Document review analysis generated four themes of student veterans’ success programs from the data collected from the public records of the selected colleges in the study. The themes were as follows:

1. Student veterans’ campus support
2. Veterans’ transition courses
3. Veterans’ learning communities
4. Veterans’ curriculum

Expert interviews provided information on the types of transition courses offered at the experts’ respective institutions and provided information on the following:

1. Types of transition issues experienced by student veterans
2. Retention for student veterans that have completed a transition course
3. Definition of student success, as well as, factors that help student veterans succeed in their first year of college
4. Institutional challenges in helping student veterans
5. Recommendations for the pilot student veteran success course proposed in this study

The discussion that follows focuses on these elements, how they support and add to the literature on student veterans’ success programs, and how these perceptions are
related to changes in higher education. This chapter continues with a discussion of the benefits of the proposed pilot course and its implications on student veterans’ success. Lastly, the discussion closes with significant conclusions and limitations of the findings, as well as, future recommendations for the higher education community as it pertains to student veterans.

**Interpretation of Elements**

Four primary themes that emerged from the research: student veterans’ campus support, veterans’ transition courses, veterans’ learning communities and veterans’ curriculum. Central to the discussion of this element was the researcher’s impression of the strong need for student veterans’ first year transition courses was evident. This study sought to determine whether or not there was a need for such a course. The findings suggest that transition courses for student veterans are needed. The proposed pilot course in this study attempts to expand on already existing transition courses, fill in the gaps, and incorporate strategies for student veterans’ success.

**Student veterans’ campus support.** Concurring with the current, available literature related to the existence of a dedicated office of student veterans is seen as a strong indicator of an institution’s commitment to serving veterans and military students. The findings revealed that many institutions claim to be military friendly and advertise as such. However, the reality is that only a small number of those self-proclaimed military friendly institutions actually offer programs, services and transitional support for veterans. Those that do offer support for veterans have made a commitment to enhance their services specifically for incoming student veterans. To accomplish this, these institutions have the support and the budget to implement such services. The allocation of funds to support student veterans is seen as institutional
commitment. The majority (9 out of 10) of the schools in this study showed institutional commitment to student veterans by providing an office of student veterans service or a veteran success office on campus. For the majority of student service members and veterans, the academic culture can seem foreign and comprised of unfamiliar rules and procedures. An office or center staffed by veterans and dedicated to providing support and making their transition to academic life more successful, can be a source of comfort, hope and relief (Woll, 2010).

Veterans’ transition courses. Building upon the concept of campus support, six of the ten schools in this study had a version of a veterans’ transition course. The veterans’ transition course takes on many different forms. Some courses focus solely on maneuvering through the bureaucracies of higher education. Others were more focused on helping students make the transition from military to college by focusing on academic adjustment. All the courses offered at the schools in this study shared a similar goal of allowing student veterans to feel that they are not alone in the process of transitioning from the military to college. This study affirms that student veterans possess many valuable qualities that are important to the college setting, including:

- loyalty, maturity, leadership, integrity
- focus on mission and purpose
- solution-oriented approaches to problems
- ability to focus on clearly defined expectations
- motivation
- willingness to help others
- willingness to take initiative
- respect for procedures
In the military, these individuals have learned to operate in complex environments. They are motivated by a sense of mission and purpose and are in search of making a meaningful contribution to civilian life (Woll, 2010, Kelley, et al., 2013, Diramio & Jarvis, 2011). These students have the highest respect for education and training and the benefits that these services provide for career and personal development. However, when highly motivated students find themselves in academic settings where they do not know the rules and feel that they don’t fit in, these qualities may go unnoticed. In the military, rules and regulations are clear and well documented and orders are precise. In civilian life, specifically in academic settings, the rules may change on a daily basis and there may be unwritten rules that students are supposed to know and some rules that must be followed and others that one can get away with not following (Woll, 2010). This is a difficult distinction for student veterans and supports the need for transitional courses in their first year of college.

Veterans’ learning communities. A learning community is an on-line platform where student veterans can seek out answers to issues they may be experiencing from other veterans, faculty, advisers and staff. Learning communities have been associated with a number of positive educational outcomes for student veterans, such as, transition to college, satisfaction in college, greater student-faculty interactions, perceptions of campus environments, and persistence and graduation (Kelley, et al., 2013). Interestingly, only three of the ten schools in this study have veterans’ learning communities. Coincidentally, these three schools (John
Carroll University, Northern Arizona University and San Diego State University) have the highest retention and graduation rates of all the schools in this study. John Carroll University does an exemplary job at incorporating the idea of comradery for student veterans through social network of veteran peers. New students are paired with a team leader during their first semester to assist in the transition, and the Student Veterans Group provides opportunities to socialize and network with other veterans at the university. Furthermore, John Carroll’s implementation of the Uvize on-line mentor network allows student veterans the opportunity to connect and mentor their peers, which reaffirms their sense of belonging to the institution. Uvize is a web-based, peer mentoring site that is a combination of Facebook and Linkedin. Uvize distinguishes itself from other on-line mentor programs because the peer network is limited to other student veterans either within their home institution or their regional area (Uvize, 2015). David Cass, founder of Uvize, posits that “the most powerful source of mentorship on campus are the other veterans”. Uvize allows student veterans to have readily available access to all veterans and faculty on campus cataloged by area of expertise. Veterans can form sub-groups by academic and personal interests (e.g. major or study groups) and seek advice from classmates and staff. This tool allows student veterans to build a culture of connectedness and promote success.

