An Exploration of Student Veterans’ Transitions from the Military to a Two-Year Community College and Their Perceptions of Support Services and Veteran Programs

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Dawn H. Mackiewicz

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Abstract

Research has shown that two-year community colleges lack the necessary support services to assist student veterans in their academic success. Two-year community colleges need to explore innovative ways to bring support services to the student veteran, in part from either a virtual or physical veterans’ center, to demonstrate their dedication to this population. This research study used the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) as the strategy of inquiry that guided the researcher in making sense of the student veterans’ perceptions of support services offered at their colleges. Research has consistently shown that student veterans are resourceful in finding creative ways to form camaraderie within their own community and are simultaneously reluctant to accept services unless they are in jeopardy of failing a course or losing their educational benefits. An alternative strategy adopted by colleges, rarely but effectively, to provide comprehensive services is the design of a veterans’ center in a virtual setting. This approach does not replace the traditional veterans’ center; it provides other resources to meet the needs of those veterans who have limited time because of work and family commitments. To explore the needs and the use of services by veteran students, this study collected data from three different two-year community colleges located in Massachusetts with six student veterans who served in either Iraq or Afghanistan. Findings consistently depicted the needs of student veterans in their educational pursuits, how they perceived their institutions in terms of the level of “veteran friendliness,” and the importance of support services to their retention and degree completion success.

Keywords: student veterans, veterans’ advisor, veterans’ center, veteran friendliness, certifying official, Post-9/11 GI Bill, PTSD.
Dedication

I am dedicating this research study to a former student veteran, colleague, and friend, Christopher Breton, a U.S. Marine Corps veteran who has been a true inspiration and motivation for this academic work. His devotion to veteran services and support systems validated my own desire to find innovative ways to assist student veterans in their educational pursuits. The study allowed me to understand and make sense of the student veteran experience in ways that I could never have imagined. I would like to express my sincerest appreciation for all the veterans whose bravery and sacrifices have secured freedom for all U.S. citizens.
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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Veterans historically encounter major challenges in their transition from military to civilian life. Understandably, veterans seek post-secondary education as a means through which to obtain employment opportunities and to support their families (Angrist, 1993; Wheeler, 2012). As Rumann, Rivera, and Hernandez (2011) discussed, colleges and universities have become increasingly competitive for Post-9/11 GI Bill funds based on the degree to which these institutions maintain the reputation of being “veteran friendly.” Veteran friendliness relates to the extent to which institutions of higher education effectively provide essential veteran-specific support services such as tutoring, mental health counseling, career counseling, and external services geared to assist qualified veterans, such as housing and medical resources. Researchers have established that this comprehensive support is essential to meeting the needs of this unique population especially in the area of retaining student veterans to degree completion in higher educational settings (Minnis, 2015; Rumann et al., 2011; Wheeler, 2015).

Many higher educational institutions face retention challenges in general, but this problem is particularly exacerbated with populations such as veterans, who face unusual difficulties in their transitions moving out of the military and into civilian pursuits such as college, and in achieving academic success. As Phelps (2015) discussed, veterans confront cultural differences during their transition from a military environment, where life is very orderly and where rules are clear, into the world of academia, characterized by considerable flexibility. The importance of two-year community colleges in understanding the difficulty that veterans face is critical for student veterans’ academic survival and ultimate career success. Institutions often expect this population to vocalize their individual needs; however, research has established that colleges and universities that are proactive in both identifying and providing an environment of support and encouragement for student veterans will motivate them with greater success to stay in school and graduate.
Minnis (2015) explained that institutions, to be veteran friendly, need to create a welcoming environment where veterans feel valued and supported, and not alienated by teachers and peers.

In this context, the purpose of this interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) was to understand the lived experiences of student veterans’ who served in either Iraq or Afghanistan and who chose to transition from military life by pursuing degrees at a two-year community college in Massachusetts. The study aimed to provide other two-year community colleges with a greater understanding of what support services and programs geared to assist the student veteran population are successful in retaining them. The research addressed situational and academic barriers student veterans encounter and examined how support programs address, or fail to meet, their needs to assist them in successfully completing their final year.

This chapter begins with an overview of the history of the various iterations of the GI Bill that have granted veterans educational benefits, thus providing context and background to the study. The rationale and significance section then addressed the importance of providing support services to the student veteran population. The chapter also presents the problem of practice and the relevant research questions that served as a foundation for the study. The chapter concludes with the chosen theoretical framework that served as the primary lens for the research, critics of the framework, and an explanation of why this framework effectively assisted the researcher in capturing the experiences of the population studied.

**Context and Background**

According to Angrist (1993), the original purpose of the GI Bill was to offer compensation benefits for members of the military who served the country by providing financial and other support for some form of college education or vocational training. Mettler (2015) explained that veteran educational benefits were originally not limited to obtaining a college degree because
vocational training was considered a viable way to enhance the probability of the student veteran entering the work force. In short, historically, the intent of the GI Bill has been to provide significant financial resources to the veteran in the arena of advanced education or training to increase their likelihood of gaining full employment. The logic behind the original GI Bill was that such support services would prevent veterans from needing additional government funding through extended governmental benefits such as disability, food and housing assistance, and medical care; in this way, they could become active contributors to society. The first GI Bill of Rights, previously known as the Serviceman Readjustment Act of 1944, was established for veterans returning from World War II to provide support for educational or vocational training, low interest mortgage loans, and unemployment benefits. According to Mettler (2005), 51% of veterans from World War II utilized the educational benefit, while only 29% capitalized on the low interest loans (p. 345). The Montgomery GI Bill, enacted in 1985, allotted first-time active duty members a limit of $10,800 in tuition support if these individuals contributed $100 a month for a year towards their education (Hexter, 1989). In comparison, the Post-9/11 GI Bill, passed by Congress in 2008, imposed no costs to the veteran and significantly increased support, even when adjusted for inflation. It included three years of tuition benefits; a generous housing allowance; and a book stipend – all to support education and career transition (Callahan & Jarrat, 2014).

In 2013, The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs reported that 754,229 veterans enrolled in higher educational institutions (Phelps, 2015, p. 236). Additionally, Post-9/11 veterans who elected not to use educational benefits could transfer them to their spouse or dependent children. Keillor (2009) discussed how the modification of veteran benefits from the Montgomery Bill to the Post-9/11 GI Bill made it financially possible for more veterans to take advantage of returning to college. McEnaney (2011) noted that the reason behind the Post-9/11 GI Bill was to recompense
veterans for what they lost while serving the country. Maudeaus, Miller, and Vance (2009) estimated that two million veterans returning home from the Iraq and Afghanistan wars would enroll in colleges and universities. The influx of veterans returning from war, the authors asserted, would require higher educational institutions to have some plan to assist them in obtaining their educational benefits to assure a smooth transition. Barr (2015) also documented that after World War II, approximately 2.2 million of 16 million veterans took advantage of the GI Bill for higher education over a 12-year period; he cited reports that stated that in the 2010-11 academic year alone, there were 600,000 veterans in college (p. 281).

Understanding the restructuring of veteran educational benefits is essential to comprehending the conditions this influx of veterans have encountered as they use these well-earned benefits. It also provides an analysis of competition among community colleges recruiting these students, particularly how they organize their service structures to meet the needs of this population.

Many student veterans have sustained some form of harm or injury due to war. These individuals endure particular challenges, needs, and disabilities which include physical, psychosocial, and structural problems, such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), traumatic brain injury (TBI), physical loss of limbs, and family reintegration issues that can compromise their ability to succeed in completing higher education degrees. A majority of student veterans need additional services to address their particular challenges. The increase in members of the military using the Post-9/11 GI bill, combined with these special needs, has put significant pressure especially on administrators, faculty members, and other staff employed at two-year community colleges, to create and enhance programs for veterans and to streamline operations to assist in their transition.
Rationale and Significance

This study examined how student veterans who were in their final year of or had graduated from a community college in Massachusetts perceived their transition to college and how they viewed the effectiveness of veteran-specific support programs in supporting their retention and degree completion. It aimed to understand their transitional needs, particularly what services were lacking or needed improvement, to increase retention and graduation rates. Researchers have emphasized the importance of understanding student veteran needs at the college level to improve retention efforts (Evans, Pelligrino, & Hoggan, 2015; O’Herrin, 2011; Persky and Oliver, 2010). Persky and Oliver (2010), for example, examined five themes that higher educational institutions need to focus on to retain this population. These included: (a) establishment of veteran centers to build camaraderie among the population; (b) streamlining of existing programs; (c) training for faculty members and support staff on issues relating to PTSD; (d) ease of military credit transferability; and (e) understanding the transition issues of this population. The authors asserted that higher educational institutions that make a concerted effort to adopt these initiatives are better equipped to lessen the stress levels for the student veteran and, ultimately, they can contribute to the academic and employment success of this constituency.

In regards to retention, Vesiland (2013) explained that student veterans have a low retention rate because they commonly suffer from PTSD or they have difficulty relating to traditional students who tend to be younger and comparatively inexperienced. Barry, Whiteman, and Macdermid (2014) attributed veteran withdrawals from school to a lack of sensitivity by both faculty and non-military peers who do not engage or welcome them into the educational environment. A myriad of issues clearly interfere with student veterans’ ability to persist. A
profound need exists to examine and document the need for and efficacy of veteran-focused programs to increase retention rates of this population that primarily attends community colleges.

Ackerman, Diramio, Garza, and Regina (2009) asserted that student veterans aspire to attend higher educational institutions to find sustainable and active employment upon graduation; however, they require strong support services during their transition from active duty to the educational and new career setting. Rumann et al. (2011) noted that some colleges and universities have formed Student Veteran of America (SVA) organizations for the purpose of connecting veterans with one another and coordinating activities specific to this population. Hollingsworth (2015) documented this dilemma, emphasizing that integrating student veterans into the classroom is key for student retention, but they often face nearly insurmountable obstacles because of their transition from the military to the institutional culture of college. Student veterans who participate in campus activities will sense a feeling of belonging that can promote success because the student feels accepted by traditional students; however, the importance of having a separate space is critical to validate their experiences with other peer veterans. Hollingsworth (2015) asserted that student veterans’ prosper within institutions that provide a veterans’ center or lounge where they can converse with other veterans with whom they can identify. These social settings provide a space where veterans can concentrate on their studies or simply relax and reduce stress. These factors, Hollingsworth (2015) found, lead to better retention rates.

Investment in these support services has benefits that extend far beyond the educational setting, creating comprehensive psychosocial effects that bolster the possibility for veterans to succeed academically and after graduation. These services, as Stone and Stone (2015) discussed, can also help veterans develop skills to overcome societal stereotypes that abound regarding veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan as having some form of mental disability. A stigma
exists that they will be unable to contribute to the workforce and will have difficulty obtaining some form of education or employment. Empowering veterans in their transition process allows them to challenge these assumptions, to take ownership of their new educational and training processes, and thus to reduce prejudice that may prevent them from effectively re-entering the workforce and society.

In summary, providing comprehensive support systems to veterans moving from war situations into the community college experience not only assists them in obtaining their degrees, but it gives them a level of self-confidence and affords a social healing process necessary for their full re-integration into society. Together, these systems of support provide them tools to apply in securing and maintaining jobs in an intensive employment market and in significantly reducing negative attitudes and prejudices of potential employers.

**Problem of Practice**

This study’s problem of practice examines how community colleges contribute to the success of student veterans by exploring retention efforts and graduation success at two-year community colleges in Massachusetts. The study aimed to benefit the institution that was the site of the research and other community colleges committed to promoting programs geared towards assisting student veterans. It has the potential to contribute to an understanding of the experience of the student veteran by identifying what elements of support services at community colleges can contribute to this population’s academic, social, and individual success.

**Research Problem and Research Question**

The purpose of this study was to examine the impact of veteran programs and support services that contribute to greater retention and graduation rates for this population at the community college level. The leading research question for this study was: How do student
veterans who utilize support services at a two-year community college in Massachusetts perceive and explain the value of these services in regards to their retention?

By exploring the perceptions of student veterans attending two-year community colleges who utilize support services, this study provided a greater understanding of what support services or programs are most effective in motivating this population to persist through degree completion and into post-deployment career success. By understanding the specific aspects of support services that assisted veterans in pursuing and completing their education, the researcher aimed to provide two-year community colleges beyond the site of the study with concrete recommendations for refining their programs and services to help this population succeed. The interview questions and subsequent analysis of responses provided an in-depth resource to guide the understanding the true experience of the student veteran actively involved in using support services or engaged in veteran programs in the community college setting. The data offered insights for administrators and program managers seeking crucial information regarding how to better design services to assist the student veteran in overcoming academic, social, and personal barriers.

Definition of Key Terminology

This section defines terms used throughout this study and relates these concepts to the veteran population.

Adaptation. The process through which a person transitions to a different environment and the supports available to assist in this effort (Schlossberg, 1981b).

Montgomery Bill. Enacted in 1985 to assist veterans in obtaining some form of education, Congress earmarked funds from this effort for military personnel serving for a minimum of three years. The veteran was required to contribute to this educational benefit by paying $1,200 from
their own funds, and the bill matched this at a flat rate of $10,800 towards their tuition (Hexter, 1989).

**Post-9/11 GI Bill.** - Veterans who served in either Iraq or Afghanistan were made eligible for this educational benefit that includes full-tuition and housing stipend to defray the costs and to promote degree completion. Veterans who do not use this benefit may transfer it to a spouse or dependent child of the veteran (Mettler, 2015).

**Veteran Friendly**- This term is used by the Veterans Administration to determine how society treats veterans in their workplace or academic environments and what resources are developed to assist them in their success (Hollingsworth, 2015; Minnis, 2015).

**Theoretical Framework**

This study used Schlossberg’s (2011) transition theory to understand the significance of the student veteran experience in assessing the effectiveness of programs or services offered to them at community colleges during their transition from the military into academic life. It consists of a 4S model (situation, self, support and strategies) that can be used to understand the challenges faced by student veterans moving from deployment and military life as they transition to a two-year community college setting. Schlossberg (2011) explained how strong support systems in new settings readily contribute to the emotional stability of an individual. This theoretical framework served as a solid lens to understand the effectiveness of the support services that either aid or inhibit student veterans in their educational success during a transitional period from military to college life. Schlossberg’s transition theory is the most appropriate choice for examining how the student veteran perceives their experience in succeeding in the community college environment because it outlines four key components that challenge individuals undergoing transitional experiences: These “4Ss” include situation, self, support and strategies.
Schlossberg’s (1981b) model, as demonstrated in Figure 1, explores a complex system of various components that this study used to analyze both events and non-events that affect veteran transition. Many components of this model were used to understand how veteran programs in two-year community colleges have responded to the needs of this population, based on the student veterans’ perceptions of their shared experiences and overall needs. For simplicity, the primary focus adopted from the framework included institutional supports and the physical setting dynamics. These two elements were essential to examining the complexities of the student veterans’ transition into the community college environment because, as research has documented, they are crucial to inhibiting or promoting veteran success. In addition, the research examined how veterans facing psychological or physical scars from serving in either Afghanistan or Iraq have benefited from support services or veteran programs, and which elements of the support programs motivated them to continue to degree completion. The framework also assisted in the exploration of deficiencies in these services that could use improvement.
Figure 1. A model for analyzing human adaption to transition. From Schlossberg (1981b, p. 5).

The model is effective in understanding the importance of support systems for various populations who enter into transitional environments; it can be easily adapted to individuals transitioning into and through educational institutions. It effectively maps how an educational setting or environment can enhance the probability of success of individuals seeking adaption when moving from one structure to another. The model was expanded to understand how outside factors, such as family commitments and other relationship factors, play a vital role in the transition process for student veterans; however, for practicality of the study, the researcher focused on the psychological transition from war to the classroom and how support services assist veterans in overcoming these barriers to achieve educational progress.
The model was essential in understanding how the student veteran relies on these services provided by educational institutions; more importantly, it assisted in understanding whether or not these services were effective in helping the veteran move from a structured military environment to an educational environment that has minimal constraints and a great deal of flexibility. Schlossberg’s (1981a) framework proved beneficial analyzing how the student veterans perceived the extent to which allegedly veteran-friendly institutions – two-year community colleges – exhibited their practical and financial commitment to the veterans’ success by creating and sustaining programs unique to their transitional needs. These needs included counseling services and tutoring or provisions, a safe place like a veterans’ center, and others; in some cases, the college’s disability services office facilitated accommodations.

Several scholars have asserted that Schlossberg’s (1981a) theory can apply to veteran transitions. O’Herrin (2011), for example, discussed how Schlossberg’s (1981b) transitional theory can be used as an effective lens in examining the efficacy of higher education support services geared to assist student veterans in their educational pursuits. In understanding the significance of transition, Pelligrino and Hoggan (2015), meanwhile, referred to Schlossberg’s (1981) transitional theory in assessing the situational factors that interfere with veterans’ ability to meet the demands of college work. Situational factors can include family and work commitments that may promote challenges for them to focus on academics. Tovar and Simon (2006) discussed how Schlossberg’s transition theory was beneficial in assessing the needs of minority students in their transition to college and used this framework as a means to assisting this population in academic jeopardy.

Schlossberg’s (1981) transition theory can help administrators understand how to benefit any population not fully or fairly represented; the model can facilitate best practices in higher educational institutions. Wheeler (2012) substantiated the notion that student veterans who
transition into civilian life have difficulty balancing work, family, and educational commitments and will need effective support systems from higher educational institutions to remain in college. It has been documented that student veterans who feel that higher educational institutions are committed to providing them with counseling and other veteran-based support services will be motivated to remain in college because they feel embraced by the institution. Yet, further research is needed to substantiate and understand these support systems if community colleges and other institutions of higher education are to effectively create and maintain programs that promote veteran success (Olsen, Badger, & McCuddy. 2014).

To understand this process, Schlossberg’s (2011) transition theory uses 4S system (situation, self, support and strategies) to measure how support services offered by higher educational institutions can best serve the veteran population by providing an environment that addresses challenges and adopts a support system that is effective by providing a “veteran friendly” reputation (Griffin & Gilbert, 2015). Schlossberg’s (2011) 4S system views the situation from the current status of the individual, examining how the person views themselves in various events or transitions. It simultaneously analyzes which support systems, whether family or institutional, support them and which strategies institutions can provide to assist in the overall change.

Schlossberg’s (1981b) transition theory asserts that faculty engagement is a critical component to assisting the student veteran because, when these individuals do not feel embraced by the faculty, they commonly become discouraged and withdraw. The transition theory was beneficial in guiding this project – from the formulation of the research question through the stage of coding, analysis, and presentation – given that the goal of the research endeavor was to understand the direct needs of the student veterans to delineate what type of support services are more beneficial to them in their
educational journey. The framework also informed the recommendations regarding how to foster an environment that retains this population.

**Critics of Your Theory**

Danish (1981) critiqued Schlossberg’s transition theory asserting that it did not expand upon “life span” development; therefore, he claimed there was a major disconnect because Schlossberg neglected to pinpoint at what phase intervention occurs and perceived the model as confusing because it lacked substance. Danish (1981) argued that individual behavior needs to be examined using a life span development model to assist individuals in identifying and overcoming barriers (Danish, 1981). Schlossberg’s model could expand upon this concept, incorporating earlier life stages; however, the model dealt with adult transition, and therefore, it was appropriate for research that focuses primarily on adults.

Hopson (1981) was critical of Schlossberg’s use of the term “adaptation” because the theory is solely reflective of “responses to transition” (p. 37). In addition, Hopson (1981) disagreed with Schlossberg’s transition theory because this theorist did not consider that supports can significantly shape a person’s overall transition success and that the individual has full control of their own ability to adapt to the environment. Lens (2001) reflected upon Schlossberg’s theory as having some benefit in assisting nurses in the planning phases of assisting adolescents in their transition to adulthood, but he viewed Schlossberg’s theory as being too broad compared to other theorists that explored transition and its impact on various populations. Lens (2001) viewed the model as limited to adults and not capable of adaptation to other vulnerable populations.

**Rationale for Theoretical Framework**

Although Hopson (1981) and Danish (1981) did not support how Schlossberg’s theory could truly reflect how support systems can attribute to individual success, Griffin and Gilbert (2015)
emphasized that Schlossberg’s (1981b) transition theory is highly appropriate for examining the experience of student veterans in their transition. This is because it focuses on the psychological elements of transition for the veteran population; they documented how the model can be, and has been, used to address the challenges faced in transitioning from military life. Student veterans are at higher risk for withdrawing from college because they suffer from PTSD and other emotional barriers that prohibit them from surviving in an academic environment that does not have sufficient support services that will address these challenges in a manner that will allow them to persist (Hollingsworth, 2015).

Because this study focused on adults, Schlossberg’s (1981) theory was appropriate to examine the effects of transition and what student veterans need during this phase of their lives. True, other frameworks may serve research exploring adolescent transitions and individual factors that contribute to transitional success more thoroughly. However, the theoretical framework combined with previous studies on transition was ideal for this study probing the extent to which the two-year community colleges attended by the veterans interviewed for this study were providing the right type of veteran programs or services to assist these individuals effectively through their transition and to provide incentives and support to complete their degrees. In addition, it is a flexible model that permitted an examination of what community colleges are doing to assist the veteran in their transitions to the classroom in the context of integration with traditional students who cannot identify with their experiences. This framework was also appropriate for this study because Schlossberg (1981a) focused on how prior experiences, in this case, enlistment and war, can alter the way that the person going through some form of transition reflexively views themselves, which affects their relationships with others and with their environment.
Conclusion

While the need for support services at community colleges for student veterans was the key focus of the study, Schlossberg’s (1981a) transitional theory served as a strong lens in understanding what specific factors actually help retain student veterans who benefit from the use of these resources. Schlossberg’s transition theory assisted in analyzing the need for these veteran services and examined how this population can benefit from services geared to assist them in overcoming any challenges arising from their transition from military life into an educational setting. Schlossberg’s (1981b) transition theory, because it is comprehensive and includes elements such as psycho-social and familial factors, provided a structure for analysis for this researcher in understanding the extent to which community colleges are addressing the needs of veterans – including PTSD, TBI, and other war-induced disabilities -- in this vital transition.

The restructuring of the GI Bill over time has been a huge political endeavor that has continuously recognized that veterans need exceptional support systems to re-enter the workforce and be able to contribute to society, rather than expecting the government to sustain them. Vocational training and/or other forms of education provide dignity for student veterans allowing them to be self-sufficient. Student veterans who have support during college have a greater sense of independence and the capacity to succeed; the opportunity to obtain degrees successfully will allow them to continue to maintain that dignity and integrity as full, contributing citizens and employees.

To explore the significance of support services, Chapter 2 of the dissertations follows, providing a literature review of specific barriers faced by the veteran population and what programs or services offered by two-year community colleges have proven effective in retaining them. Chapter 3 defines the research design used to capture the student veteran experience by utilizing the
IPA method to capture the lived experiences of student veterans as they access support services and move towards degree completion. The study used a semi-structured interview approach with veterans who used Post-9/11 and other benefits at the community college level, and who were in the last semester or had graduated. The study aimed to understand what services have been effective and to determine the level of commitment by the administrators, staff and the overall community college to help them succeed.
Chapter 2 Literature Review

This chapter reviews literature examining the history and context of student veteran educational benefits, barriers they face in transitioning to college and arriving at degree completion, and the role of higher education institutions in supporting their success. The literature review addresses social and financial barriers facing the student veteran, which is the study topic, and support services and veteran-specific programs provided by two-year community colleges that have assisted this population to help them succeed in their academic and career pursuits.

The focus is mainly on veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan Post-9/11. This study is significant because, if homecoming veterans are not incorporated into productive life activities in the domestic setting after returning from deployment, they can become highly dependent on government services. Mental health and other personal and social problems can persist. During transition, it is essential for community colleges to provide a high level of support services to help them succeed in degree completion and career success. Studying how veterans may access benefits that allow them to transition into higher education and to stronger employment opportunities is essential. Problems veterans who are transitioning face are complex, including emotional, familial and financial issues.

This researcher searched Northeastern University’s Scholar OneSearch to write this review, using primarily peer reviewed scholarly articles to document and understand the needs of the veteran population and institutional effectiveness. Google Scholar searches revealed additional general literature to support this study. Overall, when using these scholarly sources, the researcher focused specifically on how to understand how academics have researched and identified how student veterans’ view support services provided by two-year community colleges and the effectiveness of these services to their transition from military life into the college environment.
The key words used to compile peer review articles included: student veteran barriers and issues, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), traumatic brain injury (TBI), veteran friendly higher educational institutions, and veteran programs and educational benefits.

Student veterans encounter many challenges socially, psychologically, emotionally, academically, and even financially during the process of transitioning from the structured environment of the military to college life. These challenges, if not addressed through effective support services, can seriously compromise these students’ ability to stay in school and complete their degrees. Smith and Wilson (2012) noted that the student veterans’ present characteristics similar to “at risk” students enrolled in higher educational institutions and suggested that advisors need to support career aspirations of this population to motivate them to obtain the degree that will be required for them to meet their overall future goals. McGovern (2012) explained that the student veteran is primarily concerned about internships, career placement opportunities, and the prospect of connecting with military-friendly employers that will value their service experience and productive capabilities. Colleges usually assign student veterans to a certifying official who acts as an advisor and promotes the importance of an education, and who assists them in selecting a career that will provide financial stability. Institutionally, this involves providing referrals related to issues such as PTSD that can affect the ability of student veterans to succeed in college life and beyond. As Ahern, Bryan, Bryan, Bichrest and Hinkson (2014) explained, the student veteran experience is complicated because they commonly suffer from PTSD, family issues post-deployment, and other social and educational challenges. These factors can negatively reflect in the student in receiving low scores academically; this can contribute to low self-confidence and a lack of self-efficacy that can ultimately cause the student to withdraw. By obtaining a more comprehensive understanding of the situation of student veterans, educators, administrators, and
staff can effectively address how to support this population and provide services and referrals that will help these students address comprehensive deficiencies and lead them to retention, graduation, and ultimately full employment.

Exploring what support services can ensure retention efforts by higher educational institutions can assist colleges in their commitment to those students who sacrificed a great deal through their service to this country. Ackerman et al. (2009) discussed how student veterans aspire to obtain an education with the goal of attaining full employment; however, two-year community colleges that do not furnish the student veterans with the necessary support services that will aid them in their success can negatively impact the veteran’s decision to complete their educational trajectories. The student veteran who does not feel embraced by the institution faces a myriad of barriers to their ability to succeed (Rumann et al., 2011).

This issue is significant because veterans who are successful in obtaining degrees will be less reliant on federal or state subsidies; they can become productive citizens in society. Higher educational institutions that invest their time to aid student veterans in their success make a strong contribution to society by recognizing and respecting the veterans’ service by assisting them in their effort to become gainfully employed citizens. According to Angrist (1993), the investment of educational benefits in the student veteran population has a strong rate of return as these students are able to find adequate employment, compared to those student veterans who could not fully capitalize on utilizing their educational benefits.

