AN EXPLORATION OF THE PERCEPTIONS AND EXPERIENCES OF VETERANS TRANSITIONING TO HIGHER EDUCATION

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Jason Babin, M.S., M.Ed.

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Abstract

This study examined how military veterans experience transition from active duty to the classroom during the first semester at a four-year public university. Eight semi-structured interviews were conducted at a medium-sized state school located in the northeastern region of the United States. Using an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), transcripts were analyzed to identify common themes. Three major themes emerged: how do student veterans develop their identity, what challenges do they face when transitioning to college, and what environmental factors impact their success. These findings were considered within the framework of Schlossberg’s Transition Theory and suggest that military students are more likely to persist and succeed when institutions of higher education recognize the needs of this unique population and provide them with the necessary resources and support.

*Keywords: student veteran, military-affiliated, transition, identity, challenges*
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Dedication

This study is dedicated to all of the men and women of the U.S. Armed Forces whose sacrifices and service through the years have contributed so much to the welfare of our nation.
Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Since 2012, more than 600,000 veterans have entered higher education and, according to the American Council on Education, military-affiliated students now make up approximately 4% of the undergraduate population. Yet, despite the increasing numbers of veterans on campus, less than 22% of colleges and universities provide any kind of specific support (Griffin & Gilbert, 2015). Similar to the period following World War II, service members are making the transition from military duty to an environment that is significantly different. This is particularly true as many choose to attend colleges and universities that may not have the support or structure to which military personnel are accustomed.

This chapter begins with a brief overview of the research related to student veterans in an effort to provide context and background to the study. The rationale and significance of the study is discussed next, drawing connections to potential beneficiaries of the work. The problem statement, purpose statement, and research questions are presented to focus and ground the study. Finally, the theoretical framework, Schlossberg’s Transition Theory (1984), is introduced and explained, and this will serve as a lens for the study.

Context and Background

Since 1944 and the creation of The Servicemen’s Readjustment Act, also known as the GI Bill of Rights, military personnel and veterans have been using these benefits to pursue educational opportunities at colleges and universities across the nation (Cate, 2014). While having military-affiliated students on campus is nothing new, higher education institutions have witnessed a steady increase in this population, particularly as troops returned home from active duty deployments in Iraq and Afghanistan. Between 2009 and 2012, the number of veterans
enrolled in higher education nationwide increased by more than 67%, which has created a number of different challenges for college administrators (Kirkwood, 2014).

While service in the military may prepare an individual for many things, such as how to survive in a hostile environment, how to focus in stressful situations, and how to become a member of a diverse and dynamic community, it does not necessarily prepare one for the transition to civilian life. As veterans return home, some are finding themselves in an environment that can be almost as challenging as the one they left (DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2008). They are no longer surrounded by the friends and “battle buddies” who have supported and protected them throughout their service, and this can create difficulties that strain personal relationships and add to a sense of isolation (DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2008).

The American College Health Association (ACHA) recently conducted a study that examined the mental health challenges experienced by veterans as they made the transition to college. The study found that over 45% of returning veterans are suffering from some form of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and that an additional 19% are struggling with a traumatic brain injury (TBI). It also revealed that issues like PTSD and TBI can cause veterans to experience academic difficulties, relationship and adjustment issues, depression, anxiety, substance abuse, and suicidal thoughts (Rudd, Goulding, & Bryan, 2011). In another study, it was found that nearly half of all veterans deployed since 9/11 have reported some type of distressing situation during their service leading to physical, cognitive, and emotional challenges (Osborne, 2013).

While some colleges and universities have attempted to make the transition easier by creating and implementing new support programs, many veterans are not actively participating in them (Cate, 2014). Student veterans come into higher education with specific skills and
experiences that can help with their success on college campuses. However, these same veterans may also face serious academic challenges. Based on a 2009 American Freshman Survey (Berrett, 2011), almost 1 in 5 students who entered the military immediately after graduation from high school had a grade point average of C+ or lower. In addition, many of these same students needed remedial classes before they could begin their freshman year, and that placed an additional burden on both the students and the college. For some, this lack of academic prowess can be difficult to overcome, and may cause student veterans to abandon their degree program before it is completed. Although they may have excelled in real-world situations in the military, some may lack the training and experience necessary to do well in a college environment (Hassan, Jackson, Lindsay, McCabe, & Sanders, 2010).