Northern Arizona University provides a College-based Learning Community (CBLC), which is a formal program to help the new student veteran with their transition to NAU through activities with other student veterans on campus, where veterans learn the academic skills and traits needed to be successful in class, begin career planning, and learn what services and support are available to student veterans both on and off campus. San Diego State University’s Student Veterans Organization (SVO) focuses on building camaraderie by providing mentoring programs, counseling referrals and conducting social events for networking opportunities. These
learning communities help new student veterans address issues of transition such as beliefs that colleges and universities do not understand their needs, as well as address issues regarding confusion and misinformation about benefits and establish a sense of fellowship and support that student veterans are accustomed to in the military.

Veterans’ curriculum. The findings of this study show that a number of institutions have developed in-depth curriculum that is created to help student veterans’ transition into higher education and increase their resiliency and ability to deal with stress (Kelley, et al., 2013). Six of the ten schools in this study have a form of veterans’ curriculum in place. These programs include: veteran-to-veteran mentoring program, career steps programs, veteran student success workshops, mentoring resource programs and peer mentoring programs. Building these aspects into the curriculum for student veterans encourages transition support by establishing a connection to the institution, as well as, providing student veterans with the support they need as they make the transition from military to college.

Veterans’ curriculum can help with reintegration challenges and culture shock issues experienced by student veterans (Woll, 2010). Connectedness and academic integration to the university have been seen as a positive attribute for retention and student success (Tinto, 1993). The findings of this study suggest that a successful veterans’ curriculum should identify transition issues, keep track of crisis situations as they arise, address cultural differences of student veterans, provide empowerment, and focus on academic success in the classroom. The proposed pilot course is designed to incorporate these findings and help students succeed as they make the transition from the military to college.
Pilot Course (Boot Camp Success)

The proposed pilot course in this study attempts to fill the need for a student veterans’ success course by combining the existing factors that are working at the schools in this study and adding missing components. Specifically, the pilot course is designed to include transfer credit information, GI Bill benefits and institutional department information into the first week. Schools currently offering transition courses either do not include this in their course or provide the information in a quick orientation prior to the start of the term. Building this into the course the first week assures that students are aware of their transfer credit status and GI Bill benefits from the beginning of their academic journey. The major match component of the transition course helps student veterans make sure that they are in the right major at the very beginning of their first term. The courses reviewed in this study did not have a major match component build into their curriculum. Being in the right major assures that students stay on track to graduate and do not waste their GI benefits on courses that they do not absolutely need to satisfy the degree requirement. The pilot course addresses students’ career aspirations in the very beginning. This is important because as student veterans are transitioning from the military to higher education, they are also transitioning into their civilian career. Their goals need to be clearly defined early in their transition to help them stay on track while they are obtaining their degree.

While some of the colleges in this study offer a self-reflection component in their transition courses, the self-reflection section of the pilot course focuses in great detail on the students’ military experience and makes the connection of how their unique experience affects their transition into higher education. The goal of this section of the course is to compare and contrast military and civilian experiences and make the leap to transitioning successful. None of the transition courses in this study focused on learning style preference. The learning style
preference portion of the pilot course provides students with the ability to recognize their learning preferences and brings awareness to areas that may be difficult for them. This awareness is key to their success as they continue through their programs. Along with this awareness, the pilot course renders students with skills that they can use when they are in academic situations that are difficult for them. These skills set them up for the ability to cope when they know that they will have to work in a way that is not their preference.

One of the transition courses in this study did have a unit on career exploration and career assessment, however, the focus of the course was not on civilian career transition. The pilot course is designed so that one third of the course focuses on civilian career exploration. Students will learn to translate their military experience to their future civilian careers and prepare goals and a strategy for success based on personality trait measures and assessments. Students will also have the opportunity to build their resume by incorporating their past military experience in a way that can be adapted to their civilian career. Students will also learn interview techniques and strategies to separate themselves from the competition. These skills are invaluable as they make their transition from military to student to employee.