This literature review includes the following three strands: (a) history and context of veterans educational benefits programs; (b) personal and professional barriers to veteran retention; and (c) role of higher education in veteran support and retention. The first strand maps the history of educational benefits in the United States and the complexities veterans face in accessing these
resources. The second strand addresses the personal and professional barriers that are evident challenges for student veterans as they transition to college including family, financial constraints, and psychological challenges (such as PTSD and TBI) that can interfere with their ability to persist in the college setting to complete their degrees. The third strand documents the role of higher education in providing support programs to the student veteran. It also briefly summarizes the extent to which certifying officials, who oversee the overall support of student veteran transition, and faculty and administrators, can develop support services and programs geared to contributing to the success of this population. Conclusions for each strand are included, and a general summary of the literature finalizes the chapter.

**History and Context of Veterans Educational Benefits Programs**

Historically, the federal government provided a form of tuition reimbursement to veterans returning from war as a means for them to re-enter the workforce with some form of education or trade. The establishment of the educational benefits played a significant role in motivating veterans to attend college because of the high cost of tuition and other college expenses that would place a financial burden on the student and family upon departure from the military. This section provides three iterations of veteran educational benefits that begin with the Servicemen Readjustment Act of 1944, continue with the Montgomery Bills in 1985, and finally include the Post-9/11 benefits packages established in 2008.

**Serviceman Readjustment Act of 1944**

The Servicemen Readjustment Act of 1944 was the first educational and support services program for veterans in the United States, and it was enacted after World War II by President Franklin D. Roosevelt to provide veterans with unemployment insurance, housing, and educational assistance. The Roosevelt administration understood that veterans returning from the war
transitioning to civilian life would require time, enhanced skills, and support before they could fully return to the workforce (McMurray, 2007). Kiester (1994) noted that Roosevelt was a former assistant secretary of the Navy during World War I; therefore, his experience and compassion for those who served in the military combined with concern about transition led to the adoption of this Act. The Act provided assistance for those military personnel desiring to pursue a college education in hopes of securing stable employment (Angrist, 1993). Stanley (2003) outlined that veterans who entered the military on or prior to January 31, 1955 could obtain full educational benefits; however, this legislation seemed unfair to those military personnel who entered after this date. Subsequently, the enactment of the Montgomery Bill in 1985 provided veterans another option to enter college with government subsidies

**Montgomery GI Bill**

The Montgomery GI Bill, established in 1985, differed slightly from its predecessor in that it required a small contribution from the veteran as part of the criteria for eligibility to retain educational benefits (Simon, Sebastian, & Warner, 2010). Barr (2015) noted that any veteran who was interested in pursuing education while on active duty or upon departure from the service could set aside $100 per month as a contribution to the benefits package. However, recipients had to agree to complete a minimum of three years of service and could not be eligible for benefits through an ROTC or other scholarship fund if they were to obtain benefits from the Montgomery Bill. Montgomery (1994) explained that the Montgomery Bill was cost effective because veterans not only contributed to their own support, providing some level of accountability, but the education received would allow them to enter the workplace and contribute to taxes and other societal expenses. It was later recognized that the Montgomery Bill needed to be reform to more fully
support veterans serving in war; consequently, it was replaced with a Post-9/11 benefits program, which is described in the next section.

**Post-9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Act**

In 2008, Congress passed the Post-9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Act to provide a book stipend, tuition remission, and a generous housing allowance lessening financial burdens for student veterans returning from deployment primarily in Iraq and Afghanistan (Miller, 2015). As reported by the U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs (2012), of two million service members that deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan, an estimated 4,600 veterans were between the ages of 18-24; 10,000 represented the age group of 25-29; and 350,000 were over the age of 30. Veteran Affairs (2011) projected the veteran population to be 22,380 consisting of 90% males and 10% females and a total of 936,836 veterans were slated overall to use their Post-9/11 benefits. The financial benefits associated with the Post-9/11 educational allotment were a key motivator for veterans to consider entering college in lieu of pursuing what are for most fairly low paying jobs. Based on the substantial number of veterans who capitalize on this benefit, two-year colleges, which enroll the highest number, benefit from having strategic plans to accommodate the enrollment and provide adequate services to sustain this population.

According to this new structure of support, the student veteran receiving housing allowance can be awarded a specified amount according to geographical location and the rental market; they can also receive $1,000 annually to alleviate book and supplies expenses (Gentry & Schiavone, 2014; Stewart, 2014). The 2008 Post-9/11 GI Bill was restricted to veterans who served the country after September 11, 2001, and it provided up to 36 months of educational benefits, based on the number of service years, a condition that also affected the calculation of the amounts of housing and tuition reimbursement (Carr, 2010; Nyaronga, Toma, & Estrada, 2015). To apply and qualify
for Post-9/11 educational benefits, the veteran had to have served a minimum of 90 days of active duty since September 2001 and had to hold a status of honorable discharge to qualify (Elliot, Gonzalez & Larsen, 2011). Student veterans must complete all application materials to receive their educational benefits and to furnish the college with their certificate of eligibility stating the number of months of service, and calculating the percentage of anticipated benefits.

The veterans’ housing allowance in the 2008 Post-9/11 was based on full-time attendance; therefore, most student veterans’ were likely to take on a full course load because they needed these funds to support their families. This requirement promoted some drawbacks for student veterans’ attempting to balance that full course load with other family and work obligations; however, the veterans had the option of receiving a portion of their benefits providing they enrolled in a minimum of seven credits (Callahan & Jarrat, 2014).

Conclusion

Understanding the historical factors shaping veteran educational benefits is important in an analysis of how higher educational institutions have responded to an increase in enrollment due to benefits motivating more student veterans to attend college, including a swell of returnees from Iraq and Afghanistan. Educational benefit programs have progressively expanding in the comprehensive set of incentives they offer veterans to pursue higher educational opportunities. The 2008 Post-9/11 GI Bill provided a higher level of educational benefits in comparison to the previous iterations such as the Montgomery Bill and the Servicemen’s Adjustment Act of 1944. The influx of veterans returning to college placed augmented and new demands on two-year community colleges in their planning process to support these students; in some cases, this has meant expanding staff and programs. Many potential student veterans are not apprised of the regulations and application requirements included in the Post-9/11 GI Bill; therefore, it is crucial
for two-year community colleges to accommodate this population with support services such as veteran advisors trained in the complexities of the benefits structure. The benefits offered provide a financial incentive for veterans to attend college; however, the veterans face multiple personal and professional barriers that require the provision of additional support services to sustain this population. These barriers are examined in detail in the next section.

**Personal and Professional Barriers to Veteran Retention**

It is essential to explore various obstacles veterans face during their transition into the educational setting including: PTSD, TBI, loss of limbs, family reunification, financial constraints, and the overall psychological and emotional effects of war. An examination of these social, familial, economic, and psychological barriers highlights the importance of support services and programs that are specialized for student veterans to assist in retention and success at the two-year community college level. This section of the literature review addresses the various personal and situational barriers that present unique challenges for the student veteran in their effort to stay in school, complete their degrees, and succeed in a chosen career path.

The student veteran confronts various situational barriers that contribute to their inability to persist in higher education; many of these make it difficult for these individuals to focus in the classroom and beyond on their studies, and to manage the demands associated with pursuing a degree in addition to other obligations. Carr (2010) discussed how PTSD and TBI sustained by student veterans impact their ability to concentrate in the classroom and to sustain a rhythm of studying needed to succeed academically; services like tutoring and counseling can be essential to addressing these problems. O’Herrin (2011) noted that student veterans who face some form of psychological and physical barriers are often reluctant to accept services. Withdrawing from college may, in some ways, be easier than admitting they need assistance to succeed. In addition,
the student veteran may be in denial of an existing disability or disorder sustained from war, and in
fear of accepting a condition due to anticipated stigma or shame, which can also contribute to them
not seeking or accepting assistance. For example, Vacchi (2012) discussed how student veterans
have been conditioned to remain independent and be extremely self-sufficient, which commonly
deters them from inquiring about any form of assistance. They avoid being labeled as weak and
unable to manage their affairs. It has been the experience of this researcher, working in the context
of teaching student veterans, that these individuals may feel that, by accepting any form of support
services, they will demonstrate a flaw and that refusing the service will somehow help them
maintain their dignity and honor. This creates a complex scenario for individuals who are trying to
put forth an image of success and accomplishment in a new setting, and who struggle with multiple
challenges, which are often out of their realm of control. Scholars have documented that higher
educational institutions frequently fall short in their attempts to provide the necessary support
services required to retain student veterans over time. Simply trying to integrate this population
into mainstream services with traditional students – without addressing issues specific to their
experience -- has been shown to contribute significantly to retention problems (Osborne, 2014;
Smith-Osborne, 2009). Family issues with accompanying financial constraints, discussed next,
compound the difficulties veterans face in integrating into college and post-war life.

Family Issues

The student veteran relies heavily on family members to provide emotional and financial
support to ensure their individual academic success (Barry et al, 2014). The level of family support
a student veteran can access has a significant impact on their ability to perform well in school, but
not all veterans can rely on strong familiar relationships to support their transition from military to
college life. Campbell and Riggs (2015) discussed how student veterans who have strong family
supports had lower symptoms of PTSD than those students who had minimal family encouragement. Galovski and Lyons (2004) explained that familial relationships are complicated, particularly when the spouse of the veteran is exposed to the anger and frustration of PTSD symptoms. In this case, both the veteran and the family may require some form of counseling and intervention that is not always readily available.

Gerlock (2004) explained that frequent deployments, financial stress, and prolonged exposure to violence witnessed during combat increase the likelihood of domestic violence and other aggressive tendencies towards spouses and other family members. The family member can only support the veteran in their transition providing they are willing to seek counseling services to address these psychological problems so that the veteran can resume normal activity both socially and become stable enough to focus on furthering their education while contributing to supporting the household. Dekkell and Monson (2010) further noted that veterans who suffer from some form of PTSD often face divorce and separation, or other forms of family disunity, which are highly disruptive to the veteran focusing on school. The student veteran may discover that attending college and managing relationship issues simultaneously is too overwhelming, for themselves and for family members, which can lead to withdrawal. According to Romero, Riggs and Ruggero (2015), veterans who suffer from PTSD and who are able to control their behaviors with family support and counseling, are more likely to prosper in college (Dekkell and Monson, 2010; Galovski & Lyons, 2004). Additionally, the strong desire to provide for the family and procure financial stability long-term can be a powerful incentive for veterans to prosper in college.

Financial Constraints

Student veterans are typically first generation students from low socioeconomic backgrounds; therefore, a history of financial instability – and a lack of intergenerational financial
support -- may contribute to low confidence and the inability for the veteran to strive in a higher education setting (Evans et al., 2015). Sampson and Laub (1996) discussed how student veterans are commonly concerned more about immediate financial survival than the benefits of education. In short, they find it difficult to focus on long-term goals like degree completion. This concern with meeting immediate needs can lead to their inability to persist in their coursework. In addition, veterans who were once the sole financial contributor to the household because of military service may face overwhelming feelings of inadequacy, stress, and depression because they may not be able to return to the workforce immediately and reassume the role of provider (Galovski & Lyons, 2004). The Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits structure incorporated the housing allowance as part of the educational benefit in to help alleviate this provider burden, and to assist recipients in securing a certain level of financial independence. However, this is a complex dynamic – receiving an allowance may not bring the same level of dignity as being the individual whose work and skills and paycheck -- are contributing directly and primarily to the financial stability of a household.

**Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and Psychological Barriers**

The student veteran simultaneously encounters emotional and acute psychological challenges in transitioning from military to civilian life. Those veterans who suffer from PTSD may need additional classroom accommodations – such as longer time to complete assignments and tests if triggers or flashbacks arise -- to be successful (Brown & Gross, 2011; Church, 2009). Ahern et al. (2014) reported a 75% rate of PTSD or depression with veterans (p. 1036), which places a high level of pressure on recipient colleges and universities to both understand the dynamics of this disorder, but to also provide support structures to both accommodate and address it. However, as Moon and Schma (2011) acknowledged, most staff and faculty members do not receive sufficient training to respond effectively to PTSD and the physiological and intellectual affects of brain
injuries, particularly the cognitive challenges they present. In this context, financially strapped institutions may face challenges in dedicating resources for training of personnel to respond to this issue, which exacerbates the problems of both transition and retention. At another level, Bryan and Bryan (2015) documented that student veterans are at a higher risk of suicide or suicidal thoughts because they suffer from survivors’ guilt and extreme anxiety and depression from the trauma of war. Colleges and universities receiving them face challenges to be equipped, for example, with highly skilled crisis counselors and advocates, to help them cope with their problems. Smith-Osborne (2009) noted that some community colleges have designed programs geared towards addressing PTSD and brain injuries; some customized programs have been successful in working with these physical and psychological diagnoses through support groups, additional curricular resources, and individual counseling plans. These types of initiatives, explored in the next strand of this literature review, can ultimately reduce student absenteeism and potentially decrease withdrawals.

In this context, Hollingsworth (2015) found that student veterans facing what can be an overwhelming transition benefit immensely from access to a place of solitude to focus on their homework and decompress, such as a veteran’s center. This non-disruptive environment can be fundamentally essential to their sense of safety. Additionally, having a place to interact with other veterans can help alleviate feelings of estrangement and create a sense of belonging, particularly because the student veteran experience is so unique, and re-integrating into a mainstream campus culture is a process and takes time (Ackerman et al., 2009; Carr, 2010; Francis & Kraus, 2012; Hollingsworth, 2015; Semer & Harmening, 2015). These campus environments allow student veterans access to the same social stimulation that traditional students enjoying mainstream campus spaces. They provide a safe environment for veterans to identify with peer with similar profound
experiences, where they can feel safe from being judged (Ackerman et al., 2009; Carr, 2010; Church, 2009; Francis & Kraus, 2012; O’Herrin, 2011; Persky and Oliver, 2010; Rumann et al., 2011).

The student veteran who battles emotional stress associated with PTSD or brain injury requires a supportive educational setting combined with a socially safe environment to gear them towards facing concentration issues that may occur in the classroom. They face exacerbated day-to-day challenges in conquering emotional deficiencies compared to their peers, so having the capacity to move between the challenging environment of the classroom and a familiar place like a veterans’ center may prove crucial to their success. Carr (2010) explained that veterans who suffer from PTSD and brain injury have difficulty with memory and concentration that can interfere with their ability to succeed in the classroom; having access to a safe place, like a veterans’ center, can allow the student to deal with heightened anxiety rooted in the experiences of war and transitional circumstances.

Nyaronga et al., (2015) explained that the effects of PTSD also vary based on the branch of the military and the specific combat zone. Veteran and military students who suffer from PTSD have difficulty obtaining and maintaining employment, facing relationship issues, and assuaging feelings of aggression and anger that are a result of trauma sustained from serving in combat (Church, 2009; Elliot, Gonzalez & Larsen, 2011). In addition, higher educational institutions may not have the appropriate support services that can address PTSD or other service-related injuries in a manner that can motivate the student veteran. The role of higher education is to simplify the admissions process for the student veteran; this is essential in retaining this population during the initial stages of incorporation into the college or university. Higher educational institutions that are engaged in a strategic plan that will address military credit transfer, the ease of transferring, or
applying for their educational benefits --- which reduces fears, stress, and anxiety – experience increased enrollments, retention, and graduation rates (Vacchi, 2012). The plan should incorporate how the college and university will streamline and expedite the process so that the student has less anxiety in dealing with multiple departments from the start. Additionally, Brown and Gross (2011) further explained that colleges and universities that are equipped with outside veteran support services can assist in the transition to college, as well as, increase enrollment by having these networks that make veteran referrals to the institution available, facilitating more ease of transition.

In sum, overall, student veterans prosper in college environments that are devoted to providing the best level of support systems comprehensively designed to assist this unique population. The literature has indicated that this comprehensive approach must include innovative support programs designed to address not only academic and procedural barriers, but also psychological and social factors, such as PTSD, brain injury, and isolation, all which are leading factors of student veteran college failure. In the pursuit of future research, the importance of understanding the needs of this population and incorporation of support services in the college or university strategic plan can increase retention efforts and degree fulfillment (Ackerman et al., 2009; Callahan & Jarrat, 2014; O’Herrin, 2011).

**Conclusion**

The social, economic, familial, and psychological barriers described in this section significantly interfere with student veterans’ ability to persist in education. The implications of PTSD and TBI that impact social and familial relationships, as well as a propensity to want to focus on immediate financial needs, contribute to inability for veterans to concentrate in the classroom and to focus on long term goals like degree completion (Carr, 2010). The need to financially contribute to the family may impact the decision of student veterans to sacrifice working full-time
to attend college; however, the student veteran may realize that education is the key to future financial success and that they can obtain more stability with the educational and career advancement that a college degree represents. The literature provided a better understanding of how social and psychological challenges interfere with the student veterans’ ability to persist. Scholars have validated the need to explore the mechanisms through which to assist veteran students who suffer from PTSD or TBI thorough college services or other external resources. The research was limited in providing data regarding the percentage of veterans who face these obstacles in college; however, it acknowledged the importance of providing comprehensive support systems to assist this population. Among other factors, administrators and faculty play a vital role in student veterans’ transition to college, and the next section addresses what programs and services can potentially provide the necessary support to retain this population.

**Role of Higher Education in Veteran Support and Retention**

Faculty and administrators, as well as certifying officials, play an important part in the success of the student veteran during the transition from military life to the college environment and to degree completion. Institutions that effectively train personnel to understand the type of financial and other support systems available to veterans are able to retain this student population with greater frequency. It is essential for administrators to help veterans negotiate the aspects of support that can enable them to attend college and support their families. This is particularly true in the context of the Post-9/11 GI Bill educational benefits, including a generous housing allowance, tuition assistance based on the number of years served, and a book stipend; these benefits combined make it possible for them to attend school and forgo full time employment (Callahan & Jarrat, 2014). However, McEnaney (2011) explained that these tangible benefits do not erase the psychological and physical damages incurred by war, even though they serve as a bridge for
veterans to re-establish themselves post-deployment, and to develop their individual skills. According to Wheeler (2014), student veterans can flourish in higher educational institutions that effectively and comprehensively attend to their complex needs. Minnis (2015) elaborated that many colleges label themselves as “veteran friendly” merely because they are associated with veteran organizations and transfer military credit. However, the institutions must respond in a myriad of other ways to ensure that this student population can integrate into the rhythms and demands of college life, managing interactions with traditional students, by providing strong social, academic, and mental health supports geared towards assuring their educational success.

One key problem for higher educational institutions in retaining student veterans’ is the lack of support services such as mentor programs and veteran centers geared toward assisting this population in transition. As Francis and Kraus (2012) elaborated, the veteran center is a key hub where these students in transition can organize their thoughts, converse with other veterans, and reside in a space that feels safe. Establishing these centers represents a positive move forward that colleges can take to recognize the differences this population faces.

In general, however, higher educational institutions need to go beyond simply creating veteran centers to assess and address other educational barriers to create a truly comprehensive “veteran friendly” environment (Francis & Kraus, 2012; Kupo, 2010; Lokken, Pfeffer, McCauley, & Strong, 2009). For example, colleges and universities that streamline the admissions process for the student veteran facilitate the re-integration of these individuals, in accordance with their transitional situation. The veteran who is coming back from the chaos of war – and who has had clear orders and consistent, structured routines during enlistment – may perceive the re-entry process, the more flexible college schedule, and the myriad demands of degree fulfillment as overwhelming, and, they may re-examine their decision to re-enter college (Kupo, 2010; O’Herrin,
Structurally, institutions must anticipate these hesitancies and structure programs accordingly. The student veteran is already facing multiple challenges with the transition from military life to a college atmosphere; therefore, adding layers of bureaucracy to enter college and to integrate into this new environment, particularly when psychosocial issues are prescient, can constitute a major deterrent for these individuals.

In this vein, Smith-Osborne (2009) conducted research aimed at understanding how individual counseling and support groups piloted by higher educational institutions can assist those student veterans’ who suffer from PTSD and brain injury and how these services can impact success as they transition. Given these burdens, processes that appear simple to a regular student may appear excruciatingly challenging to a veteran. One example of successful implementation of a transitional program is Nichols-Casebolt’s (2012) examination of the Virginia Commonwealth University’s Green Zone piloted program, designed specifically for student veterans. The university reached out to both faculty members and staff, asking them to become volunteers of this program. Volunteers who assisted in this pilot program attended a training session to understand the complexities of deployment and its aftermath; they received a green sticker upon completion to indicate that they were available as a resource. To measure success, program directors distributed a survey to the veteran population; 70% of the population surveyed reported that they viewed the Green Zone initiative as contributing significantly to the perception that the institution was “veteran friendly” because formerly deployed students felt they had a team of individuals with whom they could discuss transitional issues. The concept of this program was to promote awareness by training essential staff to provide comprehensive support services to the veteran population. Support programs such as that described by Nichols-Casebolt (2012) have a dual effect: they simultaneously provide incentives for volunteers to interact with this population, and they promote
education about veteran combat experiences that contribute to increased sensitivity in the academic arena.

Retention efforts can be a difficult undertaking for any higher educational institution in general. Tailoring them specifically to determine what support services are most effective particularly for a complex population such as student veterans is even more challenging. Institutions that are trying to attend to populations such as veterans in transition commonly expect these groups to be able to vocalize their individual needs, but a lack of understanding exists that support services may be needed even to assist the student veteran in articulating the structural components of college or university life that would best aid their transition. In short, college life is worlds away from the highly organized structure and demands of military life; simply identifying what can help a student veteran to make this transition successfully presents a challenge for veterans themselves, and for support services personnel, which is the focus of this study.

Some initiatives nationally have attempted to address this dilemma. For example, Heineman (2016) discussed how the U.S. Department of Education, combined with the Office of Veteran Affairs, adopted the Eight Keys of Success Program in an effort to address veteran participation and institutional involvement. This program serves as a solid foundation to address the needs of student veterans with the aim of supporting a positive, educational environment geared towards their success by establishing measurable benchmarks and with the goal of providing some form of intervention when veterans entered into a transitional crisis. The model depicts success factors that can aid the veteran in being successful; it affirms that educational institutions need to provide a space for veterans to collaborate, initiate an atmosphere of support and trust, and develop systems to track their success for the purpose of creating more effective support services and programs to retain them (Heineman, 2016).
This program is exemplary because it provides a concrete form of early intervention between the student veteran and the institution, and it simultaneously tracks their success so subsequent interventions can effectively occur. The model illustrates the importance of providing professional development for faculty and staff; also essential, the program revealed, is the involvement of the outside community to allocate services not readily available at many two-year community colleges. The program has a high level of potential to serve as a solid instrument for administrators to be accountable to the success of the student veteran population.

Overall, researchers have documented that particularly important are higher education institutional supports – if only through coordination for outside referrals – to help veterans counter the effects of PTSD and TBI, among other forms of trauma and anxiety disorders. Without addressing these psychological challenges, which have familial and sociological implications, institutions cannot develop comprehensive programs that will assist the veterans in overcoming barriers to education success. In short, even ample and generous government support for housing, tuition, books, and supplies cannot give a veteran the web of sustenance needed to negotiate the emotional, family, and social complexities of reintegration into a mainstream environment like the college or university. The more intangible services, or those that are not easily measured or quantified, may be the backbone of the success of this population, which the college is well positioned to provide.

The creation and enhancement of programs offering support services dramatically enhance the probability of persistence for the student veteran population so they have the same ability to pursue viable career opportunities as their traditional peers. However, this population has particular needs and thus analyzing the quality and efficacy of specialized programs geared to assist this population in their educational pursuits can make a major contribution to their success. Specifically
in regards to institutional support, the literature explores the role of the certifying official, the impact of faculty involvement, veteran support programs, and retention issues that all play a vital role in understanding transition, which is the focus of the next section of this chapter.

**Certifying Official Role**

The Veterans Administration requires that educational institutions that process Post-9/11 educational benefits must employ a veteran advisor who is certified through this federal agency to submit and manage educational benefits on behalf of the student veteran. The veteran advisor is known as the certifying official who maintains the responsibilities as described in this section. It is essential to examine, in the context of this study, the position of the certifying official/advisor – an actor who plays a vital role in the student veterans’ transition to college. The veteran population relies substantially on the information and friendly demeanor this individual provides, both in encouraging them to attend school and to remain enrolled. This relationship is complex, however, because the certifying official oversees the reporting the educational activities of the veteran regarding enrollment; a negative report could result in a reduction in housing allowance to the student that could impact their ability to respond to familial and educational responsibilities because of the removal of this financial support (Allen, Armstrong, Conard, Hamilton, & Saladdiner, 2014). The certifying official must pay attention to detail, and any certification errors or misinterpretations of progress could negatively influence the allocation of the student veteran’s benefits. Miller (2015) explained that it is crucial for the veteran certifying official and their academic advisor to be sensitive to the needs of this population and to be able to work jointly to identify problem and make the appropriate referrals to contribute to student persistence and success. According to Ackerman et al. (2009), student veterans who receive effective support from their advisors are more likely to succeed because they feel they can rely on someone who understands their process, and who
genuinely cares and is invested in their educational success and overall mental health. The advisor can also influence the career path of the student veteran by discussing the correct fit and potential earnings of each degree option (Smith & Wilson, 2012).

The role of the certifying official is crucial to student veteran success because this population needs clear communication and guidance to ensure educational integrity is maintained (Joslin, 2009). The advisor who also maintains the role of certifying educational benefits for the student veteran is responsible for monitoring the progress and enrollment status of each student and must report withdrawals and academic issues to the Veterans Administration (Carr, 2010; Hope, 2015; Moon & Schema, 2014). Carr (2010) suggested that certifying officials need to be apprised of any legislation changes that could affect the student veterans’ educational and housing benefits. The certifying official must receive comprehensive training to understand and respond to the complexities of veteran educational policy changes and ought to serve this student population with minimal disruption of their benefits.

In this context, the Veterans Success on Campus (VSOC) program, administered by the Department of Veteran Affairs, was established to assist the student veteran in their transition to a postsecondary institution; it focused primarily on Post-9/11 benefits counseling and career services. However, the program originally only furnished services to institutions who enrolled more than 800 military and student veterans; therefore, a majority of institutions have failed to access this resource and rely solely on the certifying official/advisor to handle the volume of students (Evans et al., 2015). Comprehensive training for administrators and staff working with the student veteran population is essential, particularly those who assist with issues related to PTSD. It has been documented that these individuals in their professional capacity may experience secondary trauma, resulting in high anxiety on the job; they have been known to burn out over time.
Therefore, not only must a truly comprehensive program of support services assist the veteran, it must also take care of the advisors themselves involved in this complex effort (Evans et al., 2015; Francis and Kraus, 2012).