Student veterans belong to a unique population that can bring a wealth of knowledge and experience to a classroom and college community. Many have traveled extensively and have lived and worked in different cultures. This kind of experience can be particularly helpful for creating and maintaining a diverse campus environment. Staff and faculty surely want to assist and support student veterans as much as possible, but they may not yet have the knowledge and experience to accomplish this. Becoming a “military friendly college” is not just about creating a single office or staff member to provide services to student veterans, but an overall effort by administrators to change the campus culture to make it more understanding and supportive of this population (Wilson, 2014).

**Rationale and Significance**

While an increase in the student veteran population suggests a potential gain in overall access, there exists a number of challenges that might significantly affect a veteran’s intent to persist (Griffin & Gilbert, 2015). Although there are many different factors that affect academic
success, the manner in which a school welcomes and assimilates its students appears to be the most critical. Van Dusen (2011, p. 5) found a number of challenges faced by military students and veterans as they pursue a college education, and most significant among these is the campus environment.

Student veterans are often difficult to identify and track, particularly because of the desire to go unnoticed. Many do not self-identify due to the perception that classmates and instructors will not welcome them or understand their experiences. They may also feel a sense of isolation as they are surrounded by students who have little or no understanding of the veteran’s experience or knowledge (Bellafiore, 2012).

The potential consequences to colleges and universities for ignoring these students and their struggles are many (Cate, 2014). Along with this sudden influx of veterans into higher education, many institutions are now being evaluated by the quality of service they provide to these students as well as their rate of graduation. In addition, regional accreditation and federal funding may be affected, and schools that fail to provide sufficient support may have difficulty attracting potential students. The University of Phoenix, the largest recipient of federal aid for student veterans, experienced this recently when they were prohibited from recruiting on military bases and accessing federal education funding for service members (Douglas-Gabriel, 2015).

While it seems clear that most, if not all, institutions want to support and assist returning veterans in their transition to higher education, some are finding themselves unprepared for the challenges associated with this population. By increasing awareness and understanding of this student population, institutions can better tailor outreach programs that target their specific needs.
Research Problem and Research Question

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to understand how student veterans experience transition at Stockton University within the first semester of their freshman year. The knowledge generated through this study is expected to inform senior-level administrators on the best ways to serve and support student veterans and their transition to college. This research study will be guided by the following question:

How do veterans experience transition from military service to higher education?

The primary audiences for this study will be senior-level college administrators; however, the information collected may also be used to assist staff and faculty. By understanding how veterans experience the transition to higher education, institutions can better identify techniques and practices for addressing potential challenges.

Definition of Key Terminology

The following list of terms has been provided to offer an understanding of specific language that will be used throughout the study.

Term 1 – *Active Duty*: A period of time when a person is serving fulltime in the military. This may include the U.S. Army, Navy, Marine Corps, or Air Force.

Term 2 – *Airman*: Someone who is serving or has served in the U.S. Air Force.

Term 3 – *Battle Buddy*: A friend or partner assigned to a service member to assist them with duties and protect them from harm.

Term 4 – *G.I. Bill*: Known as the Montgomery G.I. Bill or the Servicemen’s Readjustment Act created in 1944 by the federal government to provide educational benefits to veterans.

Term 5 – *Marine*: Someone who is serving or has served in the U.S. Marine Corps.
Term 6 - **National Guard**: A component of the U.S. Armed Forces commanded by a state governor that employs military personnel on a part-time basis.

Term 7 – **Reserves**: A component of the U.S. Armed Forces commanded by the President that employs military personnel on a part-time basis.

Term 8 – **Sailor**: Someone who is serving or has served in the U.S. Navy.

Term 9 – **Soldier**: Someone who is serving or has served in the U.S. Army.

Term 10 – **Student Veteran**: A member of the Armed Forces who has been discharged from the military and is currently enrolled at an institution of higher education.

Term 11 – **Student Veteran Organization (SVO)**: A student organization created to assist service members with the transition to a college or university by providing outreach and advocacy.

Term 12 – **Veteran**: A member of the Armed Forces who has been discharged after completing satisfactory service in the military.

Term 13 – **Veterans Administration (VA)**: A government agency responsible for providing support and assistance to members of the Armed Forces who have been discharged.

Term 14 – **Veteran Friendly Institution**: A term used to describe an institution of higher education that commits to providing resources and assistance to student veterans.

The following section of this chapter will include a description and discussion of Schlossberg’s Transition Theory which will serve as the theoretical lens for this study.