This plot course is in the exploratory phase and has yet to be tested. The goal is to test the course in Fall 2016. Since the course has yet to be tested it is designed to be flexible and accommodate the future testing site. The goal of the researcher is to contact colleges and universities and select a testing site. Factors that will contribute on the restructuring of the course to accommodate the testing site are as follows: are the veterans first time college students or do they have some college experience? Depending on the answer, adjustments will be made to ensure that the course serves the population as best as possible. Another factor is the delivery of the course. Will the course be offered face to face or online? The course is structured in a
way that it can and should be offered in both delivery methods. If offered on line, the course would be structured to include videos from the instructor to provide a personal aspect. The instructor would also be available for video chat to the students. For this course to be successful a connection to the instructor is necessary, as is, a connection to the other veterans in the course. On line delivery would include group chat and group projects for students so that they can experience their transition together as a cohesive unit.

The intention of this course is for it to be three credit hours and fulfill a first year requirement in lieu of a first year seminar. The reason for this is so that veterans do not use their GI benefits for a course that does not count towards their degree. Due to the nature of the course and various institutional structures, the course be modified on an as needed basis to fill basic psychology or sociology requirements if need be. This is a factor that will be determined by each individual institution and there is enough flexibility in the material to adjust to institutional requirements. Contingency plans are built into the course for any student that may have their course activities disrupted by their military duties.

Limitations of the findings

There are a number of limitations in this study. First, sample size is always a concern when conducting a qualitative study. Although the researcher evaluated ten schools which were narrowed down from 100 identified by the Military Times, as top veteran friendly schools, a larger sample size may have allowed for a comparative analysis of the top ten schools as compared to the bottom ten schools. However, the research question in this study was looking at the elements of successful programs only. Future studies may want to examine comparisons between programs for student veterans. Also, there were three experts that were interviewed for this study. Future studies may want to include a larger sample of experts to see if other transition
issues can be identified for student veterans. Future studies may also want to add the student veterans’ perspective by interviewing students at institutions as well as experts and comparing the perceptions of the efficacy of transition courses based on student and expert perceptions.

A second limitation is that all the participating institutions are large universities. Future studies may want to investigate whether or not there are differences in programs offered by universities, colleges and community colleges. Specifically, it may be interesting to see how the different sizes of institutions are handling student veteran transition and how assess the factors that are driving small colleges to make a commitment to being veteran friendly.

Lastly, another limitation is that the proposed pilot course has not been tested. A follow-up study should be done to assess the efficacy of the proposed pilot course as it relates to student veterans’ success and retention. Future studies may want to examine first year student veterans at two colleges, one offering the pilot course and one that does not and compare end of year GPAs and student status. Also, a major question still remains as to how many veterans are opting to study on campus, and how many are choosing to study online? Future studies may want to examine if an online version of the pilot course is as effective as the traditional version.

The literature review in this study did not find information on how many veterans are choosing to pursue their degrees on-line versus a traditional classroom. However, a study that examines the success rates of on-line transition courses for veterans versus traditional face to face courses would add to this body of research.

**Implications for higher education**

Recent years have focused a great deal of attention on enhancing the experiences and educational outcomes of student veterans. However, this study suggests that the data available to support this important topic, both at the institutional and national level, remains limited. To date,
available qualitative and quantitative data both at the institutional and national is limited. An institutional best practice model for tracking student veterans does not exist. For real progress to occur, an effective system for collecting and analyzing data for this population needs to be developed. Specifically, systems at the institutional level need to be designed to identify students with military experience, track their success and retention rates, assess potential obstacles and measure the efficacy of proposed interventions. Furthermore, a best practice model for first year transition courses needs to be developed and implemented.

Based on the findings of this study, it seems that institutions of higher education can improve in serving student veterans by assisting them in their transition to the academic environment. By focusing on student veterans’ academic integration, institutions can solidify their institutional commitment to this very deserving population. It seems clear that specific first year transition courses need to developed and implemented, particularly, courses that provide transitional support, emphasis on student academic success and career development, like the proposed pilot course in this study.

**Recommendations**

**Institutional approach**

The findings of this study suggest that the most successful programs use an institutional approach to helping student veterans succeed. According to the literature, document review and expert interviews in this study, an institutional approach to helping student veterans occurs when the heads of the institution (i.e. president, chancellor, vice president of academic affairs) support student veterans by providing resources to the departments on individual campuses who service veterans (ACE, 2010). Resources vary, some examples include: larger budgets, larger staff provisions, providing physical institutional space for veterans’ centers.
a. A large part of this approach is to educate faculty, staff and students about the student veteran population. One way to achieve this is to modify the proposed pilot course to educate faculty about the student veteran population. This would involve teaching faculty about student veteran transition issues. Faculty would learn strategies on helping veterans succeed in the academic environment by being mindful of characteristics of the learners. These characteristics include transitional challenges, mindfulness of student veteran practical knowledge from their military experience, awareness of possible student disabilities, to name a few.