Institutions of higher education face budgetary issues that can interfere with their ability to provide the level of support services student veterans need (Evans et al., 2015). This can lead, often unintentionally, to the existence of a non-supportive environment for this population that will ultimately force the student veteran to withdraw and/or enroll in another institution perceived to be better able to support their education and transition. Lokken et al. (2009) noted that higher educational institutions making every effort to promote a positive environment revealing a commitment to supporting the veteran student in the transition from military to civilian college life will be considered “veteran friendly” and will increase the number of student veterans’ enrolled at their institution. Another issue that arises in this context is the need for more expensive colleges and universities with high tuition rates to reduce costs for student veterans and accept the maximum Post-9/11 educational benefits allotments. This reduces the financial burden to the student veteran, helping them avoid withdrawing from the institution.

**Faculty Impact**

Faculty members work directly with the student veteran in the classroom and can best assess their ability to comprehend and identify any learning deficiencies that would affect their ability to remain in college. Sinski (2012) suggested that faculty be cognitive of their classroom environment by avoiding crowding of seats; they should avoid assigning of seats and monitoring distractions, especially loud noises and outbursts as these are triggers for the student veteran who suffers from PTSD or TBI.
To provide context, Helms and Libertz (2014) defined TBI as a condition that is caused from trauma to the brain because of being struck by an object or explosion that impacts memory and vision, and that can promote disorientation. Additionally, the student veteran who suffers from this type of injury will need support from faculty in terms of making the necessary accommodations such as extra time on tests and projects (Helms and Libertz, 2014). Faculty who provide some level of classroom control can accommodate student veterans’ in their transition to the classroom and cultivate respect from other non-veteran students towards this population. Ackerman et al. (2009) conducted a study that revealed that some student veterans experience negative classroom experiences because either fellow classmates or faculty have voiced their opposition to war, leaving the student to feel unwelcomed, ostracized, and stigmatized, often contributing to frequent course withdrawals. The student veteran will not succeed in environments that promote hostility and resistance to their presence in the classroom. According to Olsen et al., (2014), the student who feels alienated in the classroom from either the faculty or other students will intentionally not contribute in class discussions. The student veteran will naturally become disengaged because they cannot relate to their fellow peers. Canto, Hayden, Jeffery, McMackin, and Osborn (2015) discussed that student veterans rely on faculty members to support a professional classroom environment and to instruct students to avoid slanderous remarks; they also look to them to refrain from requesting that the student veteran share their experiences because the student may feel uncomfortable or may be triggered by reliving certain incidents. Higher education institutions are wise to incorporate some training for both faculty and non-military students to encourage them to be more sensitive to this population.
Veteran Support Programs

Moon and Schma (2011) discussed the outcome of a program established by Western Michigan University in Kalamazoo designed to track class attendance issues, withdrawals, and lack of class engagement of the student veteran to identify root causes of behavior in hopes of addressing these problems to improve retention. The program goals were to include the entire education community in collaborating to identify the unique needs of the veteran population and to develop ideas that would foster success in offering the kind of support that would lead to degree completion. Two-year community colleges that adopt some form of a tracking system can determine the strength of current support services or existing programs geared toward student veterans in order to measure effectiveness. Scholars have noted that support programs that are geared to enhance success of the veteran population are the first step in breaking down the barriers that prevent veterans from continuing their degree (Brown and Gross, 2011; Hollingsworth, 2015). Church (2009), meanwhile, discussed how higher educational institutions are challenged with pinpointing which student veterans suffer from psychological and emotional issues; therefore, establishing activities such as peer counseling support groups might draw this population into more supportive circles, even though they may wish to remain isolated.

Vollman (2015) defined the Service Veterans of America (SVA) as a non-profit organization with 1,300 chapters devoted to assist student veterans in their transition to increase the probability of educational success. The organization represents partnerships between various higher educational institutions that collaborate to provide leadership training in this area. These types of organizations are instrumental in supplementing the services offered by higher educational institutions, particularly programs not easily implemented because of the lack of staff or resources. Vanover (2015) explained that the SVA is also effective in supporting student veterans in
navigating through various programs within their institutions and via outside support systems to aid in their transition to college. The involvement of the SVA in working with veterans to navigate through the process certainly serves as a benefit to the two-year community college that has restricted resources. These community collaborations have proven to be highly effective. Other institutions have greater resources to respond more independently. As Lum (2009) described, the Borough of Manhattan Community College, for example, which receives a high number of student veterans, was aware of the psychological barriers and resources needed to serve this population, and the institution responded by expanding their staff to include a licensed counselor and have provided outreach services to veterans to promote awareness of these services. As Lum (2009) explained, the expansion of staff and counseling services is usually the first step in recognizing that student veterans will need effective support to conquer PTSD to have the chance of overcoming many of its effects as they transition into the college.

Online or distance learning is also another resource institutions can cultivate to serve veterans. For example, McMurray (2007) discussed distance learning as an option for those student veterans’ who have work and family obligations that do not allow them to attend traditional class formats; however, faculty members and college administrators commonly need to establish some level of flexibility in order for this option to be possible. Colleges struggle with providing adequate support services to student veterans enrolled on campus; the challenges of meeting these needs in a distance-learning environment are even more complex and challenging, but they have been shown to be effective when implemented appropriately and comprehensively.

Cass and Hammond (2015) suggested an online mentorship program that might involve collaboration between advisors and fellow student veterans who have progressed in college who together can foster a supportive environment that would provide tools and resources for academic
success those who have just enrolled. Online programs would benefit those student veterans’ who have difficulty spending time on campus to participate in events or visit the veterans’ center; virtual forms of communication are an option for connecting off campus veterans with fellow students and other mentors who can provide stimulation and motivation to for the continuation of educational commitments.

**Retention Issues**

The student veteran who is overwhelmed with the demands of college may withdraw or stop attending because of rigorous training to act independently and exercise strength and self-sufficiency in the face of calamity. Callahan and Jarrat (2014) suggested colleges and universities should create a database to identify the entire veteran population enrolled because so many student veterans absorb their educational benefits before graduation; therefore, it is often difficult for the institution to track this population and its completion ratio. Norman et al. (2015) reported that approximately 50% of student veterans enrolled in colleges actually completed their degree; it is vital that two-year community colleges provide student veterans with more support services and programs to increase this percentage of graduation success.

Kirchner (2015) discussed how student veterans who feel stereotyped by traditional students may often withdraw from college because the risk of failure and being stigmatized will cause more psychological harm than withdrawing from the college that does not support them. Semer and Harmening (2015) asserted that student veterans also find that the inability of colleges to transfer their military credits forces them to switch institutions because they want to maximize their Post-9/11 benefits, and they feel taking courses that are similar to military coursework is a time waster.
In this context of attrition, Mccaslin, Leach, Herbst, and Armstrong (2013) reported that between 30 to 40 percent of veterans do not complete their degrees, adding to an increase in unemployment and financial instability for the student veteran afterwards. As Hope (2015) explained, the Veterans Administration will not compensate the institution for courses that do not apply to the student veteran degree; therefore, military credit and providing some form of financial aid can make the transition to college easier. The high percentage of withdrawals revealed through the literature is a strong indicator that support services, as well as reconsideration for military credit and ease of admission access, can effectively address these challenges and increase enrollment success and retention.

**Conclusion**

Two-year community colleges that are equipped with various resources and services to support the student veteran through strong programs, and by training supportive faculty and administrators who are committed to maintaining a “veteran friendly” institution, will go a long way towards retaining this population. Adequate training for the college community is required to reduce stereotypical attitudes towards the student veteran. The role of faculty members to promote student veteran educational engagement without overlooking their social and emotional needs, and their ability to demand respect in the classroom, are essential to enabling the student veteran to further engage in classroom discussions and learning overall. If instructors can help student veterans to feel a sense of collegiality with mainstream peers, they can be encouraged to ultimately stay in school and be successful (Helms & Libertz, 2014; Moon & Schma, 2011; Sinski, 2012). Veteran support programs hosted by the college demonstrate the loyalty and commitment of the institution to the student veteran population. The core reasons for student veterans withdrawing from college include isolation and a lack of institutional support. Although the literature has
suggested that veterans might succeed in institutions that provide adequate online programs, which gives them a modicum of support to balance family and work commitments, this format might adversely contribute to the student feeling isolated and disconnected with the institution. Additional research is required to identify the complexities and nuances of this dynamic.

**Summary**

This literature review has demonstrated the need for support services to prevent student veterans from becoming overwhelmed as they transition to college and to practically manage the multiplicity of tasks that college life as a student veteran entails. This review explored best practices that two-year community colleges can implement to retain the student veteran population, and it addressed the psychological and physical barriers that exist that support systems should aim to address. The literature also provided a better understanding of the three iterations of the government’s educational assistance programs for veterans, beginning with the Servicemen’s Readjustment Act of 1944 and moving through the Post-9/11 opportunities. Each version of educational assistance support provided some form of compensation for the sacrifice that the veteran made in service in full understanding of the complexities of transition and needs for education to promote future career marketability. Increases to educational benefits have contributed to an overall increase in student veteran enrollment; this financial assistance served as an incentive for veterans to attend college while being able to contribute to the family income and overall wellbeing. However, for some veterans, the literature suggests that the amount of the housing allowance was not adequate -- forcing them to work to supplement their income, creating an additional barrier. The research captured a better understanding of the student veterans’ experience in terms of understanding family obligations and financial commitments and how these situational factors can deter the student veteran from continuing their educational pursuits because they have
aim to be independent and provide for their families. Simultaneously, the student veteran who suffers from some form of PTSD and/or other psychological barriers sustained from war experiences struggles considerably with an array of secondary effects including anxiety, depression, an inability to focus, anger and possibly even increased episodes of domestic violence, emphasizing the need for mental health support services upon departure from the military (Gerlock, 2004).

The literature acknowledges that the student veteran experiences situational barriers that are non-related to the institution that can interfere with their ability to persist to degree completion. Therefore, faculty and staff involvement and institutional support, particularly the existence of support services and veteran centers, all play a role in the success of the student veteran. The literature review finally provided documentation of specific support services that have been successful in addressing psychological and emotional challenges faced by the student veteran and how these types of services are critical for their survival in higher education. The literature revealed that the model of Eight Key components did not incorporate PTSD as part of its approach; which could compromise the two-year community college’s ability to provide services specific to addressing this existing condition among student veterans (Heinem, 2016). Both physical and psychological trauma sustained by the student veteran can contribute to their inability to concentrate in the classroom and manage the demands of education leading to frustration, defeat, and withdrawal. Higher educational institutions may be neglecting to provide administrators, staff, and faculty members with the training skills needed to support student veteran issues. Therefore, the veteran is unable to receive the academic support from faculty members and staff because they lack the knowledge that could enhance their ability to help these students remain in the classroom and thrive in the college environment. Higher educational institutions that lack these resources will need to find innovative methods to provide support services. By not having adequate support
services, colleges and universities run the risk of not being considered “veteran friendly,” which could sabotage their overall reputation and decrease enrollments of veterans and financial income they bring with them in the form of government benefits for tuition assistance.

As the review of the literature has demonstrated, the student veterans experience different challenges than traditional students; therefore, general support services will not adequately address the core problems facing this population. The student veteran encounters obstacles in participating in extracurricular activities because a majority of these students have family and work obligations that prohibit them from engaging with their traditional peers in regularly scheduled college clubs and events (Callahan & Jarrat, 2014; Carr, 2010). Higher educational institutions that can provide adequate training for faculty, staff, and administrators on the psychological effects of PTSD and TBI, and on the general dynamics of life post-deployment, can assist them in learning how to help these students address these barriers. In this way, institutions can more effectively promote and implement strategies to create an environment of support of and sensitivity towards this population (Helms & Libertz, 2014; Moon & Schma, 2011; O’Herrin, 2011; Persky & Oliver, 2010). The student veteran has difficulty with the transition to civilian life and encounters anxiety in the classroom and beyond in part because of integration with traditional students who cannot identify with these experiences, causing the student veteran to feel intimidated within the college environment (Ackerman et al., 2009). The certifying official, meanwhile, is responsible for monitoring student veterans to assure compliance with the Veterans Administration; communication with this person is vital for the success of the student veteran who needs to become knowledgeable about the policies and procedures to maximize the use of their Post-9/11 educational benefits (Canto et al., 2015; Osborn, 2014; Smith & Wilson, 2012).
The three stands of literature-helped provide an understanding of the dynamics of transition from military to college life. The literature clearly identifies the necessity for conducting further research that will focus on what support services and veteran specific programs will prove beneficial in retaining student veterans at two-year community colleges. By aiming to understand the social and psychological barriers that student veterans face in their transition, this study further aided scholar practitioners in the plight to increase retention rates and increase student veterans overall career success in achieving a level of financial stability. The literature supports that the student veteran who faces many social and psychological barriers can benefit from two-year community colleges invested in their success. However, the limitations of research to date include deficiencies in identifying what exact services comprehensively support graduation success. By examining how the student veteran perceives the value of support services and veteran programs, this study can help institutions of higher education explore more innovative programs that will meet the needs of this population in their educational pursuits.
Chapter 3: Research Design

This study sought to explore the problem of practice, which was the experiences of veterans transitioning from military to college life; compile data from the participants of the study; and generate effective approaches for assisting student veterans’ in their transition. The purpose of this Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) study was to understand how veterans perceived support services and veteran programs offered by two-year community colleges in Massachusetts. The first part of this chapter provides description of qualitative research, explaining why IPA was an appropriate strategy to use to answer the research question(s). It then provides an overview of the constructivist--interpretivist paradigm and its application to the problem of practice and research question. The first section of the chapter discusses why qualitative analysis nested in constructivism-interpretivism, and an IPA strategy, were determined to be optimal for this study. The second section of the chapter outlines in full scope the design of the study including the procedures used for participant selection, data collection and storage, and data analysis. Lastly, ethical considerations are reviewed, including the researcher’s biases and the key components of trustworthiness in qualitative research -- credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. The chapter concludes by outlining limitations and by providing a summary of the chapter.

Qualitative Research Approach

This study used a qualitative approach to understand the research problem and the phenomenon which addressed the experiences of student veterans transitioning into the community college environment, post-service and post-deployment. The intent of the researcher was to understand in depth the experiences of the participants and, as Denzin and Lincoln (2011) observed, to do this in the setting where life events are taking place – the natural setting of their transitional
environment. The intent of the research was to capture as closely as possible the meaning individuals make of the phenomenon (the use of veteran services during their transitional experience) and to understand how these experiences connected the participants to the broader social world (Merriam, 1991). In the case of this study, the connection focused on the successful retention of the participants at the two-year community college they were each attending.

This study used a qualitative approach to explore this phenomenon. Compared to quantitative methods, qualitative approaches acknowledge the interactive role of the researcher in the process of data collection, analysis, and interpretation (Creswell, 2015). However, the researcher must adhere as closely as possible to an accurate accounting of the participants’ narratives and the meaning they build of these, bracketing bias to the extent possible, and being careful to avoid imposing misinterpretations (Creswell, 2015). This study lent itself best to a qualitative approach because the researcher desired to capture the true experience of the student veteran and to understand how support services address transitional barriers. Barczhak (2015) explained that quantitative studies require collection of numerical data and apply a specific theory and deductive reasoning, compared to qualitative studies that allow the researcher to apply an inductive reasoning approach by building upon, rather than testing, a theory.

This researcher determined that a more inductive approach was appropriate than hypothesis testing, given that the research aimed to document the lived experiences of the participants, with deep nuance. The study focused on understanding how the participants made meaning of and reflected upon those experiences. Creswell (2015) explained that the purpose of the research question is to assist the researcher in reflecting the overall experience of the participant. The next section addresses the rationale behind the research questions and describes how the constructivist-interpretivist paradigm informed the overall study.
Research Question

The primary research question informing this study was: How do student veterans who utilize support services at a two-year community college in Massachusetts perceive and explain the value of these services in regards to their retention? The interview questions (Appendix C) allowed the researcher to understand what aspects of support services or veteran programs served as an asset in the student veterans’ transition from military to college life, and which were lacking. The study allowed the researcher to understand how support services assisted student veterans who faced unique academic, inter-personal, and social challenges in the community college setting. It documented the lived experiences of student veterans who were effectively overcoming transitional challenges, and it sought to identify which aspects of support programs were useful to addressing the emotional, psychological, financial, and/or physical barriers that may have interfered with these students’ ability to succeed in the classroom and towards degree completion. One normative goal of this study was to provide insights into how two-year community colleges can enhance their support services or programs to respond effectively to the needs of the veteran population.

Constructivist-Interpretivist Paradigm

Ponterotto (2005) described the constructivist-interpretivist paradigm as an approach that has the capacity to capture not only the shared experiences and perceptions of participants involved in a phenomenon, but it also allows a researcher to document the meaning participants make of their experiences, co-constructed thorough interpretive interaction with the researcher. This approach decries positivist/quantitative assumptions that one reality or a right answer exists to a problem, and that quantitative tools can capture or measure experience. Instead, the constructivist-interpretivist approach is hermeneutical in that it conceptualizes reality not as something absolute or measurable, but as constructed in the minds of individuals. Thus, multiple realities intersect and the
meaning people make of these intersections can be brought to the surface through interaction, reflection, and interpretation during the research process (Butin, 2010; Ponterotto, 2005). In short, the point is not to prove a hypothesis – it is to explore in depth the meanings people make of a phenomenon, and to allow a collaborative construction of findings to emerge as the researcher and the participant work together (Ponterotto, 2005).

By using this approach, themes emerge naturally and develop by coding data. As stated previously, this was appropriate for this study because the researcher aimed to uncover, in cohort with the participants, an evolving and highly nuanced understanding of how participants perceived the quality and effectiveness of community college services, and the struggles they confronted in tapping these resources, including their feelings and analyses regarding deficiencies and improvements that could be made.

**Rationale for Using IPA**

Donalek (2004) discussed participant selection and its relationship to the research intent of exploring the lived experiences of the participants, as well as with the researcher’s understandings of their perceptions. It was thus essential for the researcher to strive to remove previous assumptions and to adhere to rigorous interpretation interactively while conducting the study; key in this process was careful data analysis and member checking, which are discussed below. IPA, as a methodology, has differences between its descriptive and interpretive origins. Shinebourne (2011) described how Husserl, a founder of the method, made significant contributions in validating and understanding the human experience, compared to positivist approaches. Husserl focused on the human aspect, so the researcher would be able to understand the individual participants’ experiences, and how these reflections differ from one another, to gain more insight into the population under study. Pringle, Drummond, Mclafferty, and Hendry (2011) suggested that Husserl’s phenomenological approach
was from a positivist/scientific view that could be a disadvantage to the researcher in understanding the psychological aspects of the participants’ reflections. Bevan (2014) explained that Husserl’s descriptive method did not intend to replace previous methods but rather to serve as an alternative to understanding the individual experience. As Giorgi (1997) explained, descriptive phenomenology can limit the scope of significant expressions of participants’ experiences. Lopez and Willis (2004) suggested that descriptive phenomenological methods ought to be used when the details of the participants’ experiences are needed to support the common experiences of all participants.

Finlay (2014) noted that interpretive phenomenology, in contrast, involves a hermeneutical approach, where the researcher and the participant are involved in a back and forth dynamic. In short, as Vanscoy and Evenstad (2015) described, Heidegger, a student of Husserl, advanced the philosophy and argued that description is fundamentally an interpretation of itself. Heidegger emphasized the importance of the subjective involvement of the researcher in the data analysis process. This leads into the discussion of the double hermeneutic – what the researcher thinks about what the participant is describing matters, and thus bias and ethics must be constantly evaluated. Clancy (2013) advocated that IPA was a rigorous method to understand and document the experiences of individuals who shared a particular experience – a phenomenon. While the researcher must address the double hermeneutic, deep reflection can serve as an instrument to reflect on the participants’ experiences without making unnecessary assumptions of the meaning of what is shared.

Thus, the concept of bracketing – the researcher constantly being aware of their pre-dispositions and biases and separating them from the research process to the degree possible – is important to address. Flood (2010) defined bracketing as a phenomenological approach that would require the researcher to aim to separate any prior knowledge about the population, as well as omit
any personal biases that would ultimately influence the research. In rigorous qualitative analysis, therefore, it is essential that the researcher assures that the research is reflective of the experiences of the participants and not shaped by imposing the researcher’s assumptions, theories, or interpretations of the responses provided (Flood, 2010). According to Ponterrotto (2005), the importance of the researcher to address any potential biases is critical so that the study will not be influenced by the researcher during data collection and analysis. Dowling (2007) defined the concept of bracketing in the data collection process as the researcher’s ability to evaluate their own experiences and separate those reflections on a constant basis so that the research study represents solely the experiences of the participants.

Smith et al., (2009), meanwhile, explained that the researcher will enter the research study with their own pre-conceptions or biases; therefore, the notion of bracketing is acknowledged; however, there is more of an emphasis on engaging with the participant and being able to make sense and analyze their experiences based on their responses. The interpretive phenomenological methodology was perceived to align most closely with this study because it allowed the researcher to understand the experience of the participants, and to compare how these experiences were similar and how the encounters of student veteran with services were in some cases extremely different.

One primary goal was to acquire new discoveries of the effectiveness of veteran services by using the IPA approach; most analyses have previously used quantitative methods. As Finlay (2014) explained, eidetic analysis can promote new discoveries by understanding the connections of the research outcomes and the through the ability of the researcher to be extremely observant. IPA assisted this researcher by allowing her to examine the transitional experiences of student veterans, which was essential to the problem of practice, as described in Chapter 1, because this population faces exceptional challenges reintegrating from service and deployment. The IPA approach
allowed this researcher to ask these students deep questions about this experience/phenomenon that other more positivist methods had not effectively captured.

Returning to the significance of hermeneutics, Vanscoy and Evenstad (2015) explained the hermeneutical phenomenology is designed to understand how researchers perceive the experiences of others and how the researcher understands their own perceptions. In this context, the researcher made an ethical commitment to remaining open-minded about the experiences; she attempted to the extent possible to notate the responses of the participants without personal interpretation of meanings, and she strived to understand the significance of the experience as the participants perceived it. By using IPA as a strategy of inquiry, the researcher was able to capture the lived experiences of student veterans and how the group interviewed perceived the success of their transition from military to college life. The interview questions allowed the student veteran to share how support services aided in their individual success and provided a venue to discuss how these services and veteran programs might be improved. Because the research used purposeful sampling, the data collection tapped a variety of types of student veterans in the study. The data analysis strived to reflect faithfully the student veteran experience as discovered through the process of data collection. The researcher was able to identify themes based on the overall responses. The next section focuses on the practicalities of recruiting student veterans for interviews, data collection, and analysis (coding), and overall issues related to ethics and trustworthiness.

**Participants**

The participants in this study consisted of six student veterans’ who served in either Iraq or Afghanistan and who had enrolled in their last semester enrolled at a two-year community college or had graduated from a two-year community college. The sample size was limited; however, the researcher purposively sought diversity in age and experience, which, in the methodology of an
IPA, is considered more effective than random sampling (Pringle et al., 2011). The researcher did not use any other qualifying criteria in selecting participants. The core purpose of this study was to understand how the student veterans perceived support services and veteran programs provided by community colleges and how these contributed to their retention success. The researcher determined that the study would use “purposeful sampling” as defined by Creswell (2015) because the research was specific to student veterans and their reported experiences. O’Reilly and Parker (2012), in this context, suggested the importance of researcher flexibility in providing an adequate sample size that fully responds to the research question. The researcher increased the participant pool via snowball sampling to obtain the targeted number of participants. The researcher recruited the participants by performing the steps described below.

First, the researcher worked with the veterans’ advisor at one college to identify participants who met the following criteria: (a) student veterans who served in either Iraq or Afghanistan; (b) veterans who were in their final semester or had graduated; (c) student veterans who had or were using support services, or who had been or were participants in veteran programs. Because the number of participants did not render an appropriate sample from the college first contacted, the researcher amended the IRB application process in order to expand the participant pool of participants who met the criterion as identified above from other colleges, using public or private contacts.

Once the researcher and the veterans’ advisor from the first college had identified potential participants, the veterans’ advisor used language created by the researcher and sent an email to those individuals (see Appendix A). The researcher used the same correspondence to expand the participant pool to individuals who were veterans and had graduated or were close to graduating
from other two-year community colleges. The researcher used verified snowball sampling, respecting confidentiality to its fullest, to recruit additional participants.

Once the veterans’ advisor and/or the researcher received confirmation of interest from the veterans who were willing to participate, the researcher followed up with the participants directly by sending additional information about the research study. The researcher also verbally contacted them to answer any questions, and then she proceeded to send them an informed consent form (Appendix B) for signature and established an interview schedule. The researcher aimed to interview six to eight participants. Six individuals were involved in the study.

The researcher collected the data by interviewing six student veterans of which four of the six participants had successfully graduated and two were in their last semester at a two-year community college in Massachusetts, at the time the study was conducted. Five males and one female veteran who served in either Iraq or Afghanistan participated in study. Dave was a graduate of College One and Otto was in his last year at the same two-year community college. Clayton, John, and Brody were graduates of College Two, and Martha was in her last semester at College Three. Pseudonyms were given to each of the veteran participants to protect their identity and their confidentiality. After careful review of the transcripts, the researcher sent the text to each of the participants to give them the opportunity to clarify and correct any misconceptions, or to amend the text of the interview.

**Dave**

Dave was a U.S. Marine Corps Veteran who deployed to Iraq and did not immediately attend college upon his return from combat. Dave attended a college in Florida briefly, but he dropped out, attributing his difficulties to PTSD and his lack of preparedness to attend college.
After 10 years, Dave decided to return to college and use his veteran educational benefits at a two-year community college; he was in his last semester at the time of the interview.

John

John was a U.S. Marine Corps Veteran who served one tour in Iraq in Operation Iraqi Freedom; he received honorable discharge in 2007. At the time of discharge, John reported that Congress was only beginning to work on the Post-9/11 educational benefit package, so he worked in a maintenance position and later decided to attend college to secure a better job and to enhance his career possibilities. John initially attended a four-year institution for a semester and realized that there were not adequate services for veterans there, so he decided to attend a two-year community college. John successfully graduated and went on to get his bachelor’s degree; he ultimately pursued and received his MBA degree. In addition, John, at the time of the interview, was supporting other veterans in his current employment position, and, prior to moving into that role, he served as a work-study support person and later as a certifying official at the community college. In his role as a certifying official, John formed a veteran’s weekly meeting to educate veterans on what benefits they were entitled to beyond the educational bill. In addition, as a student at the two-year community college, he founded a veteran’s organization to build camaraderie among the student veterans’ so they could share and exchange experiences, and to provide a venue of support, largely because the college lacked a veterans’ center when he was enrolled.

Brody

At the time of the interview, Brody, was a U.S. Army Veteran who served in Iraq; he received honorable discharge in 2008. He attended one two-year community college and was dissatisfied with the advising he received, claiming he was directed to take unnecessary courses, which prompted him to transfer to another two-year community college. Brody was enrolled at the
time of the interview as a first-generation student, and he successfully attained his associates’
degree. In addition, Brody was simultaneously working in law enforcement and said he was
enjoying his career.