**Theoretical Framework**

As this study will examine how student veterans experience Stockton University during the first semester of freshman year, Schlossberg’s Theory of Transition (1984) will provide the
theoretical framework needed to better understand key aspects of their transition. By increasing awareness of the challenges faced by military-affiliated students and veterans, this study will help colleges and universities offer more effective assistance and support to those who are managing this process (Anderson, Goodman, Schlossberg, & Goodman, 2012). While military personal are accustomed to fast-paced, high-change environments, the experience of transitioning from combat to the classroom can nonetheless be a stressful experience (Gettleman, 2005). The differences in military and academic cultures are vast, and by using Schlossberg’s theoretical approach, researchers can improve their understanding of individual behavior as it relates to this type of transition (Kevin, 2016).

This theory of transition was originally developed by Schlossberg (1981), and later in collaboration with Lynch and Chickering, expanded to improve the first year experience of students (Estrella & Lundberg, 2006). Unlike the work in their previous books, Chickering and Schlossberg shifted their focus from the institutional environment to the individual student, as well as the challenges associated with identifying long-term goals. This shift in focus was meant to help students improve their ability to learn and maximize their personal development. This publication is the best example of Schlossberg’s theory as it helps to explain how it can be beneficial in a higher education setting.

In creating her transitional theory, Schlossberg sought to develop a framework that would assist researchers in understanding adult transition, and to provide the support and guidance needed to move them through the experience (Evans, et al., 2009). This theory of transition suggests that individuals move through transition in a series of phases that can be broken down into three steps; “Moving In”, “Moving Through”, and “Moving Out” (Chickering & Schlossberg, 1994). In the first step, “Moving In”, individuals are confronted with the realities of
change and their position in the new environment. The second step, “Moving Through”, is the process where students begin to accept their role in the community and are able to function more effectively. The final step, “Moving Out”, is centered on the student completing the transition process, and moving to a condition of comfort where success is more likely (Tuttle, 1995).

According to Schlossberg, another important component for understanding transition is the context or the environment in which the transition occurs (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011). The experience is uniquely personal for each individual, and the context of each experience may be described in one of three ways: anticipated, unanticipated, and nonevent. Anticipated and unanticipated are transitions that occur, but which may or may not be planned, while a nonevent is a transition that is expected, but does not occur.

Kurt Lewin (1936), a social scientist, created a formula by which researchers could better conceptualize this transition: $B = f(P, E)$. In this equation, behavior ($B$) is the function of the interaction between the person ($P$) and his or her environment ($E$). This can also be described as Transition (individual) = $f$(Type, Context, Impact) (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011).

Because Schlossberg’s theory shows that individual transition can be both classified and explained, she believed that it could also be managed. In her research, Schlossberg found that there were four major factors that contribute to a person’s ability to manage a transition. These factors make up Schlossberg’s 4-S Model (1994): situation, self, support, and strategies:

- Situation: How an individual views or interprets the transition. Is the experience good or bad, was it planned, and was it chosen by the individual?
• Self: The strengths and weaknesses that the individual brings to the transition. Is the person confident in his or her abilities, or does he or she feel uncertain of the potential outcome?

• Support: The various resources that are available to someone in transition. These may be persons or institutions.

• Strategies: The process for managing a transition and utilizing “coping strategies.” The ability of an individual to change if an approach is not working (Powers, 2010).

These are grounded in the notion that people have a mixture of strengths and challenges which are brought to each transition (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011). These strengths and challenges can be categorized as available resources and individual shortfalls, and help to establish the likelihood of a successful transition.

It’s important to note that each person experiences transition differently, and it would be impossible to create one program that would fit all the needs of every student. However, through the examination of individual experiences, college administrators can better tailor programs that support and assist students in their transition to college.

**Alternative Theories**

Using different theories to guide research is an essential part of understanding student development. Fortunately, other approaches have been created to study the sociological, organizational, psychological, cultural, and economic factors that contribute to our understanding of student success (Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, & Hayek, 2006). While this study will utilize
Schlossberg’s Theory of Transition as the theoretical framework, it is important to acknowledge other contributors who have helped to develop this research.

Tinto focused his research on student retention and learning development. Tinto’s Student Integration model (1975) was one of the first publications that highlighted the importance of undergraduate retention and integration. The model suggests that students who integrate socially into a campus community have a higher probability of persisting to graduation (Demetriou & Schmitz-Sciborski, 2011). Like Schlossberg, Tinto theorized that successful transition depends on individual factors, but that it is also contingent on a students’ academic experiences and social integration (Tinto, 1975). He emphasized the need for administrators to match student goals with the institutional mission so as to not create unrealistic expectations.