Another suggestion for educating faculty and staff may be for the director of veteran services to design and implement departmental faculty education seminars to familiarize faculty with the needs of student veterans with an incentive programs as suggested by expert David Vacchi, Chair of Veterans’ Knowledge Committee, NASPA. Information should be provided to both faculty and staff that explains the specific issues student veterans face upon making their transition to higher education. Faculty should be made aware of issues facing student veterans. For example, appointments at the VA typically cannot be rescheduled and if they are rescheduled it can take months to get another appointment. Faculty should be made aware of this issue and not penalize student veterans who need to miss class due to these appointments. Student veterans also face military obligations while going to school. Faculty should be made aware of these types of obligations and should not penalize student veterans for classes missed due to military obligations (Williams, 2012). Furthermore, faculty needs to be informed about the teaching styles that can have a positive effect on the learning and experience of student veterans. Due to their age and past experience, student veterans tend to respond to practical, hands-on classroom activities and a classroom environment that promotes collaboration not competition and isolation (Branker, 2009). An institutional top down approach would provide resources for
faculty training and demonstrate a commitment to student veterans on the part of the university. The institutions in this study that had the most support were able to provide more programs and services for their veterans.

**Tracking student veterans**

One consistent issue that came up time and time again during this research is the lack of formal tracking of student success and retention of student veterans. One reason was that there is no formal way to specifically identify student veterans when they arrive on campus. It may be beneficial for institutions to place the bursar or registrar in the same location as veterans’ services so that each student veteran that checks in with the bursar and/or registrar will have easy access to veterans’ services and so that student veterans can be tracked from their first day on campus. Keeping track of the number of veterans at a given institution will help justify programs and services, as well as, monitor student progress towards academic goals (ACE, 2011, Military Family Research Institute, 2012).

**Military friendly distinction**

More and more institutions may want to show their commitment to the student veteran population. This can be achieved by including initiatives for student veterans’ services in their strategic plan, offering programs and services specifically for veterans, recognizing military experience and providing transfer credits, providing financial accommodations for military students who are called to active duty, setting up on campus student veterans resource centers and providing mandatory professional development for faculty and staff on the transitional needs of military students. It seems that many institutions want to claim to be “military friendly” but the definition of that term is difficult to construe. Institutions need to show that they are in fact “military friendly” by offering programs, services and support for student veterans.
One way to show institutional commitment is to implement student veterans’ transition programs and courses such as the pilot course described in this study. Another way to demonstrate military friendliness may be to implement a web-based platform, such as Uvize, in addition to already existing services. Uvize allows colleges and universities to add a virtual veterans’ center. A virtual veterans’ center is a powerful resource that helps veterans, faculty and staff efficiently manage their departments (Uvize, 2015). The online resource helps prepare students for academic success, connect with mentors, and provide academic guidance from the time of their enrollment all the way through graduation (Uvize, 2015). Specifically, Uvize allows a supportive peer network to be accessible to students at anytime from anywhere. Uvize also allows student veterans to learn key skills and tactics they need to succeed in an academic environment before they start school (Uvize, 2015). Uvize offers on-line classes using students’ military background as a foundation to teach them (Uvize, 2015). Students are able to take these classes before the semester begins. The courses range in areas of: mindset and philosophy, time management, classroom skills. Based on the research conducted in this study, implementing Uvize along with the pilot course designed in this study may have the potential to foster an educational environment that provides tools and resources that would allow student veterans to succeed.

Conclusion

It is clear that there is a greater need to better understand the challenges of student veterans. The results of this study were significant because they contributed to a new dimension to the body of research literature on elements of successful programs for student veterans and successful elements of a proposed student veterans’ success course. This study adds to the field of research of student veterans and reiterates the need for higher education to create spaces for
learning where student veterans are welcomed and supported. Because of their unique needs, which the pilot course seeks to meet, purposeful attempts by institutions of higher learning to improve the learning environment of student veterans will undoubtedly lead to an improved learning environment for all students.

These results are only the first steps in understanding the complexities that student veterans encounter as they transition from the military to college. The research in this chapter identified several potential areas for future recommendations for institutions to follow to improve their experience with student veterans’ success and retention. The fact remains that there are approximately two million veterans that will enter higher education in the next couple of years. They bring astounding energy, discipline and an understanding of a world that civilian students do not have. It is our duty as educators and administrators to assist this unique population of students and help them succeed in their transition to civilian life, specifically college life. Institutions of higher education need be better prepared to serve these students. There needs to be a collaborative effort across the entire institution for program implementation to be successful. Student veterans are an asset to institutions. Their military background and experience provides them with a greater sense of responsibility and goal orientation in the classroom. With proper guidance and support, student veterans can thrive in the higher education environment. If institutions work to provide student veterans with an outstanding education, they will quickly realize that they add tremendously to the education experiences of everyone at the institution.
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