Martha

Martha, a U.S. Army Veteran, served in 1980, stationed in Germany. Martha then joined
the Army Reserves in 2003 after a long break in service and was deployed to Iraq in Operation
Freedom. She was honorably discharged in 2005. Because of delays in pursuing higher education
related to her disability and family issues, she could not receive her Post-9/11 benefits because she
did not apply within 10 years after discharge from service. However, she was eligible for benefits
from the U.S. Division of Vocational Rehabilitation which are provided to disabled veterans in lieu
of Post-9/11 educational support, and which cover a student veteran’s expenses to include 100%
tuition reimbursement, a book stipend, and a generous housing allowance. The Post-9/11 benefits
cover up to 36 months of educational benefits compared to Vocational Rehabilitation benefits,
which expand to the level of a master’s degree. Martha attended one two-year community college
but had to withdraw because she moved. Martha, at the time of the interview, was attending
another community college in her new location and was in her final semester.

Clayton

Clayton a U.S. Marine Corps Veteran, had served two deployments in Iraq and initially used
the Montgomery Bill for schooling because he received honorable discharge in 2007 and the Post-
9/11 bill was not enacted until 2008. Clayton successfully completed his associate’s degree and
later pursued his bachelor’s degree. Clayton, at the time of the interview, was serving as an
certifying official assisting veterans at a two-year community college. He was supporting them in
all facets of accessing veteran educational benefits and other veteran-related services in the community.

Otto

Otto, a U.S. Army Veteran, served for two-years, had a small break in service, and later joined the National Guard as a mechanic. He reported that he served one deployment to Iraq from 2004 to 2005 and, at the time of the interview, he was working as a U.S. Army National Guard recruiter. He also worked with the veterans’ advisor at the community college he was attending, assisting with bringing in new recruits. He was in his last semester when interviewed and had used 10 months of his Post-9/11 educational benefits; he later transferred the remaining 26 months to his dependent since he received a full tuition stipend through the Army National Guard.

Research Environment

The research site selected for this study, a suburban, public community college, was one of 15 two-year community colleges in Massachusetts. The researcher obtained permission from the director of institutional Research to conduct the study after the researcher had secured approval from Northeastern University Institutional Review Board (IRB). The student researcher also obtained IRB permission to expand to recruit other veteran graduates from other two-year community colleges.

Procedures

Upon the formal approval from the IRB at Northeastern University, the researcher formalized recruitment process as described above. The research study aimed to protect the integrity and guidelines as outlined by the IRB process in relation to human participants. The following section discusses data collection and analysis, as well as ethical considerations that were
adhere to, including trustworthiness, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, and reporting of the data, with full accountability.

**Data Collection**

The participants were identified, and recruitment followed the Northeastern University IRB process. The researcher provided a consent and release form to each of the participants who agreed to be a part of the research study. The data was collected through interviews ranging from 45-60 minutes, using Skype. The use of semi-structured interviews allowed the researcher to use formalized questions as a foundation and to remain open to further developments during the interview process.

As Rubin and Rubin (2012) discussed, the best method to understanding participants’ responses are to both record data and simultaneously capture non-verbal messages. Initial questions prompt additional open-ended questions, which provide an opportunity to obtain a deeper understanding of the participants’ experiences. Rowley, Jones, Vassiliou and Hanna (2012) emphasized the importance of the semi-structured interview because this approach lends itself to flexibility and places no limits on the participants in the study, who can openly discuss other concerns. It also allows the researcher to be open to further inquiry. This method requires the researcher to have strong listening skills to be able to elicit data and interpret the experience accurately (Seidman, 2006).

Creswell (2015) explained that qualitative research provides the researcher with an opportunity to become close to the participant and understand what they are expressing through the interview dialogue. By gathering the IPA data through a Skype format using semi-structured interviews, the researcher was able to capture the true meaning – to the extent possible – of what the participant was describing as they reflected upon their experiences. While direct face-to-face
interviews might have been ideal, Skype is a strong alternative when a researcher faces geographical constraints. The researcher was committed to further inquiries and clarification. The researcher made sincere attempts to build a dialogue with the participant without influencing their responses and documented accurate responses by recording the interviews to avoid compromising the process.

After conducting the interviews, the researcher used relevant transcribing software to record the accuracy of the responses. The researcher shared this data with the individual veteran participants to ensure the accuracy of the participant responses while maintaining data integrity.

Rodman, Fox, and Doran (2015) strongly suggested that the researcher listen to the audio version of the transcript to avoid adding in the researchers’ own biases to what the participants have conveyed in the interview process. This is a critical step in the entire transcription process that assures that the research reflects, as closely as possible, the directly expressed experience of the participant rather than the researcher’s interpretation. The researcher offered to conduct additional interviews with the participants to fill gaps or enrich the data collection; however, the first interviews and subsequent transcript review by the participants elicited rich and detailed enough data that a second interview was determined to be unnecessary by both the researcher and the participants.

Jeong and Otman (2016) suggested that a secondary interview is one approach that allows the researcher to use this as a venue to capture more information and to clarify information provided from the interviewee in the initial interviews. The researcher had taken into account the consideration of the participants’ time in conducting the study; therefore, the researcher explained at the onset of the study the full-time commitment of the interview process and explained that both researcher and participant would clarify together whether or not a second interview was needed for clarification or further investigation. As noted above, this was not necessary.
Data Analysis

Shinebourne (2011) explained that the IPA inquiry and analysis provide a clear depiction of the overall experiences of the participants, and the process captures similarities and differences related to the phenomenon, which, in this case, was the transition of veterans returning from military service and deployment into community college life. The research questions were answered through data collection and analysis that align with Ponterotto’s (2006) term “thick description” – a method that captures the emotions, as well as the concrete descriptions, perceptions, and meaning making of the expressed lived experiences of the participants in the study. This approach was a suitable choice for this study. It allowed the researcher, through conversation and interpretive collaboration, to capture the perceptions and reflections of student veterans. She interviewed them about the quality of college support services received and the extent to which these services addressed any transitional challenges to the success of their journey adapting to the world of academia after a long period immersed in military life, and to eventual retention for degree completion.

This study particularly addressed the barriers or support systems that either enabled or encouraged veterans to succeed in the academic environment and examined the effectiveness of services that supported veterans in periods of transition. It was guided by Ponterotto’s (2006) assertions that thick description is essential to documenting the data, representing the unfolding of the phenomenon and in bolstering the accuracy of the data collection and analysis.

Kuntz (2010) noted that researchers must aim to refrain from applying their own assumptions by using various tools to directly analyze the data collected from the participants. This helps to avoid misrepresentation of the participants’ contributions and the meaning they derive from
reflecting on their experiences, assisting the researcher in adhering closely to the structure and content of the data collected throughout the analytical process.

The steps outlined below assisted the researcher in employing reliable methods for analyzing the data to carry out an IPA study that, as closely as possible, reflects the experiences and reality of the participants. Shaw (2010) strongly recommended that the researcher keep a reflective diary to document and reflect upon the process of data collection and analysis and maintain an accurate audit trail to provide a clear and accurate depiction of how the data correlates with the researcher’s interpretations. This researcher followed these procedures, and she used Shaw’s (2010) data analysis approach, employing the following steps:

**Step 1.** The researcher became familiar with the data by reviewing the transcripts and making careful notations of her initial observations and interpretations of the participants’ stories and their reflections on and interpretations of their experiences (Shaw, 2010). This step involved reading the transcripts several times to ensure accuracy of comprehension of the data; the researcher also listened carefully to the recordings both to correct any inaccuracies that might have occurred during the commercial transcription process; this permitted her to become more deeply immersed in the data, and to note and document subtleties such as tone of voice, emotive expressions, pauses, etc. (Smith, et al 2009).

**Step 2.** Shaw (2010) suggested that, during this review of the transcripts, the researcher should begin to identify initial themes and write a descriptive summary of them to capture both content and any emotions shared by the participant as they respond to the interview questions. During this stage, the researcher followed this guidance and began to establish initial interpretations to identify a multiplicity of preliminary themes.
**Step 3.** This step involved clustering multiple themes based on preliminary immersion in, and analysis and interpretation of, the data. Shaw (2010) emphasized the importance of clustering themes and asserted that this process is significant as the researcher begins to share the experiences of the participant. During this stage, the researcher performed clustering as outlined by Shaw (2010); she also employed the technique of the method of memoing as described by Creswell (2015) to clarify and identify a more comprehensive set of themes, and to identify any components that might eventually contribute to the development of grounded theory.

**Step 4.** As Shaw (2010) suggested, finalizing themes often requires the researcher to refer back to the initial transcripts to check for accuracy of interpretation and analysis. During this phase of the data analysis, a researcher identifies patterns shared by the participants across the transcripts, and analyzes individual interviews in light of these patterns through an iterative process (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Accordingly, the researcher established patterns and conducted a deep analysis of the individual interviews. She also consistently was aware of and fulfilled adherence to ethical considerations – including but not limited to – trustworthiness, credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability -- to ensure the integrity of the data analysis. The criteria and the procedures the researcher used to meet these standards are outlined in detail in the following section.

**Ethical Considerations**

The researcher strictly adhered to the policies set forth by the Northeastern University IRB to avoid any harm to the participants in the study. Participant confidentiality was preserved to ensure the privacy and trust of participants who agreed to be a part of the study. Each participant received a pseudonym of their own choice to protect their identity. In addition, the participant established the option to skip any questions that they may have felt uncomfortable responding to;
the researcher also fully agreed to discontinue their participation at any time if they wished, which did not occur. These steps were outlined in a release form that was signed by the participants after the researcher verbally explained the study and answered individual questions. The transcriptions of the recorded data were password secured on the researchers’ personal laptop, and additional backup storage using a USB device, including any files associated with this research, were also password protected to ensure data protection and integrity.

**Trustworthiness**

Josselson (2013) noted that the interview process requires the researcher to build rapport with the participants, to listen carefully, and to make accurate notations during the interview process. This practice required the researcher to use open-ended questions and clarify the information during the interview process; she was also flexible and thorough while conducting the extensive interviews, which allowed for a thick and rich collection of data and which provided the opportunity to clarify and make corrections to assure trustworthiness. Participant reviews of the transcripts (member checking) also bolstered trustworthiness. The researcher did not need to conduct a second interview to expand or clarify information provided in the first interview, and she discussed this and came to an agreement for one interview only with the participants. As Lincoln and Guba (1985) emphasized, the researcher aims to provide an accurate account of the data collected; therefore, the methods as mentioned above fully complied with this vital aspect of conducting a qualitative study

**Credibility**. Brocki and Weardon (2006) explained that validity checks can ensure that the information collected is credible. Credibility in this study was assured by the researcher taking accurate notes after each interview to assist with protecting the integrity of the data and to allow the
researcher documentation from which to address and remove her own assumptions and personal biases, to the extent possible.

The participants in this study were veterans who had served in either Iraq or Afghanistan; consequently, some of the participants had suffered from some form of PTSD. The researcher was sensitive to the existence of this condition, assuring participants they could refrain from answering any of the questions at any time. Additionally, she provided ample time for the participants to respond to the questions and continued to build rapport so that they were comfortable enough to be open in their responses. This process resulted in the participants providing candid responses to and reflections of their experiences, which strengthened the credibility of the study.

**Transferability.** The research study focused on how the student veterans’ perceived support services; this information can help to enhance the services offered at this institution, as well as, other two-year community colleges. The researcher acknowledges limitations to transferability, given the small sample and the fact that the backgrounds of the student veterans’ may not coincide with those of peers at other two-year community colleges. However, the participant pool was representative of the kind of student veteran that negotiates the transition from military to college life and that accesses available services. This, in addition to the thick, rich description, supports transferability in that the documentation of the positive aspects and limitations of the support services, as described by the participants in this study, may provide insights to other two-year community colleges serving veteran populations. The researcher strived to conduct a study that followed Ponterotto’s (2006) definition of “thick description” so that the research would offer a rich account of the experiences of student veterans and the emotions associated with transitioning from serving the military with deployment, and entering an educational setting.
Dependability. As Lincoln and Guba (1985) observed, credibility and dependability are complementary in a qualitative research process. In this context, to enhance the techniques used to provide credibility, this researcher attained an audit trail outlining the process of research. The audit trail included all aspects of the conceptualization of the research problem and purpose; recruitment practices and the rationale behind participant selection; explanations of data collection and analysis; particularly the strategies used to connect emerging themes; and as mentioned above, the keeping of notes throughout, all to systematically address biases.

Confirmability. Shenton (2004) defined the notion of confirmability as the researcher having the awareness of and commitment to separating personal biases from the research study throughout the entire process of research design, interviewing, and data analysis and presentation. Crucial steps to assure that the researcher does not incorporate bias include first documenting and analyzing positionality, and then keeping a reflexive journal to document feelings and to identify biases that arise as the researcher interacts with the participants, studies the data, codes and analyses data, creates themes, and presents results. This researcher kept a reflexive journal and re-examined it throughout the entire process to be aware of and address biases that arose. The next section will provide a more detailed explanation of how the researcher approached removing biases to focus directly on the interview process by using clarification techniques, including effective note-taking (Creswell, 2015).

Potential Research Bias

As an Certifying Veterans Official/Advisor who served student veterans’ in a previous role, my experience is that some institutions focus on the needs of new enrollments rather than retaining their current veteran population. Keeping this in mind, and as Briscoe (2005) described, I have attempted to be aware of my positionality and separate emotions from this research to avoid pre-
judging the participants in this study or the institutions that serve them. As Machi and McEvoy (2009) explained, a researcher must strive to remove their own biases to protect the content of the research study. This researcher acknowledged her positionality and focused on accurate fact finding measures that promoted a reliable understanding of the challenges student veterans face.

Merriam (1991) emphasized the importance of the researcher to remain objective and separate themselves from the researched data and the participants in the study. In addition, Lopez and Willis (2004) explained that the researcher must attempt to set apart prior knowledge regarding the population to remain unbiased and ethical (p. 727). The importance of removing my own biases in this role was important as I began to capture the lived experiences of the student veterans who utilized support services or who were actively involved in any existent veteran supported service programs. This was accomplished by adherence to the techniques of trustworthiness, described above.

**Limitations**

As with any research study, IPA involves constraints because of the limited sample. The study used purposeful sampling that limited the data collection process; indeed, it is non-conclusive in several ways, for example, it did not include those veterans not deployed to either Iraq or Afghanistan. The goal of the study was to understand the veteran experiences in-depth to provide insights that might assist other community colleges, or the institution(s) that was the site of this study, in the design and implementation of service programs. Similar programs may benefit from this research; however, other institutions may not have the resources and funding to accommodate veteran students in similar ways in their transition.
Summary

This chapter provided an explanation of the methodology that supported the exploration of how student veterans perceive their experiences transitioning from a military structured environment to a two-year community college, particularly their use of support services or affiliations with veteran-supported programs. The study has some limitations because it did not examine all student veterans enrolled at the two-year community college; however, as the chapter outlined, the IPA approach allowed the researcher to document and understand the impact of various aspects of military service and deployment on student veterans’ period of moving into and adjusting to college life. How support services were critical in assisting the student veteran in their academic success was systematically studied through careful data collection and analyses through the methods outlined in this chapter, from within a qualitative approach grounded in the constructivist-interpretivist paradigm. The importance of making the connections between support services and veteran programs and veteran success in college assisted the researcher in making recommendations to other institutions regarding effectiveness and possible improvements; these are discussed in Chapter 5 following a full report and analysis of the findings, which are documented in the next chapter.
Chapter 4: Findings and Analysis

The purpose of this IPA study was to understand how veterans perceived support services and veteran programs offered two-year community colleges in a suburban area in Massachusetts. It aimed to explore the challenges veterans face in accessing financial and other support services to attend a two-year community college using Schlossberg’s (2011) transitional theory and transitional model as a framework to inform the researcher’s understanding of the process through which the student veteran makes the necessary transition to college from the military environment. The qualitative research study used the IPA methodology as part of the research design to gain deeper insight into how the student veteran receiving veteran educational benefits perceived the level of support services offered. The research purported to identify deficiencies in support services to document what student veterans require to successfully transition from military to college life. The goal of the research study was to understand what two-year community colleges can do to make the transition to college for veterans a smoother one and what best practices can be adopted to address their needs and sustain this population.

The data was collected by interviewing six student veterans of which four of the six participants successfully graduated, and of which two were in their last semester at a two-year community college in Massachusetts, at the time the study was conducted. Five males and one female veteran who served in either Iraq or Afghanistan were the participants included in the study. Profiles of each participant are included in Chapter 3. Table 1 illustrates the participants’ experience, connecting their overall responses with the themes explored in this chapter.
Table 1.

Summary of the Participant Experiences

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Dave</th>
<th>John</th>
<th>Brody</th>
<th>Martha</th>
<th>Clayton</th>
<th>Otto</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Transition Difficulty</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgment of PTSD</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complexities of Applying for Educational Benefits</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Receipt of assistance in applying for educational benefits</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial aid awareness</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Veterans’ Center Existence</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Importance of having a Veterans’ Center</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive Encounter with the Veteran Advisor</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The research data revealed eight main themes and 10 sub-ordinate themes. These included:

(1) *The transition from military to college life* with a subordinate theme of (a) *PTSD*; (2) *The complexities of applying for educational benefits* with the subordinate themes of; (a) Accessing direct personal assistance to apply; and (b) *Financial aid awareness*; (3) *The use of support services* with the subordinate theme of; (a) *The non-use of support services*; (4) *The existence or non-existence of veterans’ center* with the subordinate theme of; (a) *The benefits of having a veterans’ center*; (5) *The veteran advisor* with the subordinate theme of; (a) *The limitations of the veteran advisor*; (6) *Faculty accessibility and support* with the subordinate theme of; (a) *Faculty understanding of veteran transition*; (7) *Traditional students and veterans’ integration* with the subordinate themes of; (a) *Difficulties of traditional students understanding the veteran experience*,
and (b) Student veterans’ inability to relate to traditional students; (8) Veteran friendliness with the subordinate theme of; (a) Suggestions for promoting veteran services from a veterans’ perspective.

The following figure outlines the superordinate themes accompanied by sub-themes designed for understanding the student veterans’ transition and the need for support services, as well as how they view all aspects of college life and the transition.

Table 2

Summary of Themes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Superordinate Theme 1: The transition from military to college life.</th>
<th>Subthemes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The participants’ reflection on their transition with a focus on specific barriers that were encountered and acknowledgement of the effects of PTSD in this transition.</td>
<td>(a) PTSD</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Superordinate Theme 2: The complexities of applying for educational benefits</th>
<th>Subtheme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The participants’ experience in applying for benefits and whether they were able to seek assistance from the institution or other means, as well as, awareness of their eligibility for financial aid.</td>
<td>(a) Accessing direct assistance to apply (b) Financial aid awareness</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Superordinate Theme 3: The use of support services</th>
<th>Subtheme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Determined whether the participants used support services or whether they declined to use support services.</td>
<td>(a) The non-use of support services</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Superordinate Theme 4: The existence or non-existence of veterans’ centers</th>
<th>Subtheme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The participants’ disclosed whether the two-year community college hosted a veterans’ center and how this center aided in their academic and personal success.</td>
<td>(a) The benefits of having a veterans’ center</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Superordinate Theme 5: The veteran advisor</th>
<th>Subtheme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The participants’ experience in working with the veteran advisor and what support was accessed. Also, the limitations of the veteran advisor in terms of availability and overall capacity to support veterans in various areas.</td>
<td>(a) The limitations of the veteran advisor</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The Transition from Military to College Life

The data confirmed that the transition from military to college life is difficult for student veterans who were accustomed to structured military routines and lifestyles; the flexibility of college life, as the participants outlined, presented unanticipated challenges. Additionally, some student veterans regularly experience the effects of PTSD, which can interfere with their ability to succeed in a college atmosphere – socially, academically, and emotionally. The veterans in this study had not been in school for a period of time, creating a gap which presented obstacles to a smooth transition, as was evidenced by the interviews. This section examines these issues under the theme, The transition from military to college life, with the subordinate theme of Addressing PTSD, including how it impacts of transition and the difficulties veterans with this disorder face.

All six participants shared similar barriers and difficulties during their transition from military to college life to which they responded with a variety of strategies, exhibiting creativity and resilience to move towards their goals in a sustained way, despite delays. In discussing issues that interfered with their capacity to fulfill academic tasks, a majority of the participants noted that
PTSD caused problems specific to their situation that other students did not face, particularly in relation to concentration in the classes and completing assignments. Acknowledging that they confronted unique challenges was important in that it allowed the participants to accept their status and move from a certain level of paralysis into problem solving mode, seeking support services, also a key theme that emerged in this study.

Dave, for example, specifically said he had difficulty transitioning and was unable to consider college soon after leaving service because he battled with PTSD that led to his alcoholism as a response to these stress factors. As Dave stated:

My transition from military life to civilian, uh, wasn't a good one. I got back from, uh, the war in the Middle East and I really didn't have, uh, the wherewithal to understand that I had PTSD or anger issues or anything like that. So, I took it out on alcohol.

Dave acknowledged that he was not college-ready because he needed to be able to recognize the effects of war. He attributed his lack of desire to both enroll and persist in school, even though he had access to the GI Bill, to PTSD struggle that resulted from his service in Afghanistan and that led to his abusing alcohol to cope. He stated that taking on the stressors of academic life given his active PTSD and alcohol use “just wasn’t a good mix for me.”

This admittance of being overwhelmed during the transition was a common thread in the transitional experience; as the researcher observed from the data analysis, the transition for the student veteran begins immediately after leaving service. Attending college is a secondary part of the transition for them, representing another layer of post-military challenges. For example, some of the student veterans participating in this study needed to access medical, mental health, and other Veteran Administration resources before pursuing a college education; all had to negotiate seeking financial support as a prelude to entering college; several sought employment as their first transition
experience. Throughout this process, accessing support was key, as Dave, stated, “You kind of need that good guide and that’s what's going to keep you going so you don't give up from the beginning, you know?”

Adding to a general sense of being overwhelmed during the transition, many of the participants were struggling regarding whether to pursue more immediate gains like employment or to activate the patience and perseverance to reach for longer-term goals, like obtaining a college education, to improve their career status. For example, John explained that he originally thought the transition from military to civilian life meant seeking some form of employment and that, at the beginning, college was not on his radar. He believed many of the skills garnered during his military career would assist him tremendously in seeking employment and that “actually, [making] pretty decent money” would be “easy with my background and my credential from the service.” He, like others, had to adjust to the idea that he would require further training through college. In discussing transitional barriers with Brody and Martha, both admitted that they needed to cope and adjust to civilian society and seek assistance to deal with PTSD immediately, before they could consider pursuing their educational pursuits. Martha also attempted employment as an option because she did not see herself as a college student. She expressed, “At one time, I was going through some hard times and one of my friends said ‘Hey, why don't you come back to school?’ I'm like, ‘No way.’” Consequently, Martha did not identify an immediate interest in the pursuit of college, which made the transition once she decided to attend even more difficult. Clayton also accessed unemployment benefits and then worked after discharge from the service to support his family. Clayton stated, “When I got out of the military, I collected unemployment for a year because I didn't know what I wanted to do. I ended up working for the Post Office for three and a half years.” Having worked prior in less than ideal jobs constituted a motivating factor for some of the
participants to negotiate the transition to and completion of their college degrees, seeking longer-term gains. Otto, from the start, had viewed college as a better option. He expressed that his military training was an asset to his transition and enhanced his ability to perform in college.

Thus, the transition from military life to college, as the interviews revealed, was a complex process that began prior to enrollment and immediately after discharge. Each of the participants expressed their distinct need to delay or pursue education based on their immediate goals and circumstances after leaving the service. All revealed, however, that they went through a process of discernment and initial transitional experiences before enrolling, and that the goal of moving toward options that would increase job satisfaction and earning potential emerged as important for them, motivating them to overcome challenges. Although this section disclosed PTSD as one of the barriers of transition and a reason in some cases for delaying college, the next section focuses solely on how PTSD influenced the participants’ experiences.

**Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)**

Five of the six participants discussed this theme, and each one acknowledged how PTSD is a primary barrier to overcome before entering and while within a traditional college setting. PTSD can make it difficult for the veteran to focus in the classroom or to systematically comprehend the information; addressing this usually requires some form of support services before these students can be confident in the academic environment. As Dave clearly stated, PTSD added an extra and significant burden to an already complex transition:

> My backpack’s heavier than yours every single day, you know. So, we got to try to figure out a way to lighten the load of that backpack, so the student becomes, you know, a student veterans’ can become productive and block out all the noise and then crush it.
Dave’s statement is a concrete depiction of the effects of PTSD and how the veteran must cope with this affliction. It can seriously undermine their performance in their studies.

John and Otis did not mention anything about PTSD in terms of their transitional barriers from military to college life; however, both participants acknowledged its existence and expressed how this disorder can certainly weigh on a person’s ability to focus in class and in general. Brody and Martha associated PTSD with anger and further explained that it complicated their transition by delaying their enrollment. They described that veterans who suffer from this disorder are reluctant to share that they even have PTSD, as they fear that people, particularly other students, will judge them, which overlaps with the theme later in this chapter regarding “The difficulties of integrating with traditional students.” As Brody stated, “I find a lot of people who I've served with had difficulty talking to anybody about it, it is, like, the anger issues and the different things that go along with the PTSD.”

Martha acknowledged that she suffered from PTSD and provided the researcher with a vivid example of her encounter facing stress and anxiety, revealing that it taught her a positive lesson, stating:

I’ve learned ... the biggest lesson I've learned is you got to have self-care. You must.

Especially if you have PTSD, anxiety, hyper-vigilance, anger issues, all that stuff. Cause how are you going to function as a student if you don't get that in check?

Clayton added: “Unfortunately a lot of us come back with PTSD or a TBI [traumatic brain injury] issue where paying attention or retaining information is a struggle, and they're pretty good about getting you the services to deal with that.” Clayton said he clearly understood the existence of PTSD; he acknowledged that seeking some form of support services is essential to surviving the effects of PTSD. In this sense, dealing with PTSD had, in some cases, the unanticipated, beneficial
effect of leading student veterans to seek support services and to be aware of the need for self-care, both components that supported the students in their transitional experience.

Conclusion

The superordinate theme of *Transition from military to college life* revealed that the participants faced a myriad of barriers, including PTSD; however, the researcher analyzed that they devised an array of strategies and exhibited creative resilience in confronting and overcoming the barriers during the transition, making it possible for them to effectively advance in their educational pursuits. This was true even for three of the individuals who met the additional barrier of postponing college, either for financial reasons or because they were waiting for Post-9/11 benefits to begin. The importance of getting an education, a long-term goal- that would allow the student veterans’ to obtain a career that would permit them to significantly strengthen their financial security, motivated all to grapple with personal, psychological, familial, and institutional obstacles that were making the transition difficult or complex.