As with earlier studies, Tinto’s work has been both supported and revised over the last thirty years; however, it remains a significant influence on research as it pertains to retention and graduation (Demetriou & Schmitz-Sciborski, 2011). In his most recent revision, Tinto included motivational variables which have been used to improve our understanding of student success. These variables include: (a) academic preparation, examines a student’s prior instruction and his or her preparedness for college-level work; (b) academic engagement, studies the connection a student has with the academic community at an institution; (c) social engagement, considers the time and effort a student commits to engaging in campus activities; (d) financing college, examines the amount of time and effort students put into financing their college education; (e) demographic characteristics, looks at the parent’s and family’s level of education, ethnicity, and support that might be available (Demetriou & Schmitz-Sciborski, 2011).

Even though Tinto received support for his theory from the academic community, some researchers found it to be flawed due to its use of an academic integration construct. Because of
this, Tinto’s model may inadvertently separate the different student experiences that are vital to understanding transition (Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, & Hayek, 2006).

Another model that supported and challenged Schlossberg Theory of Transition is Chickering’s Theory of Identity Development. Created in 1969 and revised in 1993, Chickering’s theory suggests that self-identity is influenced by the emotional and social characteristics of the individual, and that these characteristics directly affect student development. While Schlossberg and Tinto imply a more linear process, Chickering proposes that the development of an individual takes place at different rates and at different times (Chickering & Reisser, 1993).

Chickering uses seven “vectors” to describe the course of student development, each of which builds upon the others: (a) developing competence, growing in intellectual, physical, and manual qualities; (b) managing emotions, coping with personal feelings; (c) moving through autonomy toward interdependence, developing self-awareness and independent thought; (d) developing mature interpersonal relationships, becoming more tolerant and accepting of others; (e) establishing identity, being comfortable with oneself; (f) developing purpose, creating realistic and attainable goals; (g) developing integrity, solidifying beliefs and values that guide decision making (De Larrosa, 2000).

This work by Chickering (1969), and later revised by Chickering and Reisser (1993), has been critical to understanding student development, transition, and integration. The seven vectors significantly influence research that concerns the “emotional, social, physical, and intellectual development of college students” (De Larrosa, 2000).
Some researchers have suggested that academic and social integration theories, like Schlossberg, Tinto, and Chickering, are not as effective when referring to student populations that develop their personal identity from specific subgroups or cultures (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011). This conclusion is derived from the belief that integration is a form of assimilation, and that this process may interfere with a student’s development of his or her identity. This can be a particular concern for student veterans where social and academic integration could be seen as a push to abandon closely held principles and beliefs that were acquired through their service in the Armed Forces (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011).

Despite this concern, Schlossberg’s theory provides the necessary structure and guidance to explore and improve the transition process. It is essential for those experiencing significant changes in life, whether voluntary or involuntary, to determine all available resources to help increase the probability of success. By using a transition model like Schlossberg, Tinto, and Chickering, much of the “mystery—if not the misery—can be taken out” (Schlossberg, 2011).

Rationale

The transition from military service to civilian life can be a significant challenge for student veterans (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011). While institutions of higher education have made efforts to improve this experience, some are still not meeting the needs of this unique population (DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2008). Utilizing a theoretical approach like Schlossberg's Theory of Transition, researchers and administrators can better understand military culture, and provide the necessary assistance and support to increase success.

According to Bridges (2004), every transition begins with an ending. This is particularly true when an individual is discharged from the military, and must deal with the loss of structure
and support to which they are accustomed. By understanding how a student’s “roles, relationships, routines, and assumptions” may be affected by military experience, colleges and universities can provide the guidance needed to help navigate the transition process.

Enrolling in college helps military students and veterans transition back to civilian life, and it can also contribute to the psychological healing of severely wounded soldiers (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011). However, a thorough understanding of the complexity of the transition process is necessary for it to be successful. Using Schlossberg's Theory of Transition, researchers can understand the unique characteristics associated with military-affiliated students, and the elements that influence their transition to college.

**Applying theory**

Veterans have a strong sense of identity and personal pride which impact their lives in a multitude of ways. Decisions about where to live, work, or study can all be influenced by their status as a veteran (Francis & Kraus, 2012, p. 12). Past research has shown that veterans are more likely to support an organization or institution that recognizes and acknowledges their service (Jones, 2016). It should be understood that veterans are not looking for preferential treatment; rather, they simply want to know that others recognize the challenges they face while transitioning from military service to civilian life. This is why it is important for colleges and universities to better understand this unique student population, and to make every effort to make them feel welcomed and valued.