In addressing issues related to PTSD, the participants’ interviews revealed that this disorder had a particularly strong impact on their ability to focus on their educational pursuits, and, the researcher observed, this was not easily resolved. Nonetheless, simply having the awareness and admitting that PTSD was disruptive to their well-being and ability to succeed was an important first step that allowed the participants to address it; most revealed a willingness to work through its implications, among them anger. This process had the unintended consequence of them reaching out for help – a difficult step for most student veterans who have learned they must be extremely self-reliant. Although the interview questions did not incorporate PTSD specifically, to avoid harm to the participants, five of the six participants felt ready to discuss the impact of PTSD, describing how this barrier contributed to their difficulties in transitioning to civilian life, particularly their
pursuit of a degree. The powerful example of how Dave referred to PTSD as a “heavy backpack” illustrated that PTSD weighed heavily on the participants, particularly because the symptoms do not disappear quickly; having PTSD contributed to the student veterans’ propensity to isolate because they believed people would judge them if they revealed their condition. This underscored the importance of having resources like a veterans’ center or a support group where they could connect with peers who had similar experiences, both themes that are addressed below. The next section discusses the participants’ experiences of applying for Post-9/11 educational benefits. It attempts to identify who supported them in their application process to understand the level of support they received from the two-year community college. It also explores the participants’ awareness of their financial aid eligibility.

**The Complexities of Applying for Educational Benefits**

The theme, *The complexities of applying for educational benefits*, explored the experiences of veterans as they negotiated the process of applying for Post 9/11 benefits and other resources, both directly from the federal government and within the college’s institutional setting, including any forms of financial aid or work-study opportunities sought. The subordinate themes analyzed the mechanisms that helped participants obtain assistance and the level of awareness they had regarding how to access financial aid, for which all students, including veterans, are eligible. The level of difficulty experienced by the participants in applying for educational benefits varied — some found it complex while others found the process smooth. The veteran is eligible for some form of educational benefits such as Post-9/11 or vocational educational benefits that cover tuition, provide a small book stipend, and offer a generous housing allowance which, combined, served as a substantial set of incentives to return to college. However, the student veterans may find it difficult to sort through the application process and to remain current regarding any changes.
The first sub-ordinate theme emerged to understand what the veterans experienced in accessing benefits and the extent to which they were able to rely on college personnel and resources to help them navigate this process, or whether they had to reach out to peers or friends for assistance. This theme also includes data related to the degree of awareness had regarding financial aid specifically as a resource to supplement any financial deficiencies of the Post-9/11 or other veteran educational benefits for which they were eligible. The following section provides an analytical overview of the participant’s responses when asked about benefits and includes evidence regarding how each participant perceived the efficacy of the support systems in place to guide them.

Five of the six participants perceived the process of applying for benefits as cumbersome and/or complex, which not only provoked frustration and stress, but also posed yet another barrier to their transition. Dave reported having difficulties accessing services, and he noted the lack of direct, personal support; he was particularly critical of the lack of individuals highly knowledgeable about the veteran benefit structure and their tendency to avoid meeting face-to-face and instead referring them to other agencies. As Dave noted, “They would be like okay…here's a 188 number, call them, leave you on hold for an hour. You wouldn't get any answers and when you did they were very vague. It was not a good transition.”

John, similar to Dave, struggled with the application process, stating, “I believe at the time the VONAPP, which is Veterans On-Line Application website, did exist. But it was not user-friendly, ah, at all.” Otto was blunt in his response to the complexity of the benefits application: “To be honest, the process was a pain in the butt.” Martha used Post-9/11 benefits initially, but she said she found that once she transferred to using veteran educational benefits through the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation, the process was smoother than the application procedures for Post-9/11 aid, primarily because she had a counselor assigned “who handles the paperwork.”
difference in the two systems and her emphasis on the importance of personalized assistance is notable.

Unlike Dave, John, Otto, and Martha, Brody said the application forms papers themselves were not too difficult to complete; however, he perceived flaws in the process in part because of the infrastructure at the college. “It was like a couple of days before the semester started, so I ended up…at the main office and being in line for a considerable amount of time, and coming from one line to another line.” He said that if he had had better information regarding the intricacies of the process, he would have started to apply much earlier.

Clayton, comparatively, had the easiest time applying for Post 9/11 benefits. Clayton stated, “But no, it wasn't complex. It was pretty much straightforward – name, years of service, where you want to go to school, and that. But I wouldn't say it was complex at all.” As noted, some of the participants did not find the process complex but more tedious and time consuming and they described the system as not “user friendly.” The experiences of these participants clearly indicated a lack of effective institutional support, particularly of personalized attention in this area, to aid them in the application process. This led the researcher to observe that they perceived the process as an obstacle to an essential aspect of their transition – financial support. The next section analyzes the type of direct personal assistance the veterans did or did not receive to walk through the application process.

**Accessing Direct Personal Assistance to Apply**

This subtheme examined what level of direct personal assistance was provided to the participants in applying for Post-9/11 educational benefits. Understanding who helped the participants who received assistance in applying for benefits can help two-year community colleges in identifying factors that assist these students in bridging the gaps inhibiting their successful
transitional experience. All participants explained that they either used a friend, veteran peer, or a college or VA official, but no comprehensive system of personnel was identified. Dave stated, “The veteran counselor at the VA stated, she’s like, ‘You know, the GI Bill,’ and you’ll sign up, you might take a couple liberal art classes but you're not sure where you want to go.” Dave reported that having an official who was versed in the Post 911 benefits was definitely beneficial for him. John, Brody and Otto all applied on their own and did not seek out anyone to assist them either from the VA or the college. However, John admitted that, because he independently applied, the process took a little longer because he had to fix some initial errors in his application; he expressed that having assistance from someone who could better navigate the application process would have been helpful. John stated, “I had to figure it out on my own. Um, so the letter that came in the mail from the VA was quite vague, as most of them usually are.” Brody, meanwhile, explained that “…having the service readily available rather than having to jump through hoops to the VA to try and get something going would be, uh, much more beneficial.”

Brody clearly found the process stressful and asserted that having assistance would have reduced the level of frustration associated with accessing his educational benefits. Martha and Clayton said they used a peer veteran at the college to assist them through the process and felt comfortable reaching out to this individual; with this assistance, neither saw the need to also seek an official from the college to aid them. Martha, however, had access to additional services. She described, “Yeah, you have your own fellow veterans that will help you, you also had, for example, I hate using the word like, but for example, at College Three Community College they have a disability office.”

In summary, the respondents interviewed revealed that, when services were available and they were aware of their existence, college personnel were helpful. Peers represented an important
resource for direct assistance; this emphasizes the value of veterans helping veterans, which is discussed further in a section below on veterans’ center services. The next section builds upon resources available to the participants, probing whether they were aware of the potential of applying for other forms of financial aid as a supplement to their veterans’ educational benefits.

Financial Aid Awareness

This subtheme emerged from discussions about the level of awareness the participants had regarding their eligible to apply for both veterans’ educational benefits and financial aid from the college, and the assistance received to pursue this resource. The student veterans interviewed depended on the administration and college staff to inform them of financial resources beyond veterans’ benefits that were available to them. In this context, this subtheme serves as an instrument to understand further what information is furnished regarding additional financial aid for student veterans’ transitioning to college.

In response to this inquiry, Dave explained, “The resources weren't that great for veterans. It was more so, go to, you know, financial aid and they'll help me fill out the paperwork.” Dave acknowledged that he was informed that he was eligible for financial aid and that there was someone from the college to assist with the paperwork process. John, however, expressed that he was misled in his inquiry regarding financial aid eligibility:

So first, um, it was never brought up. And the reason it was never brought up, and this is what, how it was explained to me, ah, if a veteran's receiving education benefits at the rate of 100%, which is exactly what I was doing, then there was no need for that veteran to, ah, apply for any kind of financial aid. Which I came to find out, ah, several semesters later, was incorrect.
John viewed financial aid as a way to supplement what the Post-9/11 Bill did not provide, particularly to offset family expenses, so knowing about and obtaining access to this resource was important to his financial stability. John said that through navigating this process the first time, “I became…educated in financial aid and…I’ve actually used it on several occasions to help subsidize…living for myself and my family.” This reveals that, when given the opportunity, the student veterans exhibit persistence and activate problem-solving skills to reach their goals, in this case being able to stay in college due to additional financial support.

Brody and Otto both worked full-time, so they were both aware of financial aid but purposely did not apply or inquire because they did not meet the income eligibility requirements. They both said they did not see the point of taking out student loans to incur debt, for example, when the aid for veterans covered their tuition and many other domestic expenses. They revealed resourcefulness, like John, in problem solving to devise a formula that worked well enough for them to pursue their education and support their families. Martha and Clayton both reported that there were aware of financial aid and applied accordingly.

Conclusion

The main theme, *The complexities of applying for educational benefits*, with the accompanied subordinate themes exploring assistance received in applying for benefits and financial aid awareness, disclosed that the participants faced a variety of complex challenges in the application process. However, they drew equally on a variety of resources – personal, from the college itself, and from peers -- to negotiate through obstacles. This problem-solving ability also surfaced in the area of procuring financial aid, a resource many sought in addition to veteran-specific resources, and one that several originally knew little about. In their individual ways, the veterans put together strategies to assure they could tap adequate resources to fund their education
and in some cases support families, which allowed them to reach their goal of degree completion. The next theme will elaborate on the participants’ perceptions of and use or non-use of support services offered by the two-year community college, and how these services aided them in their success. It also explores which factors encouraged veterans to access services and what type of obstacles prevented or inhibited them from doing so.

**The Use of Support Services**

Support services included tutoring, disability services, coaching, or any services that supported them in the academic endeavors. The importance and awareness of support services was particularly significant for participants who were having difficulty in a specific course. This theme will identify to what level and to what extent the participants sought support services and what type of services they used to aid them in their overall success.

In addressing whether the participant used support services, three of the six participants utilized some form of these resources. John, who did not feel the services were geared specifically for student veterans, said these academic services needed to exist because for this group because he did not believe traditional type services could assist a student veteran.. This was particularly true, he asserted, if the support specialist did not have training in working with individuals with anxiety or PTSD. Dave explained the significance of using support services for issues beyond academic aids like tutoring but which affected academic performance, “counseling, mental health, physical ailments,” for example. He said having services comprehensively offered was key because “you have to, you know, take care of that stuff, and then you can just spend as much time on your concentration and it [academics] will get better…The school stuff will come.”

Dave elaborated further on the efficacy of support services when they were readily available and interconnected. He explained that the veterans’ center at his college, for example, held weekly
meetings, and one of the topics was bringing services to the center, like a math and English lab, as part of a support system for academic assistance. He further explained that seeking help with tutoring also led him to interact more with fellow veterans, which added another layer of support to the academic environment.

Brody expressed his initial need to be independent in his own studies, and he said he did not use support services until he faced challenges mastering the content in his statistics course. He noted:

Statistics I struggled in. I didn't...I missed the-memo where I was supposed to get one of those fancy-fancy schmancy calculators. So I was trying to do all these calculations just on paper and what not with just a regular calculator. And, uh, it went poorly for...after about the third or fourth week. And I ended up having to go to the-math tutor.

Martha viewed tutoring and other support services as a benefit and used these services as she needed them.

Otto and Martha both acknowledged using tutoring services. Martha said that they were free of cost was a plus. Otto, meanwhile, said he believed he could have succeeded without them, but taking advantage of tutoring helped him increase his GPA, and it meant “the difference between a 3.2 and a 4.0.” Some of the participants shared the benefits of seeking out tutoring or resources from external agencies to succeed academically in their courses.

All but two of the participants perceived the support services as useful for different reasons and accessed them, largely for academic support, but also for challenges such as mental health issues. Repeatedly, the participants emphasized the need for more comprehensive coordination of resources available to them, but they did find ways to access services to overcome barriers. The
next section will further provide rationale of why the participants elected not to use support services.

Non-use of Support Services

This subtheme emerged from analysis documenting that some participants elected not to use support services offered by the two-year community college they attended. Some of the participants felt confident about their own ability to succeed in the classroom and did not see the true benefit of using these services as they used their GPA as a measurement to their success. Two of the six participants clearly demonstrated their disinterest in using any form of support services. More importantly, the two participants clearly expressed they did not use support services in part because they did not perceive that what was offered was adequately geared for student veterans’ needs. This brings to the fore the importance of clearly understanding the perspectives of student veterans in transition from military life, because, as the participants repeatedly revealed, their needs are different and more complex, perhaps, than the traditional student population for whom services are usually geared, a theme discussed below. Although John admitted that he did not use any form of support services while he was a student, he noted that later in his career as a certifying veteran official he understood the need for support services tailored specifically to the student veterans’ situation. John noted that the experience of not receiving appropriate support prompted him to hold weekly meetings afterwards in his new position to promote awareness and referrals to the veterans he served at the two-year community college where he was employed. John explained how student veterans shared common difficulties that did not match those faced by traditional students; the college he attended as a student, he noted, did not have veteran-specific services to meet those needs, and that had deterred him from seeking help:
We're all around the same age, we're all older than the average students in that college, and we're all dealing with the same stuff regarding the VA, the benefits and then, in turn, the college and the lack of support systems they have set in place for veterans.

Clayton, meanwhile, acknowledged that the resources were available, but he explained that he did not use any support services because he felt he did not need them. Clayton justified his need not to use support services because his GPA was sufficient. In addition, his family obligations promoted some time constraints in seeking any services. In asking Otto if he used any support services he stated, “I didn't really go too much out of my way to find support, but I do know a lot about the support systems.” Having knowledge of the availability convinced Otto to seek a tutor to achieve a stellar grade point average.

**Conclusion**

Overall, while the reasons behind veterans not using services varied, what emerged from the participants’ accounts supporting this theme was essentially the need for assistance to respond appropriately and directly to veteran-specific needs. The participants learned lessons, however, from this deficiency, as manifested in John’s subsequent commitment as a certifying official to consult with student veterans so that the response from the college where he later worked addressed veteran-specific concerns more adeptly.

This theme revealed a commitment on the part of student veterans to seek services when they needed them, from tutoring to mental health to financial and career counseling; however, the inefficacy of these assistance programs to address veteran-specific needs clearly proved a deterrent to some of the participants from seeking help. A common thread throughout this theme, which also was present in the previous theme, however, was, the commitment shown by all participants to navigate around institutional deficiencies to tap the resources they needed to succeed, in spite of
delays and frustration. In this context, particularly when their grades were in decline, the prospect of failing prompted these individuals to sort out institutional bureaucracy to find tutors or other resources. Some of the participants noted that their military training had taught them to be self-reliant and to achieve success independently, a characteristic they did in part transfer to the college setting; however, most, to reach their goals, tempered this tendency to go it alone and found the help they needed, either from college staff and programs, or from peers. They were more apt, however, to use assistance particularly geared toward and designated for student veterans’ needs, which is in part the focus of the next section addressing the superordinate theme, The existence or non-existence of veterans’ centers. While related to the discussion just explored of support services in general, the next theme specifically explores those services that were tailored for veteran use.

The Existence or Non-existence of Veterans Centers

This superordinate theme addresses how participants perceived the existence or lack thereof of a veterans’ center at the two-year community college level. The veterans’ center generally provides a central place for students to gather and also, depending on the institution, as a central location for offering academic and other support services. Its sheer existence provides one manifestation that a college or university is committed to investing in student veterans’ welfare and is attempting to be “veteran friendly.” Even though some of the participants in this study revealed that the community college they attended did not formally have an established veterans’ center, all noted the importance of the existence of this type of resource for the student veterans. This was in large part because it provided a space where they could decompress and/or interact, collaborate, and share with other veteran peers facing similar challenges in transitioning from military life.

The subordinate theme explores the benefits of having a veterans’ center, with unanimously positive responses supporting the existence of these facilities, even when they were established or
run through less-than-formal arrangements. For example, Dave explained that he had access to “like kind of a veterans’ center upstairs at the library, which is on the second floor.” Dave also noted that the institution eventually established and official center:

I was actually there for the ribbon cutting, I mean, everything. So it was, it was, it was nice.

But this is new over there…and what they did was they've added it to their website, to the college homepage.

John, whose institution did not have a center, shared his dissatisfaction with the absence of a facility because he understood that hosting a veterans’ center could build collaboration and provide a space for the student veterans to relax rather than having to leave the campus to access this type of space. John stated, “Nothing, ah, like there was nowhere for the veterans to go to seek maybe counseling or just simply have a place to relax.” John attempted to convince the college to set up a veterans’ center; however, he said the college did not consider hosting one because they could not envision the cost-benefit balance. This experience affected him and increased his dissatisfaction with the institution, which he viewed as not supportive of veteran needs, a response which underscores the importance of this facility to student veterans.

John further explained that later, when he worked as a veterans’ representative at a college that hosted a veterans’ center, the student veterans utilized the center based on their needs:

Ah, you'll have veterans that will come to a veterans’ center and take advantage of it 100%. They'll be there every day that they're at the college for classes, in between classes, before classes or after classes. But then you'll have veterans that pop in for five to 10 minutes at a time, once a month, just to pop in, to say hi. And then you have other veterans that'll pop in because they are having some sort of, ah, anxiety attack or some sort of issue that requires, um, a counselor's touch, so to speak.
While John attended a two-year community college that did not host a center, he founded a veterans’ club there that essentially provided support to veterans; he found that this was one creative idea to fill this need. The veterans would meet on a weekly basis and discuss their needs, as well as outside veteran resources. The researcher observed that the extent to which John pursued this initiative and his innovation in strategizing to meet his needs and those of fellow veterans underscored the importance of providing this kind of system of support, tangibly, through a physical location on campus. Brody, who was from the same institution as John, noted that he was aware of the veterans’ club and saw it as a positive initiative, but because of his work and family obligations he was unable to benefit from participating in activities there.

Martha also acknowledged the existence of the veterans’ center at her institution stating, “They have a veterans’ center about five minutes from the school.” Martha expressed satisfaction with the level of support at the veterans’ center and reported that the center was important because it also offered onsite counseling services to veterans. Clayton explained that his college did not have a veterans’ center, but that the veterans’ office lounge informally and partially became that kind of place where student veterans met casually to converse, whether they were meeting with an advisor or not. Otto admitted that he visited the veterans’ center only to meet with the advisor for course selection and did not use it as a place to study or converse with other veterans.

Notably, only half of the participants reported having a veterans’ center; however, the participants that reported having no veterans’ center found innovative ways to strategize either by using the veterans’ advisor’s office as a small veteran’s center or by initiating a veterans’ club to claim a space for collaboration and exchange with peers. This strongly underscores the symbolic and practical importance of having a center. The next section will assess the ways in which the participants perceived use of the center to be beneficial, socially and academically.
The Benefits of Having a Veterans’ Center

After each participant had shared whether the two-year community college hosted a veterans’ center, they discussed the benefits of using the facility. Some of the participants expressed that the center provided a place to relate to other peers, or a space to host various veteran activities and speakers; academically, it constituted a familiar and safe space to go to focus on homework. Additionally, the center provided what could be described as psychological benefits, by sculpting out a safe place on a busy campus to decompress or share like experiences with either the veteran advisor or other military peers.

Dave elaborated on the beneficial aspects, explaining that the center benefitted vets in that it provided a venue for them to build friendships with other student veterans, and that usually led them to support one another in a variety of ways, academically and personally. It also conjured a sense of camaraderie that was reminiscent of the social interactions found among military cadres, which may have had unspoken benefits by providing a dynamic familiar to military life, almost recreating so to speak, the structure and team spirit of the squad or unit. As Dave stated, “You’re checking up on our platoon mates, so it is incredibly helpful to me on a personal level and it builds a trust because we all have been through so much as soldiers.”

Dave also shared that he viewed the center as a safe place where a veteran could decompress and be with others in a similar situation. “We have a safe place, per se. You know, please feel free to come here, you know? Please feel free to chat, you know, with other veterans, so on and so forth, um, you know.” John also supported the need for a veterans’ center for reasons similar to Dave; but he went a step further regarding the benefits the center provided and made direct links to its positive effects on preventing dropout:
Just having a place for them to go is incredibly important. And if you're speaking in terms of retention for any college, you're going to, you're going to retain veterans at a much higher level than with a veterans’ center than if you do not have a veterans’ center.

Additionally, John noted the clearinghouse character of the center, stating that vets knew they could arrive and immediately have someone to discuss things like delays in the arrival of veteran benefits and strategize how to advocate with the Veterans Administration on their behalf to speed up that process.

This kind of social integration within a campus environment has proven important to the success of all students, and it was apparently even more important to the veteran participants interviewed because they bore the additional burden of not feeling particularly integrated with non-veteran peers, a theme discussed later in this chapter. In this sense, Martha emphasized the sense of safety experienced at the facility, which permitted vets to feel connected by disconnecting from others on campus who were not living the effects of post-war life: “It's a place to hide, if you want to close the doors you can close the doors. It's a place where all veterans are at the same place [in a place where] no one understands a veteran.”

Clayton confirmed this analysis, and he considered the center a place for vets to connect more privately with advisors: “Absolutely. I feel that the veterans should have their own spot on campus, have the veteran's advisor share their knowledge at the veterans’ center.” Clayton, like most of the other participants, further emphasized that the veterans benefited from the veterans’ center in that it provided a venue through which to network with fellow veterans who identified with one another.

Although only four of the six participants had the option of using a veterans’ center, all participants could see some form of benefit from its existence. The participants viewed the center
as a “safe haven” where they could go to gather their thoughts and share with peers who understood their circumstances. The participants who would have utilized the center viewed this place as means to collaborate with other veteran peers. In addition, John viewed the existence of a veterans’ center as a mechanism through which retention was bolstered – it gave the veteran a place to resolve issues and identify resources, as well as a place to find much-needed solitude. All participants acknowledged the value of having a veterans’ center; Otto and Brody, however, did not use the facility mostly because they did not have the time to take advantage of the resources available there.

Dave, Clayton and Martha viewed the center as a venue where veterans could meet and talk to fellow veterans with whom they uniquely identified, because, they asserted, only veterans can identify with fellow veterans. The veterans’ center provided a venue that offered such an environment. These participants all collectively agreed that it is essential for veterans to have a separate place outside of the parameters of the activities of the traditional students. The next section outlines the participants’ perceptions of support services provided by the veterans’ advisor and how the role of this individual was beneficial or not to their educational pursuits.

**The Veteran Advisor**

The veteran advisor’s role is to assist the student veterans’ in academic advising, veteran educational benefits, and outside referrals that will aid them in their success in the classroom. This section provides documentation for and analysis of the participants’ perceptions of the level to which they received support from the veteran advisor, and the efficacy of that assistance. The results were mixed – some participants received ample and effective guidance; others were assigned to individuals in the role who were overwhelmed with work and spread thin with time. Consistency of personnel also emerged as an important factor for the participants.
To begin, Dave expressed that the veteran advisor he was assigned was taken into many directions and was overwhelmed. The position was only part-time, and Dave stressed that expanding it to full time, or adding more hours, would have permitted the individual to provide ampler support. Dave shared positive insights, however, into how the veteran advisor contributed to his success. He became a point person for Dave in choosing another academic program post-graduation, for example.

John and Brody also found their colleges lacking for not having a dedicated staff member serving the veteran population; the individual filling that role was only able to provide academic advising and did not assist with negotiating benefits or make other linkages to Veterans Administration services. Both participants attributed the absence of this kind of support to institutional financial restraints which, John noted, meant that, in many ways, the veterans were left to advocate for themselves. Otto noted that he used the veterans’ advisor to network professionally to recruit veterans to service, which was part of his job; however, outside of this, again, the advisor only assisted with course selection and did not provide comprehensive support. Martha, meanwhile, noted that changes in personnel in the office led her to hesitate in consistently accessing services: “Whoever is sitting at the desk nowadays, I don’t know what they know. . . I had a bond with Wyatt, and now he’s gone. Now my classes are different; I don’t go there anymore.” Brody explained that he used the veterans’ advisor purely for academic support and had no issues with his Post-911 benefits so his interaction was limited.

Clayton, meanwhile, expressed satisfaction with the level of support provided by the veteran advisor, which was more comprehensive than assistance received by the other participants. He explained: “Yeah. She was there to help me pick out my classes, let me know what I could and couldn’t take, what the rules of the Post-9/11 GI Bill [were] and how it worked.”
Overall, most of the participants shared that either they did not have access to a dedicated veterans’ advisor, or the individual assigned did not have ample time and/or knowledge to meet their assistance needs. Although the participants expressed dissatisfaction with the availability of the veterans’ advisor, they realized that this was likely due to the college’s inability to provide adequate staffing hours for the veterans’ advisor to meet the needs of this population. The researcher observed their frustration with the limitations of the service. The next section will further analyze that aspect – the limitations of the role of the veterans’ advisor and what the participants thought would enhance this person’s role so he or she could better help increase student veterans’ success.

**Limitations of the Veteran Advisor**

This subordinate theme outlines the participants’ perspectives regarding the quality and efficacy of services provided by the veteran advisor or other staff filling this role, and it explores understanding how this individual might be empowered to serve student veterans more effectively. The participants openly asserted the need for this position to be filled with qualified people trained to assist veterans in a comprehensive manner and who were specifically – and hopefully full time – dedicated to this task.

As noted above, Dave described how the veteran advisor at his institution was stretched too thin, and he advocated not only that this position should be full-time, but that the individual appointed needed to have the capacity and authority to respond to a variety of veteran needs:

If you had that full-time employee, then you, then that employee at the college could reach out to, you know, federal, state and nonprofit personnel…to say, hey, do you mind coming over, you know, for a minute and talking about VA health care? You mind coming over and talking about homeless, you know, housing resources. Obviously, we live on the, you know,
living in the suburbs, we're in a housing crisis. You know, there [are] so many veterans, you know, and of course the college does not offer dormitory style housing, you know?

John, meanwhile, had a unique perspective and a great deal of hindsight at the time of the interview, given that he had moved into the role of a certifying official after graduation. He spoke frankly about limitations and solutions to the role’s deficiencies. He also endorsed having the position be full time and suggested a separation between the roles of academic and veteran advisors. In this context, John had particularly keen insights to offer:

That [the educational benefits advisor position] is…at the very least a part-time job and it's very most a full-time job. But that, that should be separate from a veterans’ services advisor, somebody who's dedicated simply to being there for when veteran walks through the door and has just, you know, an, an arbitrary question about what classes, dates he should be taking for which major? Now when you try to put those two types of jobs together at once, the person who is trying to complete that, ah, process gets kind of lost in the wheat. On the one hand, they're, they're being stretched way too thin with the financial part of it. And on the other hand, they're not giving, ah, adequate answers to the veteran about the arbitrary questions because, they, they're, they've got too much on their mind.

Brody recalled a time when the veterans’ advisor managed to work with a faculty member to circumvent a course pre-requisite he was being asked to take so that he could fulfill his requirements more quickly and maximize the use of his Post-9/11 benefits. Brody displayed satisfaction with the veteran advisor, but he also admitted he had limited expectations.

Martha most starkly cited the limitations of the person in this role and related a negative experience that made her hesitant in seeking further assistance. She said when she asked a question related to advising, the person in charge told her, “Hey, there's a computer over there. Figure it out
for yourself.” She said the advisor was both patronizing and condescending to civilian and military students alike. Clayton, finally, expressed satisfaction with the veterans’ advisor, yet he acknowledged that the office itself was, even with two work study employees, limited in its capacity both time-wise and in the types of assistance the personnel was qualified to give. He, too, suggested that the role should be comprehensive in nature and not related only to academics. He suggested a model through which the office could have contract-type professionals “come in once a week to be there” for aspects such as mental health counseling. Otto, meanwhile, received adequate career counseling from the veteran advisor at his institution, and he said he would have felt comfortable seeking academic advising if he had needed it.

**Conclusion**

What emerged from the discussions regarding the efficacy and capacity of individuals assigned to the role of veteran advisor at the participants’ respective institutions was a clear sense that this position should offer comprehensive services beyond academic coaching for class enrollment. Participants asserted overall that their institutions had a certain obligation to provide qualified personnel with ample time and training to fulfill this position; however, none noted that not having this prevented them from succeeding, but rather they explained a compelling need for more comprehensive services in this area.

The researcher noted again that the veterans resourcefully identified what the veterans’ advisor could offer them; they sought that particular service and acknowledged that it was useful. Each participant had their own perceptions of both the advantages and limitations of the advisor with several expressing that it was the responsibility of the institution to provide a veteran advisor who was dedicated to veterans and who was not pulled away from this role by other activities. Two
participants did reveal that they felt they received little support and had to work things out independently, because of deficiencies in the service or by choice.

In observing and analyzing the veterans’ descriptions of their experiences with the veterans’ advisor, the major finding was that participants perceived that it is the responsibility of two-year community colleges to employ, if possible, a full-time veterans’ advisor. This individual, they repeatedly asserted, needs to have the capacity to respond comprehensively to their intersecting needs – from academic questions, to veteran education benefit inquiries, to tapping other resources (mental health, career counseling, outside benefits), to assist the veteran to be successful in their transition and beyond. The participants who reported positive experiences with the veterans’ advisor were able to see the value of the role; however, they did not allow inadequacies of service in this area to inhibit their success in pursuing their degrees, and many again tapped their resilience and problem-solving skills to fill in the gaps. Having a dedicated veterans’ advisor with empathy and time to work through veteran issues and provide advocacy can help retain the student veterans’ through the college experience, the interviewees revealed.

The next superordinate theme will uncover how the participants viewed faculty members’ accessibility and will outline the student veterans’ perceptions of the degree to which faculty expressed compassion towards and understanding of veterans’ needs.

**Faculty Support and Accessibility**

This section discusses faculty support in general, particularly accessibility. It also reports on veteran perceptions regarding the extent to which faculty understood the complexities of the veteran transition experience. The participants collectively agreed that the faculty members attempted to be accessible and to provide support upon request; they exhibited this support directly
in the classroom, without drawing undue attention to the veterans, and most provided the option of meeting confidentially to address specific student needs.

Faculty members did vary, however, in the extent of their responses. John, for example, said “it depends on the faculty member,” and he had “seen it work both ways.” Generally, though, the faculty members’ guidance “worked more in favor of the veteran than not.” Brody appreciated faculty members’ academic support, particularly with research projects, for which they made time after class. Martha and Clayton both viewed their interactions with faculty as positive and noted that not only were faculty members available to the student, but Martha recalled having special accommodations made for her:

Yes, they are. I mean, when I had to go, I had an emergency, my aunt unexpectedly passed away in September, I had to leave Monday and come back Wednesday, up to Ohio. I emailed my teachers, no problem. I made up my classes and my math, [I couldn’t] make up media class, but I let them know what was going on, "Hey, I’m having problems with this, but I'll catch up.”

Clayton also had positive interactions with the faculty, and he noted, “They were accessible outside the classroom if you made an appointment during office hours. As far as notes or presentations, whatever was provided through the portal…was basically it.” Otto also shared positive interactions with faculty, reporting, “They've all been great. If I tell them, ‘Hey, I can't come in, because of this or because of that,’ as long as I get a valid reason and it’s related and practical, they're pretty easy on me”

Overall, accessibility to faculty was generally not a problem, and the veterans were motivated to take advantage of this in a variety of ways. Given the sense of independence with which the veterans approached the various challenges during their transition, their willingness to ask for help
when needed revealed both that the faculty made an attempt to create an environment of support and that the veterans readily adjusted to the faculty-student role as a part of their transition. The next section goes beyond the question of practical accessibility to probe the ways in which the faculty either revealed empathy and understanding toward this population or struggled to accommodate their struggles and situation at that deeper level.

**Faculty Understanding of Veteran Transition**

This subordinate theme reveals how student veterans’ perceived faculty sensitivity and understanding of student veterans’ transitions into the classroom from military life. With the exception of John, all remaining participants said they felt faculty were aware of veteran needs on a variety of levels and worked well with them.

Dave expressed that “the faculty's on board 100%...the faculty wants to learn [about] the veterans’ challenges.” John expressed that he generally sensed the faculty worked in favor of the veterans; however, this shifted, and it became strongly tempered later when he worked as a certifying official by his experience with a student who reported that at least one faculty member’s political stance, expressed as against war and anti-military, may have affected grades.

I've seen veterans receive poor grades, um, simply because they're a veteran. Now, that's super unfortunate, ah, when the professor or faculty member decides to bring their own political agenda, ah, into the classroom and grade based on whether or not they, they agree with, ah, the veteran's point of view.

John thus expressed an acquired distrust of faculty in general regarding faculty grading, which he clarified stemmed from a particular incident later at the institution where he became a certifying official.
Brody shared his positive experience in the classroom and said he felt comfortable and viewed faculty as sensitive to veterans. He related: “In my English course, there were stories that centered about veterans and the faculty and peers were sensitive to that.” He perceived this as a deliberate effort on the part of faculty to create an inclusive environment where veterans’ lives were respected and where peers learned about their struggles. Martha also acknowledged that faculty members were fair and sensitive in the classroom, stating, “They always say, ‘No problem, I'll see you in class.’ [They were] really helpful, very understanding and they don't judge you. None of the teachers that I had this semester were bad, they were all pretty good this time.” Clayton, similarly, viewed faculty as sensitive to student veterans’ needs in the classroom:

I think they're sensitive to the needs of veterans. [I] wouldn't necessarily think that they completely understand what goes through a veteran’s head and how they act or whatnot. But, I did find that faculty at the college were understanding, and they would do anything necessary to help you out in order to be successful.

Clayton further explained that he did not remember “any time where they told me to knock it off or, if they disagreed with a viewpoint I had, right, wrong, indifferent. It was a place where you could express yourself and not catch any flack for it.” Otto explained that if he missed a class, faculty members were quick to help him catch up: “Yeah, they’ll send me an email, like a general breakdown of that day in class.” Otto viewed this practice as an expression of a significant level of understanding of the student veterans’ struggle and a willingness to accommodate their needs.

All the participants reflected on specific experiences when a faculty member demonstrated full accessibility or even provided extra assistance and a willingness to assist the student veterans outside of the classroom. Martha and Otto shared similar experiences where faculty members were adaptable to their need to take time off, and faculty members offered to work with them to make up
the missed assignments or lectures. Dave and Brody shared classroom experiences where they felt faculty engaged with veterans and demonstrated respect for their service by directly acknowledging it. Clayton and John said they felt that faculty members were accessible, but each expressed that this was not reflective of all faculty members. As John clearly stated, he felt that faculty members that held political views on war could have a tendency to subject veterans to unfair grading practices. Clayton said he felt that faculty members were accessible, but he acknowledged that the faculty could not completely understand the transitional experience of the student veterans.

**Conclusion**

Overall, the veterans felt faculty members were open and dedicated to assisting students. With the exception of John’s perception of unfair and stereotypical treatment in grading, which came after he was a student, the participants did not think they were treated differently in a detrimental way, and instead they expressed that they felt confidence to reach out to the faculty to express a problem or issue, without facing resistance or discomfort. The researcher observed that the participants viewed faculty members as a valued resource in terms of availability and their willingness to accommodate time off to meet family, medical, or other obligations outside of the classroom. Most of the participants expressed that they felt confident that faculty members’ investment in their academic success was sincere. In terms of understanding the true experience of the veteran, the faculty member, participants observed, could benefit from some formalized training on the veteran experience and what challenges they encounter such as PTSD effects that may interfere with their ability to focus in the classroom. This type of training, several participants noted, could empower faculty members to assist the veteran population in more effective ways than without this knowledge.
The next superordinate theme addresses the perspectives of the student veterans regarding the level to which they needed to integrate with traditional students and the degree of traditional students’ awareness of the student veterans’ situation.

**Traditional Students and Integration**

This theme explored how student veterans’ viewed traditional students, their ideas of how traditional students viewed veterans, and their perceptions of how the community college worked to integrate the two populations by promoting understanding. The subthemes explore expressions of being misunderstood by the traditional student population and the perceptions and the interactions that led some to conclude that separation, to a degree, could actually be beneficial to the student veterans. Five of the six participants expressed that the traditional students could not identify with the student veterans based on their maturity level; interchangeably, the participants said they found it difficult to relate to the traditional student population. The next section focuses on how the traditional students understood veterans, from the participants’ viewpoints.

**Traditional Students’ Understanding of Veterans**

While most of the participants said they felt traditional students were not aware of the student veterans’ situation, Dave was gracious regarding to what extent their non-military peers could be expected to comprehend the unique experience of veterans. As Dave explained:

Well, first, only 2% of the nation, as you know, is a soldier, and only 1% is a combat veteran. So, a majority of the nation [has] no idea what a veteran's gone through, what they've done, so on and so forth, you know what I mean?

Dave’s statement acknowledged that the traditional student should not be expected to understand the student veterans and that only a small percentage of veterans serve in combat; therefore, most people in general do not understand their experiences, particularly younger, less experienced peers.
John also shared his perspective on how he viewed traditional students and their ability to integrate and understand student veterans. He expressed, “And I’m not trying to put down these 18, 19-year-old students, good for them for going to college after high school as we decided to serve our country.” He explained this dynamic as follows:

But, that's like, that's like, you know, a 40-year-old man trying to explain his retirement run to a 20-year-old person. It just doesn't work. You know what I mean? You can't. The, the 20-year-old person's probably not going to understand, ah, the intricacies of a Roth IRA and how it's benefited that person at the age of 40.

These disparate experiences, John said, made him feel that he could not relate much at all to this population, but unlike his perspective that some professors held negative political views regarding veterans, John said he felt no hostility from traditional peers in this area. Brody, similarly, said he could not relate to the traditional students in the classroom because he found their maturity level very different from the more experienced student veterans. He said, in large part due to his experience in the military and in law enforcement, his views “definitely tend to not line up with a lot of the students in the class” whom he claimed were “much further left-leaning than I am.” While he also noted that he did not feel hostility, per se, he described the traditional students as “child-kids,” clearly reflecting his assessment of their lack of experience as adults and their naïve perspective on the world.

Martha shared some mixed views, saying that she generally enjoyed two of her classmates who were not veterans: “I have fun with the guys in my class, they respect me and I respect them, no I do. In my media class it's a trip and a half, the teacher is great.” However, Martha expressed that being an older female in the classroom was a challenge at times and that traditional students in general may have received her differently because she did not think they viewed her as typical
veteran. The researcher sensed that Martha felt slighted by this because she referred to it as “BS” and “double standards” based on gender. It was almost as if the traditional students were not legitimating her experience as a veteran because they perceived that “the guy that’s 25 years old…that’s a veteran,” but rather she was “the fifty-nine year old mature lady.”

Otto’s statements, meanwhile, revealed a perception of acute misunderstanding from traditional students, stating, “Yes, I think there’s a lot of misinformation about what a veteran is and what it is to be in the military.” He said when he introduced himself as an Army Recruiter, he “got that look like, oh, God, he’s the enemy.” Thus, age differences, a huge gap in life experiences, and stereotypes about what it means to be in the military – these combined to create a sense among the participants that their traditional peers misunderstood them and may have judged them, often because of inexperience and immaturity. They grappled with the question of the extent to which the institution could provide forums for interactions that would lead to sincere integration, and even deemed separate but equal activities as an option, dynamics discussed in the next subtheme section.

**Student Veterans’ Inability to Relate to Traditional Students**

The theme regarding the participants’ perspectives in terms of traditional student awareness of the student veterans’ experience, and whether institutions could potentially integrate the two populations for a smoother transition for the veterans to the two-year community college, emerged as complex. Four of the six participants expressed no desire to integrate with traditional students and explained in their own manner how they felt this population did not have the maturity level to identify with the student veterans, specifically because the student veterans tend to be older, with a family and extended responsibilities. Dave and Otto, however, said the integration could be possible and encouraged it, but they also acknowledged that awareness, training, and preparation regarding the issues veterans face in general and in college would be an essential component of this
process. Dave noted that “I just don’t think a lot of people are aware; again, it’s not their fault.” He reiterated that the student veterans’ presence on campuses was relatively rare, given that, without a draft, only “a small percentage of the nation is a soldier, and even a smaller percentage of the country is a soldier who goes to college.”

This sense of being in a unique situation led John to doubt the benefit of integrating traditional students with veterans. He suggested that it would be beneficial to have the veterans’ needs addressed separately with more frequency, for example in orientation sessions geared exclusively towards the specific experiences of the veterans entering college after discharge and post-deployment – such as all of the complexities of financial support under the Post-9/11 Bill and other concerns. While cost could make this challenging, especially if the percentage of veterans attending the college was low, John nonetheless argued that their concerns were so specific and complex that “I don’t think numbers should really count in that type of situation.”

Brody and Martha also expressed feeling separate from non-veteran peers, and Brody was quite apprehensive about integrating traditional students with veterans, given that he perceived that traditional students have no real conception of the student veterans’ experiences. He reflected: “They have rather kooky ideas, as far as I'm concerned, about what's going on in the world, and very idealized versions about how things should be handled.” Martha said she felt overall that the traditional students were quite different than the student veterans and did not have the ability to be aware of or identify with this population. She noted:

They're not the same. You [veterans] have your special needs, yes you do, you really do… you have your special needs but, get with me, take your head out of your butt, they're not doing that [make the effort to understand veterans].
Clayton expressed mixed feelings about whether he perceived integration of traditional students as beneficial. He, too, said he did not think the traditional students held a level of maturity equal to that of student veterans, the latter who were usually in their “late 20s, with families” as compared to being just out of high school. Otto diverged from the other participants in that he was in full favor of integrating traditional students with student veterans and even believed that beginning teaching awareness about the experiences of the military as early as high school would be beneficial.

**Conclusion**

Overall, the participants generally perceived integration with the traditional student population as difficult and did not believe the institutions they were attending had sufficient capacity to carry out activities and programs to bring the two populations together successfully and to create a true understanding by traditional students of the student veteran experience. Traditional students, most participants agreed, lacked maturity compared with their student veteran peers, and lifestyle challenges were starkly different for the two groups. Such was the feeling that veteran needs were truly unique and needed to be specifically attended to, that one participant advocated for separate orientation sessions.

The participant responses in many ways challenged preconceptions of the components constituting a “successful” transition in that not fully integrating with non-veteran peers was not only perceived as logistically possible and sensible, but actually preferable. This was true even though several of the participants expressed empathy for the difficulties a traditional student might have in understanding the veterans’ experiences. This further supported analyses derived from other themes regarding the participants’ capacity to figure out what worked best for them, even when faced with obstacles – such as a lack of comprehension from mainstream peers. While several expressed that awareness training could prove helpful, none vehemently argued that forcing
integration was necessary to their success; they could navigate the college setting perhaps even better if their needs were attended to in separate settings.

The next superordinate theme takes the perceptions of the veterans regarding acceptance of and response to their needs to the institutional level by examining in what ways and the extent to which they viewed the college they were or had been enrolled in as “veteran friendly.” The subordinate theme addresses suggestions participants made for improvement in this area that might increase retention and enhance the student veterans’ experience and ease of transition.

**Veteran Friendliness**

This theme provides insights from the veterans’ perspectives on the level to which – and how -- their institution fulfilled a reputation or not of being “veteran friendly;” it also queries how the participants actually defined the meaning of this term and steps they thought would be necessary to refine services to augment veteran friendliness. By exploring the dynamics behind this term and by asking the veterans what it entailed for them, this theme offers a broader description from the veterans’ point of view of the institutional culture in which the participants negotiated college life after military service.

Dave explained that stereotypes enacted negatively affected the level of veteran friendliness at the institution he attended, stating, “I would say, you know, just, just basically, not being afraid, you know? Veterans are people too. I think there's sometimes there's a level of…intimidation, you know?” Along similar lines, John said it was important for the institution to understand the particular struggles the veteran faced, making sure staff members – a core contact person in fact – was on board to assist the student veterans in their transition and to identify with and respond to their needs. He also emphasized that this type of assistance from someone who truly understood what they were going through would foster a sense that “we have, um, a safe place, per se.” Making
an effort to communicate subtleties to the veteran like “feel free to chat…to come here” was an important quality John thought that such a point person should have.

John clearly expressed that he thought institutions were capable of providing a “veteran friendly” atmosphere if they were willing to devote the resources to make that possible, particularly in filling staff positions with individuals that could help the vets navigate the various aspects of the college landscape, addressing the particular dilemmas they faced in the transition. Brody was less optimistic, and he first equated veteran friendly with an absence of negativity: “There definitely didn't seem to be any- any hostility or indifference towards me at all.” When pressed to define the term further, he described “veteran friendliness” as an institution that promotes equality and a welcoming environment.

Martha, however, shared her anger towards the two-year community college, and she did not perceive her institution as “veteran friendly” at all. She provided strong opinions illustrated with a vivid example:

No, they're not. The first day I was there when my daughter was ... I was there for my daughters’ orientation, I parked my, sorry, I'm pausing, I parked my car and it has, "Combat vet," you know, "Iraqi freedom," "Woman of Veterans," too on my car. It wasn't a school day, but they gave me a ticket because I parked over thirty minutes. A twenty-dollar ticket. Are you kidding me? Well, parking for one. If they allow a zillion parking spaces for all the staff and a handicapped [space], and there's a lot of people that are handicapped, don't get me wrong on that, I'm not doubting that, but for crying out loud, if you want this veteran friendly, do something for the veterans instead of sticking it to us every time we do anything, you know? They're not veteran friendly, I just don't think they are, they think they're better than us.
Clayton had the opposite experience, stating that he viewed his institution as exemplary in being veteran friendly because they were extremely devoted to providing support services for veterans transitioning from military to college life. Key to his positive assessment were factors such as having “a dedicated person on campus that strictly deals with vets and active duty military personnel to help them get their educational benefit…or guide them towards how to get disability services.” He emphasized that having someone sufficiently knowledgeable about particular benefits was important, citing a “welcome home” bonus and volunteer community support services for vets available in the state of Massachusetts as examples. Beyond practical assistance, he, like John, expressed that the more intangible support paid forward was also key, stating that people at his college “were there to [provide] peer support, [if you were] having a bad day, you could go into that office.”

For Otto, meanwhile, the community college’s cognizance of the veteran’s status as an adult learner proved important, given that younger undergraduates without much experience had different learning strategies and needs. He explained: “I think they realize, you know, hey, these guys…aren't coming out of high school, they're not high school grads…and it might take them a little time to transition and maybe give them a little bit of favor and benefit of the doubt.” In this context, the next section provides an overview of the participants views of what two-year community colleges can do to improve their overall reputation regarding student veterans and what constitutes a “veteran friendly” institution.

**Improving Veteran Friendliness**

This subordinate theme provides a description of ways in which the participants assessed that their institutions could improve veteran friendless to support their transition. The need for an institution to have a person designated specifically to guide and support veterans was reiterated
from findings from other themes, with Dave stating, for example: “Well, I think that a full-time veterans’ advisor would be able to devote some hours on outreach to outside resources to assist veterans.” He suggested using institutional resources to link up with more external support -- including networking to help veterans locate career and counseling services, places that provided VA healthcare and mental health assistance, or disability coaching, for example. This, he asserted, would send the message that the institution cared comprehensively about the veteran, not only during their tenure there while in classes, but also about their future.

Dave elaborated saying that the veterans’ center could serve in this capacity, bringing together multiple services. He imagined such a place as follows:

I mean I kind of like the, the concept of one-stop shopping, you know? Give the, give the resources to that veteran's benefits office, have the different people come in around the community, and I'm sure they would love to do it, you know? And come in and then you could have different people from different municipalities per se, to say hey, I want, you know, we, you know…we're the fire department. We like to hire veterans. We're the police department, we like to hire veterans. This is what you would have to do to get to the, get to the process.

John shared Dave’s view on the importance of having the appropriate hours of staffing to support student veterans’ stating, “Yeah, if I was the president or of a college or the CFO of a college or what have you, then I would, I would have two people. A part-time person, a full-time person, and a veteran’s center.” John also emphasized the importance of supporting the veterans in receiving their financial benefits on time and of consistently having an individual on staff who was highly proficient in this area and devoted to helping the vets manage the glitches in the bureaucratic process of both the VA and college-based financial aid. The college, he said, needed “to make
sure…the school is getting paid and the veteran is getting paid.” Repeatedly, in this theme and beyond, institutional assistance in coordination, collaborating services, and assisting with networking for benefits and other resources came up as highly important to a smooth and successful transition for the veteran participants.

Caring about the mental health of the veterans also resurfaced within this theme; Brody said a place like a veterans’ center would offer students a non-threatening environment to recognize and to begin to address the issues that correspond to diagnoses such as PTSD. He stated:

The different things that go along with the PTSD that, uh, that they- they [student veterans] don't know who to talk to about it and kind of don't want to talk to anybody about it. But I think if I had talked to people about it, it would have made a huge difference for me. Brody continued by saying that he also thought student veterans could benefit from financial counseling, particularly because while in service, the military generally handles financial matters, or dealing with resource allocation is straightforward given the institutional structure. He noted that basic skills that civilians had greater opportunity – or were forced – to learn were sometimes new and baffling to the student veterans whose life had been significantly organized by the military: “I mean weird things, like paying bills, like all of the bills at once you get,” and how to manage money in general would have been helpful. Brody’s suggestion coincided with observations from other participants who cited linkages and access to external supports and services offering practical assistance as highly beneficial. When the institution plays a role in this process, Brody noted, the more time the veteran has to spend focusing on the classroom rather than being overwhelmed with issues of transition outside of the college.

Martha had only one comment regarding improvement, and it related to services devoted specifically to female veterans and their distinct set of needs. Indeed, while she supported the need
for a veterans’ center, she also said she felt the centers needed to be more inclusive of the needs of women. She asserted:

Community colleges and let's be honest, the vets center, here we go with women’s issues. The vets center doesn't offer women’s groups, I'm not saying…I know we're a big time minority, but still, I have to wear a hat that says women's veterans and I had gotten compliments on it too of course because we're all veterans.

Martha pointed out that services respond even less to women’s needs. Clayton, meanwhile, said he felt tutoring was important and that veterans needed a place for reclusion, per se. “There should be a quiet room for someone to decompress if they are having a bad day.”

Otto, meanwhile, was quite proactive in his suggestions, specifying, for example, that he would like to see the college working with the Upward Bound Program, a government-sponsored career readiness initiative: “It would be great if the Upward Bound program was there. It is limited to a couple different colleges.” He continued by saying, “That program is amazing in that it's something that every veteran, anyone with veteran status can go and use and those guys will set you up for success all day long.” Otto stated the benefits of that program include the level to which they assist veterans in pre-college aptitude and academic placement testing, given that vets have been out of high school for many years. He noted, “It's encouragement, it's tutoring…Most veterans have been out of high school for a while.”

**Conclusion**

In understanding how each participant defined “veteran friendliness” and how the institution reflected this quality, both the concrete and practical things offered by the institution mattered, but also the subtler and less tangible messages sent and social and emotional support provided to the veterans were key. Creating an environment where the veteran felt safe, in part by designating an
exclusive space for veteran use, and general attitudes of not perceiving veterans as enemies, but rather welcoming them with an attitude of equality, emerged as key. The extent to which the veterans perceived this as occurring at their institutions varied; however, suggestions to centralize services and to retrofit existing structures to provide comprehensive linkages to an array of outside resources repeatedly emerged. Within this need for centralization, the participants also stressed that having a trained and empathic point person present to guide the student veterans and to either handle all aspects of veteran services, or exhibit a strong capacity to connect the students with referrals or other resources when needs extended beyond institutional capacity, was essential. Moreover, just as the student veteran participants in general noted that their needs differed from those of traditional students, the one female participant also provided a gender perspective, emphasizing that women veterans’ struggles and needs are different from those of their male peers. Institutions need to be cognizant of this and respond with gender sensitivity accordingly when considering how and what type of services and support to offer this population, women and men alike. Overall, all participants noted some deficiency or area for improvement, regardless of whether this implied expanding services to hire more staff; working more intensely with the community to have access to external services at the college geared towards veterans’ needs; or directly providing ampler financial, career, and mental health counseling to aid this population in their transitional success.

Summary

The themes and subordinate themes presented aligned well with the major research question of this study: How do student veterans who utilize support services at a two-year community college in Massachusetts perceive and explain the value of these services regarding their retention? Through coding and analysis, the findings, responding to the question, produced eight main themes
and 10 subordinate themes, as outlined above, which provided in-depth insights into and a comprehensive understanding of the participants’ perspectives regarding the transition from military to college life.

The themes comprehensively offered a structure from which to understand the perceptions of student veterans enrolled in or who had graduated from two-year community colleges in Massachusetts. Five of the six participants shared that they did not immediately attend college after serving in the military; rather, they pursued some form of employment. Four out of the six participants acknowledged that PTSD interfered with their ability to be successful in the classroom and that treatment for this disorder was essential for them to be able to focus on college. Most of the participants found the process of applying for Post-9/11 benefits to be cumbersome and complex, and four of the participants used other military peers to assist them in the application process. The other two participants found the application process quite straightforward and applied without any assistance. Four of the participants were aware that they were eligible for financial aid to supplement their veteran educational benefits; the remaining participants did not know they were eligible until after their first year of college.

In terms of support services, remarkably, only three of the participants used some form of support services, mainly tutoring, during their academic pursuits. For the most part, the participants strived to be independent and did not see the need to pursue support services, as they revealed that they were able to retain a good GPA, a dynamic that re-enforced their need to continue their own merit accessing their competencies level. This subordinate theme also provided a deeper understanding of how the student veterans perceived support services and disclosed use or non-use of these services. In some cases, the student veterans refrained from seeking services unless it meant passing or failing.
However, all the participants expressed the need for a veterans’ center and the importance of collaboration and support from their veteran peers. Particularly salient was the need to have a place of solitude to decompress and share with peers that was exclusive to veterans and separate from the traditional student population. Unfortunately, only half of the participants interviewed in this study reported that their institutions hosted veterans’ centers, but those participants found innovative ways to access the amenities usually provided by a center, such as joining a veteran-specific group on campus to gain some interaction with other veterans.

The researcher found it intriguing that only half of the participants reported the existence of a veterans’ center; however, all agreed that having a veterans’ center is critical to student veterans’ success because it provides a venue to talk to other peers and a safe space to reflect, decompress, and focus on studies. The participants said they felt that the faculty members generally were available to assist them and that they were sensitive to the needs of student veterans; many said their instructors gave them extra time and flexibility to negotiate academic or personal hurdles. However, and importantly, one participant noted that he had observed that one faculty member who held political views against war had revealed these biases in their grading of student veterans’ work. These types of biases revealed the need for training of faculty on these issues to address their lack of knowledge of the veterans’ situation and to mitigate stereotypes of student veterans. Similarly, as for traditional students at the college, most participants expressed that these individuals could not readily relate to student veterans because of stark difference in life experiences and levels of maturity. The participants provided insights into interactions with traditional students; they did not see separation from them as a problem, and one student even suggested a separate student orientation dedicated exclusively to veteran students.
The subordinate theme, *Improving veteran friendliness*, revealed critical findings of the study because the researcher was able to appreciate and capture the extent to which and how each participant perceived the “veteran friendliness” of their institution. The participants stressed a real need for veterans’ centers and expressed that the colleges needed to prioritize hiring enough qualified and capable staff to support activities directed toward this population, whether they were affiliated with a center or not. Two of the participants envisioned the veterans’ center as a place where individuals from external veteran support services could visit and provide information and resources to the student veterans. The researcher confirmed through the data analysis that the use of Schlossberg’s (2011) adult transitional theory as a mechanism to identify and analyze support services and student veterans’ needs at the two-year community college during their transition from military life to a college setting was effective. This connection is explored in detail in Chapter 5; it helped to document what veterans perceived as both weaknesses and strengths in the support systems geared towards increasing retention and providing a full scope of transitional services to meet adult student veterans’ needs.

In addition to elaborating further on the connection between the theoretical framework and its application to the data analysis, Chapter 5 summarizes the findings based on the themes by providing a systematic analysis of how the results of this study support or contradict the studies presented in the literature review, provided in Chapter 2. It also offers a conclusion and ends with a discussion of the implications of the results for the practice setting and an examination of directions for future research on this topic.
Chapter 5: Discussion and Implications for Practice

The purpose of this research study was to gain a better understanding of how student veterans perceive support services provided by two-year community colleges during their transition from military to college life. Schlossberg’s (1981a) transitional theory was the theoretical framework used to understand the perception of the participants. By focusing on the significance of adult transition, the theory furnished the researcher with a solid foundation to create relevant research questions and to collect and analyze the data. Methodology used included a qualitative study and an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) strategy of inquiry. These tools allowed the researcher to make sense of the student veterans’ experiences and to document their perceptions of how two-year community colleges succeed or fail to make available services and support needed for these individuals to transition from a structured military environment to a more flexible academic setting.

Eight superordinate themes were identified. They included: (1) The transition from military to college life; (2) The complexities of applying for educational benefits; (3) The use of support services; (4) The existence or non-existence of veterans’ center; (5) The veteran advisor; (6) Faculty accessibility and support; (7) Traditional students and veterans’ integration; and (8) Veteran friendliness.

The themes provided a comprehensive assessment of how participants viewed the complexities of applying for educational benefits and what support services were available and/or beneficial to them. The findings included perceptions from a mixed group of six participants (five males and one female).

This chapter presents the finding related to each major theme. It incorporates how the findings relate to previous studies outlined in the literature review and how the theoretical
framework applies to this study’s results. The last section of the chapter focuses on the implications of the findings for practice by providing valid examples and recommendations; it also includes detailed directions for future research. The first section thus begins by connecting the findings to the first theme, *The transition from military to college life*, and to the literature and framework.

**The Transition from Military to College Life**

The findings related to the first theme, *The transition from military to college life*, revealed how participants shared the difficulties of transition into civilian life; some documented delayed enrollment in college either because they pursued full-time employment or focused on resolving physical injuries or mental health disorders resulting from war. This coincides with McGovern’s (2012) explanation that veterans are primarily concerned about career opportunities, as they want to be able to support themselves and their families. The findings also linked to an analysis regarding mental health challenges as barriers to veteran enrollment and success. Ahern et al. (2014) asserted that PTSD affects a vast majority of student veterans in ways similar to those the participants interviewed for this study exhibited. PTSD, as the literature revealed, can delay enrollment and create difficulties for the veteran student in transitioning into college, carrying through with coursework, and completing degrees. The overall transition for the veteran student is often overwhelming; therefore, it is necessary for two-year community colleges to provide a comprehensive set of supports to this population. Each participant faced difficulties transitioning into college. Some reported issues of PTSD and others were concerned about financial stability, which in some cases resulted in delaying their pursuit of an education for employment. These individuals later accessed the Post-9/11 educational benefits at a time that they were college ready.
In relation to the theoretical framework informing this study, Schlossberg’s (2011) 4S model considers the status of how an individual views themselves during pivotal events or transitions. It also examines what kind of support systems, family or institutional, adult learners need and what strategies institutions can provide to assist these non-traditional students in moving through a period of change. Schlossberg’s (1981) approach applies directly to the context the veterans interviewed for this study faced, and it became apparent during the data analysis that it was essential for the two-year community colleges the participants attended to assess these needs and provide services geared towards veterans to retain them and support their success. This relates back to the literature, particularly Brown and Gross (2011), who discussed the importance that support services provided by a two-year community college represent in increasing the student veteran’s ability to succeed in this new environment. In addition, this study revealed, it is important for the student veteran to have a venue through which to collaborate and interact with other veterans. This represents a component contributing to veteran success that the literature has frequently documented; the two-year community college provides support successfully if it can establish an environment offering a sense of welcome and belonging so that the student veteran’s transition will not be one of isolation and alienation. This transition is not automatic, but it takes the veteran a considerable amount of time to adjust, and support offered needs to vary to meet changing needs along the way (Ackerman et al., Carr, 2010; Francis & Kraus, 2012; Hollingsworth, 2015; Semer & Harmening, 2015).

Understanding transition to analyze human adaptation, as Schlossberg (1981b) advocated, served as an appropriate approach to guide the researcher in capturing and interpreting the perceptions of the participants regarding support services offered at their various institutions. This approach also assisted the researcher in understanding both the internal and external factors that
affect the balance and deficits of resources such as institutional and family supports. Schlossberg’s (1981) theoretical framework discussed how adult transition is a process; support systems that are long-range and consistent are necessary for an individual in transition to recover adequately and gain some momentum. Because the student veteran returning from deployment, as the participants in this study were, usually suffers from the effects of war, the process of re-entry can be extremely overwhelming. The problems and issues that arise during re-entry commonly interfere with the student veterans’ ability to perform in college; the flexible, self-scheduled routines of college, compared to the structure and rigors of enlistment and combat, can be a source of constant anxiety that makes adjustment particularly challenging, as O’Herrin (2011) and Kupo (2010) both observed.

Returning to the issue of PTSD, the participants clearly were aware that this disorder exists for veterans; however, only half of the participants were comfortable enough to share that they were suffering from its effects. As Carr (2010) discussed, student veterans who suffer from PTSD find it difficult to focus in the classroom setting. The effects of PTSD, as described by the participants, coincided with Carr’s (2010) findings, compromising their ability to succeed in the classroom because they had difficulty concentrating. They explained that being able to discuss their struggles with another student veteran who could relate to the barriers associated with this disorder was essential to moving through the vestiges of PTSD. If not addressed, PTSD can promote depression and an even deeper lack of confidence for the veteran student, as Bryan and Bryan (2015) discussed, which often leads to more serious psychological problems that may involve suicidal thoughts, which would further inhibit success in college and put the veteran’s general wellbeing and very life at risk. This affects transition considerably. Understandably, the student veterans interviewed for this study explained that they felt that their mental health needs were different from the traditional student who did not face these challenges as described.
Smith and Wilson (2012) also emphasized how student veterans’ are often classified in relation to PTSD as having an inability to focus consistently; they acknowledged the need to address and cope with the effects of the disorder before these students can commit to their studies, which resonated throughout the interviews with the participants in this study. The issue of PTSD crossed into the theme of the benefits of a veterans’ center with participants who emphasized the importance of this space where veterans can decompress and feel safe. In addition, the interviews revealed that having a dedicated veterans’ advisor who is knowledgeable about their mental health challenges was equally important. PTSD can negatively affect the student veterans’ ability to focus on their education, causing considerable anxiety; therefore, veteran friendly services such as a center are essential to their adjustment and success in the classroom and beyond (Romero et al., 2015).

Conclusively, the participants identified with some form of transitional issues that either delayed their enrollment or distracted their ability to focus at times, and they expressed the need for support to aid in their success through transition towards degree completion. In this context, as Nyaronga et al. (2015) explained, PTSD is problematic, and the level of severity of the disorder can depend on the branch of service served, which college advisors need to understand. This may help explain why some of the participants were able to discuss the effects of PTSD where others were not. For the purposes of this study; however, almost all of the participants acknowledged stressors particular to their situation that were a direct result of service, and noted the importance of having a place where they could interact with other veterans to address barriers and commonalities of their transition experience. This coincides with Hollingsworth’s (2015) explanation that student veterans face transitional issues from combat to the classroom and having a place exclusive to them where
they can non-judgmentally meet with peers and an empathic advisor, in addition to professional counseling, commonly will give them the kind of relief that can help them to detach and refocus.

In summary, a myriad of factors affected the process of transition from military to college life for the student veterans interviewed for this study. These ranged from facing the implications of post-war effects on their mental health, such as PTSD, which derailed their concentration in class and even kept some from immediately enrolling after discharge, to being generally overwhelmed and anxious about managing a new and flexible schedule, financial concerns, and family issues. Throughout the descriptions of the difficulties faced, the participants consistently noted the importance of support services. The next section focuses on one area in which many veterans needed support, which constitutes the second superordinate theme, *The complexities of applying for educational benefits.*

**The Complexities of Applying for Educational Benefits**

This theme correlated with the literature in that the participants in the study were all motivated to attend college because of the benefits offered by the Post-9/11 GI Bill and other forms of educational support; however, applying for and securing these benefits involved a complex process with which many needed assistance. All but one of the participants in the study explained that they found the process of applying for benefits difficult and discussed the importance of informed mentors or guides to assist them in navigating the bureaucracy. This resonates with Elliot et al.’s (2011) discussion of the need for student veterans to have access to a veteran advisor who is an expert in all facets of applying for the Post-9/11 educational benefit and who can assist them in this complex process. This individual, the literature and the students interviewed for this study emphasized, needs to be able to fully explain to the student veteran the eligibility requirements and
regulations associated with maintaining the benefits provided by this legislation. The participants in this study also discussed concerns about their eligibility.

Veterans who waited for the enactment of the Post-9/11 GI Bill and who sought employment in the meantime thought that they would prosper in these positions, but they soon discovered that they would need additional formal education to advance in their careers, which led them to return to college. As Sampson and Laub (1996) explained, the military student is concerned about remaining financially stable while entertaining the prospect of attending college, and the participants revealed that government educational benefits provided the financial security and incentives to motivate them to attend and persevere to degree completion. In this study, for some of the participants, the financial benefits of attending college certainly outweighed working in low-paying, dead-end jobs or pursuing employment that was not of their real career interest.

Gentry and Schiavone (2014) explained that the student veteran is eligible to obtain tuition, a book stipend, and a housing allowance in accordance with the rental market of their residence. Confirming these scholars’ assertions, one of the participants revealed that he needed to be a full-time student to reap these benefits, where another participant expressed the need to be successfully bringing in income, thus he needed a pro-rated benefits structure so that he could study on a part-time basis. The remaining participants wanted to be both successful and attend college full-time to maximize these benefits. Interestingly, there was not one veteran interviewed that sought the services of a veterans’ advisor in applying for their educational benefits; instead, even though they expressed that they should be able to rely on such an individual, they relied on fellow veterans to walk them through the application process. The participants, nonetheless, admitted that advisory services were important, confirming what Carr (2010) asserted, that the veterans’ advisor is essential due to their awareness of legislative changes regarding the certified process and what is
needed to attain and maintain these veteran educational benefits. It is possible that the participants in this study were not aware of the skill set that the certifying official offered. Others, as outlined in Chapter 4, were hesitant to use application assistance services because military life had imbued in them a sense that they should possess the capacity and independence to manage this process alone, which revealed that sending the message that seeking help is not a weakness is important and needs to be addressed.

In discussing the complexities of applying for Post-9/11 benefits, the participants reflected on the importance of receiving tuition reimbursement and the housing allowance to focus on their studies and worry less about their financial struggles. Cass and Hammond (2015) suggested an online mentor might provide some of these resources to the veteran student to assist in applying for Post-9/11 benefits. The participants admitted refraining from using support services, solving problems in part independently; however, the fact that many sought out other veteran colleagues for these resources demonstrates the need for support services and for awareness regarding their existence, especially understanding the role and responsibilities of the veterans’ advisor or certifying official. Some of the participants were not aware that they were eligible for financial aid beyond their veteran-specific benefits, for example, which may have been a result of them not talking to the veterans’ advisor or other department officials. Other veterans were encouraged by peer veterans to apply for financial aid.

In relation to the complexities of negotiating the benefits structure, the review of the literature in this dissertation focused primarily on the iterations of veteran-specific educational benefits derived from the federal government and the need to seek out services from the veterans’ advisor to access these resources. In addition to facing difficulties with accessing veteran-specific benefits, the interviews revealed that many students also needed help navigating other forms of
federal financial aid and other resources. In addition, student veterans may not understand the regulations set forth by the Veterans Administration, as Hope (2015) explained, because there are strict guidelines regarding what will be compensated, and which courses are mandatory for student veterans to take to receive federal military assistance to complete their degree.

Five of the six participants attended college on a full-time basis and were able to reap 100% of their Post-9/11 or vocational rehab educational benefits. The fifth participant decided to attend college part-time to facilitate his readjustment to the rigors of academic life. As previously explained in the literature, the student veteran can maximize these benefits if they attend full-time which can allow them to afford to attend college because it offers some financial stability (Callahan & Jarrat, 2014). McEnaney (2011) discussed the need for Post-9/11 benefits for student veterans, as well as the ability to apply for these benefits in a timely fashion to financially support their educational endeavors. The benefits, however, often do not fully address the need for support services for those veterans who suffer from the mental and physical effects from war, which are services they need to seek elsewhere and which many expect the college to provide. The literature was limited in addressing the mechanics and complexities of applying for the actual benefits, which was a barrier the participants noted; however, the literature consistently emphasized how the educational benefits were crucial and needed if the veteran wanted to attend college.

Overall, in examining the intersection of the literature with the participants’ experiences, there was coincidence in that, while the student veterans found that applying for and receiving benefits was essential to their attending college, many faced obstacles in the process of procuring this support. Additionally, to overcome these obstacles, the student veterans commonly had to let go of their own insistence to manage their affairs completely independently and be willing to seek help from mentors and professionals. Even with the benefits provided by the government,
particularly the Post-9/11 educational bill., the participants found it necessary to access additional forms of financial and other support – student financial aid, disability benefits, and assistance to confront issues of mental health. In this context, the next theme will address the participants’ use of support services and provide an explanation of the reasons some elected to refrain from using these services.

**The Use of Support Services**

This section provides a discussion of the theme regarding using or not using support services offered by the two-year community college. The study revealed that veterans who suffer from PTSD were reluctant to seek support services for this illness specifically because they were afraid of being judged by traditional student peers, faculty, or administrative and support staff, and because they felt they needed to handle situations independently without assistance. The participants who reported using support services mainly focused on seeking tutoring services because they were having difficulty comprehending the course material and, because of receiving Post-9/11 or Vocational Rehabilitation benefits, they did not want to fail the course in fear of having to pay back the institution for tuition and other expenses. These findings demonstrated the level of independence of student veterans possess, or believe they must possess, made them hesitant many times to seek support services. O’Herrin (2011) explained that student veterans who suffer from PTSD or other disorders, or simply from the disruption of transition, may withdraw from college rather than admitting they need any form of assistance to remain in college. This underscores the need to make service structures accessible, streamlined, confidential, and veteran-friendly.

Heineman (2016) discussed the need for student veterans to utilize support services and the need for two-year community colleges to be able to track their progress and to consistently and
appropriate make referrals to these services, or adjust offerings as needs change or arise. Only half of the participants engaged in using support services, and they limited their use primarily to tutoring and academic support. The participants who decided not to use these services noted that they felt they were making substantial academic progress without it. These findings demonstrated that student veterans possibly avoid taking advantage of support services unless their academic success is threatened.

As the literature outlined, higher educational institutions are generally challenged with understanding what type of support services are needed to aid the veteran student in their success and to further understand what challenges are present, such as emotional and psychological issues, especially when the veteran does not want to be identified as having these conditions (Church, 2009). As previously discussed, assumptions are made by institutions that the student veteran will self-report regarding what kind of assistance is needed and when, which is not always the case. In short, devising structures to respond to veteran needs specifically and confidentially, as Nichols-Casebolt (2012) explained, benefits both the recipient, as well as the provider of these support programs, because individuals involved in this process also become aware of veteran issues by working with this population, and providing appropriate services bolsters veteran student success.

The participants interviewed for this study confirmed assertions outlined in the literature regarding the crucial need for support services; however, as the literature also delineated, the veterans first strived for a maximum level of independence before reaching out for assistance. Importantly, the student veterans in this study whose institutions did not have formal structures to promote this level of support – due to lack of a veterans’ center, for example – formed these connections to some extent on their own, which is in part discussed in the next section on the veterans center.
The Existence or Non-existence of a Veterans’ Center

The findings revealed that only three of the participants had access to a formal veterans’ center. The literature was limited in providing information on what strategies student veterans used at two-year community colleges that did not host a veterans’ center; however, the literature supported the need for a veterans’ center in general and the benefits of having the veterans center, which was addressed in the subtheme under this theme in Chapter 4. In this context, for example, Hollingsworth (2015) found that student veterans facing an overwhelming transition into academic life benefit immensely from access to a place of solitude to focus on their homework, decompress, and interact with peers confidentially, such as a veterans’ center. This non-disruptive environment can be essential to their sense of safety and can significantly enhance their academic success, particularly because it also serves as a point of contact with peers, who provide emotional, academic, networking, and social support. The participants in the study emphasized the importance of having a veterans’ center and described how the facility can serve as a place to refocus, interact, and decompress. According to Wheeler (2014), veterans’ centers generally promote collaboration with fellow veterans, and this impacts the success of the veteran student positively because they find people whom with to identify, leading them to feel supported rather than alienated and isolated, and less overwhelmed by experiencing this type of camaraderie. The participants viewed the center as a place where they could not only study and focus, but it helped them to feel connected to a larger community – it gave them a sense of belonging, which can be extremely important for individuals, particularly adults, undergoing a transitional experience, as Schlossberg’s theory asserts.

Francis and Kraus (2012) viewed the veterans’ center as a central place where student veterans can organize themselves, converse with others, and relate to other veterans in a space that
provides a significant and necessary level of safety. The student veterans’ interviewed for this study who did not use support services in general acknowledged the need for a veterans’ center, seeing it as a means of social and psychological support that served a greater purpose for students. One participant explained that the institution was unable to provide a veterans’ center because the college claimed financial hardship in dedicates resources to this purpose. As Evans et al. (2015) noted, budgetary issues frequently and markedly interfere with a college’s ability to provide support services for student veterans. However, the participants who reported that their institution did not host a veterans’ center found innovative ways to collaborate and connect with their peers. Some initiated a more informal veterans’ club without a brick and mortar location, others gathered in common spaces; these alternatives also fostered a level of support among student veterans to share experiences, share resources, and to provide support and mentorship among and within their peer group. That the student veterans independently found ways to create this supportive environment in the formal absence of a center further accentuates the importance of the existence of this service. These findings were significant in understanding that the veteran student thrives when receiving the support of and having access to social interaction with their peers; the need to share and collaborate is important to their personal, transitional, and academic success, and a veterans’ center is an ideal way to facilitating this interaction and solidarity. The literature supported the needs of the participants in having a veterans’ center and detailed how this space is fundamental to the building of support networks among student veterans.

In summary, the literature coincided directly with the findings regarding veterans’ centers given that scholars have emphasized that the investment in this service by two-year community colleges will ultimately lead to a greater number of veterans attending the college because the center’s very existence reveals institutional dedication to this population. Enrollments would
increase financial revenues that would justify the cost of hosting a veterans’ center (Lokken et al., 2009). This is because, as the data revealed, the center is a lifeline for many of these student veterans because it can provide a place of solitude, or an environment that is safe within which to interact and share experiences with peers, without feeling overwhelmed or alienated. It also serves as a clearinghouse for access to essential resources in many cases. Some of the participants in this study who deemed interaction with peers and access to resources truly essential found ways to create their own ad-hoc or formal veterans centers to meet their needs and those of their fellow vets, in the absence of formal institutional initiatives.

A veterans’ center, however, must be supported by trained staff with direct knowledge of the complexities of the veteran transitional experience. The participants and the literature coincided in affirming that student veterans who have access to such an individual, usually a veteran advisor, are more likely to succeed because they feel that someone competent and familiar with their situation is invested in their educational and personal success. In this context, another key college staff member who is essential to helping veterans transition smoothly and integrate to the degree necessary is the veteran advisor, whose role in relation to the findings and the literature leads the discussion in the next section.

**The Veteran Advisor**

Half of the participants emphasized the importance of having a veterans’ advisor devoted to veteran services and committed to the role, preferably fulltime. These participants viewed support for maintaining and even prioritizing the position of the veterans’ advisor as a vital component of an institution’s level of commitment to veteran friendliness. They also asserted that this individual needed to be someone fully competent in veteran services who understood the transition veterans undergo and the complexities adapting to college life after service in the military, particularly the
struggles faced post-deployment and related to combat experience. As Smith and Wilson (2012) observed, this individual should possess the capacity to influence the career path of the veteran student by discussing the potential earnings and advancement possibilities of each degree option, a quality the participants also emphasized was key to their success. As the interviews documented and research has substantiated, the role of the veterans’ advisor or certifying official is crucial to the student veterans’ success because this population needs clear communication and guidance for the transition to be successful. The confidentiality provided by a veteran-designated certifying official or advisor is important to student veterans as they navigate the personal and academic challenges of transition (Joslin, 2009). In this context, Miller (2015) explained that it is crucial for the veteran academic advisor to be sensitive to the needs of this population and to be able to identify their barriers and struggles as well as make the appropriate referrals to contribute to student success.

In regards to mental health, the veteran advisor or certifying official commonly must advise on ways for veterans to deal particularly with PTSD, and its corollary effects such as depression, anxiety, and even suicidal tendencies. However, one major finding in the literature, which the researcher was not able to examine in depth through the interview process, was the potentially deleterious effect advising and supporting veterans with this disorder can have on the mental and professional health of the advisor or certifying official. Burnout is common because he or she may become overwhelmed by the secondary trauma involved in listening to the experiences these soldiers have endured, and providing this form of support over time can be challenging without adequate training and backup (Evans, Pelligrino, & Hoggan, 2015; Francis & Kraus, 2012). Most college administrators are not aware of the need the veteran advisor has for support, even though researchers have emphasized the need to help the veteran advisor avoid burnout. The existence of
support services and training for these advisors so they may be balanced and consistently effective in the support they provide is essential, in addition to providing support directly to the veterans.

The next section examines another type of support that is crucial to veteran academic and transitional success—faculty accessibility to assist veterans and their awareness of veteran issues and the need to provide other support.

Faculty Accessibility and Support

Most of the participants reflected positively on their relationship with and accessibility to the faculty members at their institution except for one participant who noted that they believed faculty members who held certain political beliefs and were anti-military let this bias come through in their grading, at an institution where he worked after degree completion. Schlossberg’s (1981) transition theory asserts that faculty engagement is a critical component of assistance to the student veteran because the student who does not feel embraced by the faculty may be alienated and more prone to withdraw. Those student veterans interviewed who said they felt supported by faculty, while not at risk of withdrawing, did comment on how much the faculty’s accessibility and assistance helped them at different times, both academically and in feeling welcomed to the college, and not stigmatized.

Ackerman et al. (2009) discussed how student veterans who have negative classroom experiences and limited support from faculty members, especially from those who voice their opposition against war, will be more likely to feel alienated or discriminated against, which increases their likeliness to withdraw. For the most part, the participants interviewed for this study were able to gain insight from the faculty members and received extensions, for example, if they needed more time to complete a project, compared to traditional students. Sinski (2012) explained the importance of faculty awareness and sensitivity of the student veterans’ struggles in the
classroom. He also expressed the importance of classroom comfort to reduce the likelihood of triggers associated with PTSD; consequently, overcrowded classrooms and loud distractions can be detrimental to student veterans (Sinski, 2012). According to Olsen et al., (2014), the student who feels alienated in the classroom because of the behavior of either the faculty member or other students will intentionally not contribute in class discussions, which can negatively affect academic performance. This did not seem to be a major barrier to participants in this study, who expressed that they generally felt comfortable asking for assistance. Helms and Libertz (2014) noted the importance of faculty support to accommodate student veterans’ in order to increase retention and confidence in the classroom.

Veterans rely on faculty members to provide a comfortable and safe academic and classroom atmosphere that does not require them to share war experiences; they also need faculty to set the tone for an environment of respect where derogatory remarks from other students are discouraged or outright and explicitly not tolerated (Canto, et al., 2015). The participants did not report any negative conflicts in the classroom in this regards, or any disrespect on the part of their faculty members or other non-military students in the classroom. The one example of anti-war sentiments affecting grades occurred later to a student not interviewed for this study, whom the participant advised at his work locale – another community college where he served as a certifying official.

As the literature clearly outlined and the data fully supported, many academic challenges veterans face can be resolved when faculty pay particular attention to the struggles these students face, providing adequate accessibility one-on-one, and creating a rapport where safety from stigma or discrimination is evident. It is also essential for faculty to work to create an environment of acceptance and support for veterans by eliminating barriers such as discrimination directly in the
classroom, by setting a tone of inclusivity from the start. This combination of individualized access and support from faculty and their assistance in providing a welcoming atmosphere in general through their actions and attitudes assisted veterans interviewed for this study in their transitional and academic success.

Beyond faculty support, the student veteran to some extent must also negotiate the complexity of interactions with students who are not veterans (traditional students). The next section discusses the experiences the participants had in this area, and how they perceived the process of integrating with traditional students and its value – or lack thereof – within their own veteran community. The analysis also relates the findings in this area to the literature.

**Traditional Students and Veterans’ Integration**

The participants in the study generally were hesitant about affirming the need to interact with traditional students because of the difficulty they had relating to them, and vice versa. The participants had no objection to being in the same class and jointly participating in discussions with traditional students; however, ongoing and comprehensive integration was not a priority, and in fact, it was not seen as even necessary to successful transition. This was true to the extent that one participant suggested that the veterans needed separate services that were usually joint, like a student orientation devoted to student veterans only. This study revealed that the participants felt more comfortable in environments that overtly supported them, and, in this sense, they admitted they related more to their veteran peers than to the rest of the student body. This was largely because the veterans perceived that traditional students did not have the same level of maturity as they did because most of the veterans had gone into service and had deployed immediately after high school. The participants noted differences in age and experience, and the fact that many of them had families and a different set of responsibilities; one remarked that he perceived that the
traditional students felt intimated by the veterans. The literature confirms and coincides with these perspectives; for example, Ackerman et al., (2009) discussed how student veterans identify more readily with veteran peers because they share the deep experience of service and deployment, which creates a separation from traditional students, many who do exhibit judgmental attitudes.

Minnis (2015) explained that many colleges can collaborate with other veteran organizations to provide external support for veteran-specific services, but they lack the ability to provide awareness training to connect traditional students with student veterans internally. Similarly, the participants in this study admitted it was difficult for an institution, particularly with financial restraints, to promote the kind and level of activities and programs that would facilitate stronger integration and awareness. Most of the participants did not feel readily embraced by traditional students, and several admitted that they understood why these individuals might have difficulties relating the student veterans’ experiences. The also expressed that they felt that the institution would not be able to change the stereotypes about veterans and the misfit between the two populations.

Kirchner (2015) explained that student veterans feel stereotyped in many ways and are less likely to succeed in environments that do not support their specific needs, including a sense of community or belonging. The veterans in this study appeared to find support more with veteran peers than with the traditional students, even though they acknowledged that activities to promote awareness might be useful. Even so, they repeatedly expressed the importance of having a veteran-only space and even a separate student orientation program to provide them with a safe and supportive environment that directly met their needs. This reticence resonated with Ackerman et al. (2009) who explained that to a certain degree, difficulties student veterans face in their transition from military to college life can in part be attributed to the increased anxiety and fear of judgment
they feel when they are integrated with traditional students in the classroom and school environment. As the literature confirms and the participants expressed, integrating with traditional students is complex and challenging, although it can reap some benefits. The literature in part contradicts the participants’ experiences. For example, Hollingsworth’s (2015) study noted that student veterans invited to participate in campus activities with other traditional students felt embraced by the college community and that ultimately increased persistence and retention. The participants in this study did not necessarily believe that integration to that extent was needed for their perseverance or success either in transitioning or in academics.

The findings from the data both supported and challenged the literature in regards to this theme. Veterans need to not feel alienated and discriminated when interacting with traditional students; however, many of the participants in this study did not deem it essential, although it would have been well regarded, for the institution to make exceptional efforts to provide programs fostering intensive integration with traditional students. Basically, the veterans sought tolerance, awareness regarding their situation, and respect, and they emphasized that ideally transitional activities, such as orientation, would be geared more specifically to their needs, and even be organized as a separate event from the general orientation that focused mostly on traditional students.

In the least, institutions can be aware that integration should not occur until the student veteran has had some transitional time to be confident that they are safe, and that their boundaries are understood and respected. This sensitivity combined with the other themes listed above contributes to the extent to which an institution is considered to be veteran friendly, which is the focus of the next section.
Veteran Friendliness

The participants in the study perceived “veteran friendliness” as an institution’s ability to provide a safe place where veterans feel welcomed and not judged, and to have support staff on board, hopefully full time, to help meet the complex needs that veterans in transition have. In addition, the findings from the interviews revealed that veterans want an institution that does not stereotype them in a negative manner; they want equal treatment and respect for their unique experiences. In general, as both the participants in this study and research confirmed, higher educational institutions benefit from going beyond simply creating veterans’ centers focused only on academics to promote a pro-veteran organizational culture of inclusion. Crucial areas include assessing and addressing a variety of barriers such as mental health, familial issues, and PTSD counseling to provide a truly comprehensive “veteran friendly” environment (Francis & Kraus, 2012; Kupo, 2010; Lokken et al., 2009). Lokken et al. (2009) noted that higher educational institutions best benefit student veterans if they make every effort to promote a positive environment that is committed to making the transition from military to civilian college life smooth because this will increase the number of student veterans enrolled and retained at these institutions, strengthening the college’s reputation among this population.

Simultaneously, as previously analyzed, the student veteran often suffers from some form of PTSD and other psychological barriers sustained from war experiences. These mental health vestiges of war may lead to issues such as increased episodes of domestic violence, lack of concentration, depression, and others; therefore, carefully designing and offering support services to these students appropriately and comprehensively constitutes a crucial component signifying an institution’s level of veteran friendliness (Gerlock, 2004). In this study, four of six of the participants acknowledged the severity and prevalence of PTSD among veterans. These
participants pointed out that it is commonly difficult for a veteran student to seek help for this disorder because of a fear of judgment, which indicates a strong need for an institution to openly address this problem and to provide a safe atmosphere of sensitivity and acceptance for the veteran student population.

This finding coincides directly with the literature examining institutional responses to the psychological and social needs of veterans. Higher educational institutions that provide adequate training for faculty, staff, and administrators on the psychological effects of PTSD and TBI – and the general dynamics of life post-deployment – will effectively address these barriers and offer strategies to promote sensitivity to this population. Institutional awareness of and ability to address these dynamics constitute some of the most important aspects of being veteran friendly, as it is defined in the literature and was conceptualized by the participants in this study (Helmes & Libertz, 2014; Moon & Schma, 2011; O’Herrin, 2011; Persky & Oliver, 2010). Finally, Brown and Gross (2011) further explained that colleges and universities that are equipped with outside veteran support services in these and other areas can assist in the transition to college, as well as increase enrollment by having these networks make veteran referrals to the institution.

Beyond providing adequate on-campus services and creating an environment where veterans are accepted and not judged, veteran friendliness depends on the capacity of the institution to provide linkage inside and through the college to outside veteran services. Whether on-campus or through referrals, the participants in this study, in sync with the literature, emphasized the crucial role an institution has in responding effectively and non-judgmentally to issues pertaining to mental health, particularly PTSD, and its effects, such as difficulty concentrating in class and needing flexibility to attend to holistic needs. In short, veteran friendliness must involve a multiplicity of
factors that embrace the student veterans’ struggles specifically. The next section provides a conclusion integrating and summarizing the analysis provided in this chapter.

**Conclusion**

The purpose of this research study was to understand how veterans enrolled in a two-year community college in Massachusetts perceived the value of support services provided by their institutions and the complexities they experienced during the transition from the military to college life. The research used an IPA strategy of inquiry to understand the experiences of veterans by documenting and interpreting the voices of the participants, attempting to make accurate sense of their experiences of transition from military to college life. In addition, the researcher captured a solid reflection of the participants’ experiences by applying Schlossberg’s (1981) transitional theory to the collection of data and analysis describing how six student veterans from various two-year community colleges perceived support services that aided them in their transition from a structured military environment to a far less restrictive educational environment and routine. By interpreting the experiences of the participants through this lens, the researcher was able to understand their needs and explore innovative methods that might address the barriers; this analysis occurred in interaction with information and analysis provided in both the literature review and the discussion of the theoretical framework.

The student veterans who participated in the study were able to explain their resistance to using support services at the two-year community college based on their need to remain independent, in line with their military training. However, they simultaneously recognized the need for support services and found innovative ways to assist one another during the transition. The participants acknowledged the struggles associated with PTSD and the need for institutional support, specifically the need for a veterans’ center to assist with such challenges. The participants
expressed how they viewed “veteran friendliness” at their prospective institutions, and each shared the importance of feeling accepted and the significance of having a veterans’ advisor committed to helping them meet their goals. They also expressed the need for a point contact or someone that understood access to the available resources and how to navigate college life, particularly in relation to accessing financial aid to offset costs not met by their veterans’ educational benefits. The participants did not see themselves integrating with the traditional student population to a significant extent, and they perceived that the traditional student population to a strong degree did not have the maturity to respond to them effectively, and the institution did not possess sufficient resources to create awareness and venues for true integration. This was primarily because the participants perceived that traditional students could never truly identify with the student veterans’ previous experiences enrolled in the military and undergoing the trials of deployment and post-deployment.

The veterans in the study valued the importance of faculty members’ accessibility and reported positive experiences receiving support, except for one participant who felt faculty members’ anti-war and anti-military political views had the potential to affect grading. The findings enabled the researcher to discern innovative ways to encourage student veterans who were reluctant to seek help to consider using support services. These innovative ideas constitute the focus of the next section outlining recommendations for practice.

**Recommendations for Practice**

Reflecting on the findings as they relate to the superordinate themes outlined in this study, the researcher in this section examines how two-year community colleges can provide innovative ways to support student veterans in their transition from military to college life, and she delineates other implications and recommendations for practice. Smith-Osborne (2009) discussed the
importance of community college support in developing programs and services that will address the challenges associated with veteran PTSD and suggested peer support groups and additional resources as ways to overcome this barrier. The researcher found that the institutions lacking a veterans’ center needed a way to collaborate with other veterans to create a community space, as well as to promote activities that could meet their individual needs. Connecting veterans either through a veterans’ center or more informal channels emerged as extremely important because student veterans expressed that they felt more comfortable sharing their experiences with other students who could more closely relate and identify with them – particularly their peers who had also served and been deployed.

The study revealed that student veterans have a strong sense of independence and are reluctant to seek assistance unless they feel their success in school, mainly related to grades, is in jeopardy. In this context and in discussing the needs of the participants, the researcher established that most of the participants wanted to see a separate student orientation set up and/or to have the college arrange visits from veteran-friendly experts from outside resource agencies to supply career counseling, financial planning, and VA services. Locating access to these services under one structure in the college setting so that the veteran could easily and comprehensively use them emerged as important. Even though some veterans rarely visited the veterans’ center, and others did not even have access to this kind of facility, all consistently emphasized the need for it to exist. Therefore, practitioners should consider developing plans that connect the veteran to the support services they need. This can be achieved either by promoting more dynamic activities at a center or as a structured part of the orientation process, and/or through additional events during the school year.
The researcher, examining the need for but common lack of the use of a brick and mortar center, considered that an online/virtual veterans’ center, of which few models exist, might be a way to bring the services more regularly and comprehensively to the student veterans. Through this approach, the veteran students could gain access using their mobile phones or tablets and obtain information similar to an online classroom, except the center would have a veterans’ advisor available through either a chat or a Skype-like format. This interactive digital virtual center could also host frequent workshops with or networking linkages to community or government organizations devoted to veterans’ services such as medical coverage, career readiness, tutoring services, veteran educational benefits, financial aid, and other requested assistance. Live podcasts or Skype sessions archived for later viewing by other student veterans’ or by those individuals unable to attend during the scheduled time could provide support. This would enable the veteran student to attend these workshops either face-to-face in a center or through a virtual connection.

The virtual veterans’ center would also be a way for a student veteran to obtain support services in a confidential manner, connecting to the virtual room or being physically present, or sending inquiries through the messaging center incorporated into this virtual setting. The veteran student who has difficulty going to the center in person because of family and work commitments would have access to this option to connect at times convenient for them. In addition, the virtual veterans’ center could employ a counselor/advisor, hopefully fulltime, to talk to the veteran students in private, one-on-one sessions to discuss issues relating to PTSD, TBI, or other struggles (relationships, re-integration) and issues that he or she feel may interfere with their ability to succeed in college. This option could empower veterans to seek help by not forcing them to openly attend workshops in person and disclose personal information and veteran status to others.
As the literature and this study revealed, it is important for every two-year community college to strive to be “veteran friendly” and to host some kind of veterans’ center; however, logistics and a lack of resources often make the option unviable. In this context, incorporating a digital, virtual approach might be a cost and time-efficient way to fill the gap for those veterans who are apprehensive to seek out services or who face multiple time constraints from family and employment, for example. Figure 2 provides a visual representation of a possible virtual veterans’ center:

**Figure 2: Virtual Veterans’ Center**

![Diagram of a virtual veterans’ center](image)

*Figure 2. Diagram depicting the possible structure of a virtual veterans’ center.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

This study covered many facets of how veterans perceive support services and institutional sensitivity to their experiences and needs during their transition from military to college life. Future studies could provide a comprehensive overview of strategies used by numerous two-year community colleges, either through a national-level survey or comparative qualitative case studies,
to facilitate the process of lessening the complexities of applying for Post-9/11 benefits. The limitations of the literature in this area, as well as in the category of financial aid awareness, underscore the need for institutions to provide stronger supports regarding financial processes for veterans in their initial transition to college and through to degree completion. As one participant suggested, having a separate orientation for student veterans focused on veteran-specific issues and information could constitute one approach for two-year community colleges to assist these students in this area. Discussions of non-veteran specific financial aid and dispersion of information regarding how to access these resources prior to the start of the semester to alleviate any delays in applying for these essential resources also need to occur. The elimination of financial constraints and the streamlining of the application processes allow the veteran student to focus on their studies and be less concerned about how they are going to fund their education and usually simultaneously support a family.

The act of working to remove barriers is essential to retaining the veteran student population. The findings indicated that many veterans, or at least several of those interviewed for this study, do not use support services; therefore, further research could examine more deeply the reasons behind veteran reticence to seeking help, not only academically, but also to meet emotional, psychological, and familial needs. A survey instrument deployed to student veterans across two-year community colleges aiming to examine what support services would be utilized could constitute a first essential step in obtaining key information to assist in devising structures that could be effective in breaking down barriers to student veterans’ transitional and academic success.

The researcher designed a prototype of a survey instrument to use to identify these support service needs and pinpoint what services would be used. This tool could provide a starting point for two-year community colleges to begin to understand the real needs of student veterans. The survey
would attempt to assess the use of support services and to identify the extent to which integrating a virtual veterans center would be viable and useful for student veterans who have difficulty accessing a traditional center, who attend institutions that cannot afford this facility, or who prefer this more confidential approach to accessing vital services.

Table 3. Veteran student support services survey

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Workshops</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>I would attend workshops if they were specific to veteran issues</td>
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<tr>
<td>I would find a workshop on PTSD beneficial</td>
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<tr>
<td>Career readiness is a workshop that I think would enhance my knowledge of career paths</td>
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<tr>
<td>A workshop on Financial Aid regulations and the application process would serve my specific interests and I would attend this type of workshop</td>
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<tr>
<td>I would attend a workshop exploring veteran educational benefits and updated federal policies</td>
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<tr>
<td>I would attend a workshop that addressed medical coverage options</td>
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<tr>
<td>I would not attend any workshops regardless unless it was offered in an online setting.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Veterans’ center</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>I never visit the Veterans’ Center because I do not have time but would consider enrolling in a Virtual Veterans’ Center that would accommodate my time constraints</td>
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</table>
I would rather visit the traditional Veterans’ Center if it offered workshops and counseling services.

I would openly use the virtual Veterans’ Center if it offered confidential counseling services.

I think the Veterans’ Center, whether virtual or physical, benefits veterans.

**Veterans’ Advisor**

The veterans’ advisor is accessible and is able to assist in all facets of veteran educational benefits.

The veterans’ advisor is helpful but I wish he/she was available for more hours than the current schedule.

The veterans’ advisor was helpful in my transition from the military to college life.

**Faculty and Traditional Students**

Faculty members are accessible and sensitive to the needs of veterans.

Traditional students are sensitive to and work well with student veterans.

Faculty and traditional students could benefit from training regarding veteran needs and experiences.

Overall, I find the institution “Veteran Friendly”

**Additional Comments**

A survey approach of this kind would assist institutions in examining personnel available to fulfill various needs and in evaluating the costs and benefits of providing these services. One of the
female participants interviewed for this study expressed the need for more services specific to woman student veterans. Baechtold De Sawal (2009) noted that women student veterans deal with issues such as gender dynamics, family problems, incidents of sexual assault, and mental health issues that require differential support from that provided to their male military peers. Additional research on the status and experiences specifically of women student veterans that sheds light on precisely what kind of services are required for them is needed, and any survey instrument created or used would benefit from including gender-specific queries.

Overall, further research and collaboration between two-year community colleges, veteran representatives, and outside resources would aid in devising optimal strategies to assist student veterans in their transition into college and to help reduce the reluctance of using college services that could ease the complexities of the transition from military to college life and improve retention and persistence.
References


Appendix A: Initial E-Mail Script

Dear (NAME),

My name is Dawn Mackiewicz, and I am a current doctoral candidate enrolled at Northeastern University College of Professional Studies in Boston, Massachusetts. I am conducting a research study with my advisor, Dr. Thomas Wylie, entitled, “An Exploration of Veteran Student Transition from Military to a Two-Year Community College and Their Perceptions of Support Services and Veteran Programs.” I am seeking to interview 6 to 10 veteran students who meet the following criteria: Veterans who served in either Iraq or Afghanistan in a designated combat zone, who are in their last semester, and who have attained a GPA of 2.0 or higher, and who have used some form of support services for veterans at the college and/or have been actively involved in veteran specific programs at the college or sponsored by or affiliated with the college. The research study will consist of a series of questions relating to how veteran students perceive support services and veteran programs, in terms of how and to what extent these contributed to their transition to college and to retention and academic success. The interviews will take place in person at a location you choose; the interviews will be recorded, and your identity will be kept confidential. You will be asked to review the transcripts from the interviews to ensure accuracy, to correct or amend the text, and to provide feedback. The interviews are anticipated to last at least 45 to 60 minutes with the potential for a second interview if the researcher needs to ask more questions or clarify the information from the first interview. The total time involved in this study will not exceed two hours. Your participation in this study is strictly voluntary and you may terminate your participation at any time for any reason. I would like to address any further questions that you have about the study. If you are interested in being a volunteer in this study, I have attached the consent form for your review; I will answer any questions or concerns you may have about the consent form or the study before you give consent to participate. We will discuss the consent form at the beginning of the interview so I can answer any questions you may have. If you would like to volunteer to participate, or if you have any questions, email me at mackiewicz.d@husky.neu.edu. Any emails to any other email address cannot used per IRB policy. In closing, thank you for considering being a part of my research study, and I hope to further discuss this project in the near future.

Best Dawn Mackiewicz
Appendix B: Participant Consent Form

Northeastern University, Doctor of Education

Name of Investigator(s): Principal Investigator, Thomas Wylie; Student Researcher, Dawn Mackiewicz

Title of Project: An Exploration of Veteran Student Transition from Military to a Two-Year Community College and Their Perception of Support Services and Veteran Programs

Informed Consent to Participate in a Research Study
We are inviting you to take part in a research study. This form will tell you about the study, but the student researcher will explain it to you first. You may ask this person any questions that you have. When you are ready to make a decision regarding your participation, you may tell the student researcher if you want to participate or not. You do not have to participate if you do not want to. If you decide to participate, the student researcher will ask you to sign this statement and will give you a copy to keep.

Why am I being asked to take part in this research study?
We are asking you to be in this study because you:
   a. Are a veteran student who served in either Iraq or Afghanistan in a designated combat zone
   b. Are using some form of support services at your current institution or are actively involved in veteran-specific programs that have aided in your academic success and/or in your transition to college in general.
   c. Have maintained a minimum of a 2.0 GPA and are currently in your last semester
   d. Are currently using Post 911 benefits to cover tuition costs.

Why is this research study being done?
The purpose of this research is to understand the how veteran students who utilize support services at a two-year community college perceive and explain the value of these services in regards to their retention.

What will I be asked to do?
If you decide to volunteer to be a part of the study, participants will engage in an interview with the student researcher to identify what support services or veteran related programs offered by your institution have contributed to your overall success and to discuss your perceptions regarding the efficacy of these programs.

Where will this take place and how much of my time will it take?
Participants will engage in a 45 to 60 minute interview with potential for a second interview (for the purpose of clarity or further questions). The total time commitment will not exceed two hours.
These interviews will take place at the college in a meeting room that provides confidentiality, and the interview will be recorded and later transcribed. Each participant will be asked to review the transcripts of the interviews to confirm accuracy of the responses. The identity of all participants will be kept fully confidential.

**Will there be any risk or discomfort to me?**

There are no foreseeable risks or discomforts for your taking part of this research study.

**Will I benefit by being in this research?**

There will be no direct benefits for your participation in this research study; however, your responses may aid us in identifying what support services and veteran related programs are beneficial to veteran students, as well as what services may need to be considered to enhance veteran success.

**Who will see the information about me?**

The student researcher will ensure that your participation in the study will be kept confidential and secure. You will be given the opportunity to select a pseudonym for the purpose of identity protection so that only the student researcher and the Principal Investigator (the student’s academic advisor) will know about your participation. If you do not wish to be identified in this research study, any materials or future publications resulting from this research will not identify you or your institution as being part of this study.

In terms of protecting the content of data collected for the research study, the student researcher will store all the information electronically on their personal computer using OneDrive. The electronic documents will also be password protected, and there will be no physical files kept to ensure further data integrity as the student researcher will scan any physical documents and shred the originals.

In rare occurrences, authorized personnel may request to view the research information about you and other participants in the study for the sole purpose of ensuring the research was conducted properly. We would only permit personnel from Northeastern University such as the Institutional Review Board to review this information.

**Can I stop my participation in this study?**

You have elected to participate in the research study on a volunteer basis; therefore, you can terminate your participation in the study at any time during the research study. In addition, you may refuse to answer any question asked by the student researcher.

**Who can I contact if I have questions or problems?**

Please feel free to contact Dawn Mackiewicz, the person mainly responsible for the research study at mackiewicz.d@husky.neu.edu. You can also contact, the Principal Investigator at t.wylie@northeastern.edu.

**Who can I contact about my rights as a participant?**

If you have any questions about your rights in this research, you may contact Nan C. Regina, Director, Human Subject Research Protection, Mail Stop: 560-177, 360 Huntington Avenue, Northeastern University, Boston, MA 02115. Tel: 617.373.4588, Email: n.regina@neu.edu. You may call anonymously if you wish.

**Will I be paid for my participation?**

You will not be paid for your participation in the study.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Will it cost me anything to participate?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>There are no costs to participate in the study.</td>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Is there anything else I need to know?</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>You must be at least 18 years old to participate in the study and meet the criteria of the research study described above. Date</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Signature of person [parent] agreeing to take part**

____________________________________________
Printed name of person above

____________________________________________
Signature of person who explained the study to the participant above and obtained consent Date

____________________________________________
Printed name of person above

Depending upon the nature of your research, you may also be required to provide information about one or more of the following if it is applicable:

1. A statement that the particular treatment or procedure may involve risks to the subject (or to the embryo or fetus, if the subject is or may become pregnant) which are currently unforeseeable.
2. Anticipated circumstances under which the subject’s participation may be terminated by the investigator without regard to the subject’s consent.
3. Any additional costs to the subject that may result from participation in the research.
4. The consequences of a subject’s decision to withdraw from the research and procedures for orderly termination of participation by the subject.
5. A statement that significant new finding(s) developed during the course of the research which may be related to the subject’s willingness to continue participation will be provided to the subject.
6. The approximate number of subjects involved in the study.
Appendix C: Interview Questions and Protocols

Time of the Interview:

Date:

Place: Room number

Interviewee #:

Steps:

1. Ask the participant whether or not he/she permits the student researcher to record the interview.
2. Once the participant has agreed to allow the student researcher to record, the student researcher will turn on the recording device.
3. Introduction to the Research Study:
   a. Interviewer/Interview Introductions
   b. The student researcher will explain the length of the interview
   c. The student researcher will explain the purpose of the study and the rationale for the data being collected.
   d. The student researcher will explain the pre-cautions to be taken to protect the confidentiality of the participant and how the student researcher will protect the data collection.

Interview Questions:

1) The following set of questions are designed to gain a full understanding of your experience as a veteran using veteran support services and to understand the true essence of transition from military to college life.
   a. Can you describe your transition from military to civilian life and why you decided to attend college?
   b. How would you define transition?
   c. What challenges did you foresee as a veteran student? If any?

2) The next set of questions are meant to gain a sense of the complexities of applying for Post 911 benefits and the timeliness of attaining these benefits.
   a. In terms of applying for your Post 911 benefits, did you receive any assistance? If so what kind? Who helped you find and apply for benefits, if anyone?
   b. Did you find applying for the Post 911 benefits complex?
   c. Were you able to apply for these benefits in time to attend college in the semester you desired?
   d. Did you receive 100% of your Post 911 benefits? If not, did you apply for financial aid to meet the gap?

3) The following set of questions are designed to gain a sense of the strength of support services and what support services were beneficial in your transition to college, and to your retention.
a. Have you utilized any support services offered by the institution – for example tutoring, coaching or counseling services – to aid in your transition?

b. What aspect of these services do you think best assisted you in being successful in college.

c. Did you see any challenges in maintaining your GPA? If so, did you seek out support services to address these challenges? Please explain

d. What additional support services do you think could best support veteran students that may not be presently offered at the institution?

4) The next series of questions aims to understand how veteran students perceive the Veteran Center and how this center has proved beneficial or not in your retention at the college. Another goal is to understand how the center serves to bring together veteran peers for support and collaboration.

a. Does the institution offer veteran specific activities worth participating in? Please explain.

b. Do you frequently visit the Veterans Center?

c. What aspects of the Veterans Center do you feel benefit the veteran student? Which aspects are not very useful? Please explain.

d. Do you talk to your military peers and relate experiences?

e. What do you like most about the Veterans Center?

f. Do you have any recommendations for enhancing the center?

5) The following questions are meant to gain an understanding of the role of the Veterans Advisor and how this advisor has provided referrals and resources to ensure your success as a student.

a. Do you work with the Veterans Advisor to discuss services at the college?

b. Do you feel the Veterans Advisor is helpful in finding resources to meet your needs? If not, what might he/she change to better assist you?

c. Do you need to make an appointment with the Veterans Advisor or are walk-ins welcome?

d. Can you share any special situation that you felt the Veteran Advisor helped you overcome any obstacles?

6) The next series of questions is designed to understand how faculty members have aided you in your success in the classroom.

a. Can you explain your experiences working with faculty members?

b. Do you think faculty members are sensitive to the needs of veteran students?

c. In your view, do you think faculty member were accessible? How so?

d. Did he or she provide additional assistance outside of the classroom? In what way?

e. Did the faculty member provide some form of shared resources such as presentations or notes that aided in your understanding of the materials?

f. Do you find that faculty members provided a comfortable environment in which you could present your viewpoints?

7) The next series of questions aims to understand the role of the two-year community college in assisting veteran students.

a. Can you define “Veteran Friendliness” and what it means to you?

b. Do you think the institution is devoted to the veteran population? Is it “Veteran Friendly”? How so?

c. Should the college invest more funds to veteran support programs? In what areas?

d. What do think the college can do to make the transition from military life to college smoother? Please explain.

e. Do you think the college needs to hire more personnel to meet the needs of veteran students? In what roles?
f. Can you provide direct recommendations that would assist the institution in developing new programs that you think veterans would utilize?

8) The following questions are geared to understand how veteran students relate to traditional students?
   a. Do you think traditional students understand the plight of veteran students?
   b. Do you find it difficult to relate to traditional students? Why?
   c. What do you think educational institutions can do to promote a cohesive and supportive atmosphere that would integrate traditional students with veteran students?

Additional prompts that may be referred to in the interview

Can you explain to me why you view this in this manner?

Is there a specific example that you can provide?

Are you trying to convey the following…?

I think you are trying to state…..? Is that a fair assessment?

Can you tell me more?