While transitioning from the military may appear to be a positive experience that allows veterans to return to their lives without difficulty, it is more likely to be fraught with unexpected challenges (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011). According to a study conducted in 2013, approximately fifty percent of post-9/11 veterans returning from combat deployment experienced distressing
situations which led to a variety of physical, cognitive, and emotional challenges (Osborne, 2013). While some colleges are attempting to help with these issues, faculty, staff, and administrators may not be sufficiently familiar with this population to fully understand their needs.

By using Schlossberg’s Transition Model as the theoretical framework, this study will determine the unique factors associated with student veteran transition to higher education. These factors will include:

- What type of transition is occurring: anticipated, unanticipated, or nonevents?
- What is the degree to which the individual’s life has been altered, including changes in roles, relationships, routines, assumptions?
- Where is the individual in the transition process: considering a change, beginning the change, completed the change?
- What resources are currently being utilized, and which of these are helping to make the transition more successful (Schlossberg, 2011)?

Military-affiliated students and veterans tend to be significantly different from typical first-year students, particularly those starting college directly after high school. As with other non-traditional students, it is necessary for college administrators, faculty, and staff to recognize the specific and unique experiences of this population. This study utilizing Schlossberg’s Transition Model is intended to help achieve this goal.

A fundamental component of Schlossberg’s Transition Theory is the notion of personal development, which plays a crucial role in addressing the needs of college students (Evans et al., 1998). By studying different development theories, student affairs practitioners can cultivate
better techniques and tools with which to support students. Through this lens, this study will identify key factors that may be impactful to the transitional success of student veterans (Powers, 2010).

**Conclusion**

It is clear that Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen, and Marines come to college with a wealth of experience. They have learned how to manage very challenging, even life-threatening, situations, how to handle stress, and to function in a diverse community. Unfortunately, their experiences in the military do not prepare them for life on a typical college campus.

Military personnel are accustomed to being told what to do from the moment they awaken until they fall asleep at night. Every moment of the day is scheduled, and there is little room for individual expression. This structured environment works well within the context of military service, but it differs drastically from life on campus where students are expected to manage their own responsibilities.

It is essential that college administrators, faculty, and staff understand these differences, and offer additional and focused support to students who have served in the military. This is especially true for military students who transition directly from combat to campus. The needs of this student population are distinctive and unique, and specialized staff members should be assigned to assist them.

The following chapter will be a review of the literature, which will provide a foundation for understanding military-affiliated students and veterans, and the challenges this population encounters as they begin their college careers. Specifically, this review will include an overall description of this student population, as well as the academic data and support programs and initiatives currently being offered at colleges and universities.
Chapter Two: Literature Review

Since the passage of the Montgomery G.I Bill, and later the Post 9/11 G.I. Bill, military personal and veterans have been using their educational benefits to attend colleges, universities, and specialized training programs. Student veterans are not a new phenomenon to college campuses, but the recent sudden influx of these students has created a number of different challenges for higher education institutions. Military culture can be significantly different from the “civilian world” and, for some, transitioning from one to the other brings a unique set of challenges. This is particularly true when veterans transition directly from combat to college campuses where they no longer have the support and structure to which they have been accustomed.

While there have been various articles and studies written about student veterans, there is limited information directly related to the needs and challenges of this unique population. The following literature review is intended to provide a framework for understanding military-affiliated students, and the challenges they face as they embark on their college careers. Specifically, this review will provide a brief history of governmental support, an overall description of the student veteran, the challenges faced by veterans, and the current programs and initiatives created by institutions to help support and assist veterans in transition. Finally, the literature review will demonstrate the need for additional future research since the information presented on the emergent student graphic appears to be inconclusive (Jones, 2013).

Historic Perspective on Veteran Support

In 1924, in the midst of the Great Depression, the first financial assistance program was created by the United States Congress to provide economic support to veterans. It was called the
World War Adjusted Act of 1924, but was more commonly known as the Bonus Act (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2013). This legislation sought to provide monetary assistance in the form of bonuses given to veterans who served during World War I. When drafted, this bill provoked intense debate as many legislators were hesitant to support such a costly initiative during difficult economic times. Some legislators even questioned whether veterans deserved such a comprehensive support program. Eventually, $4 billion was allocated for these bonuses; however, it would be over twenty years before any veteran received compensation from this plan (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2013).

This long delay lead to a march on Washington, D.C. by several veterans groups who demanded more support and assistance from government officials. Sadly, federal troops were called in to disperse the crowds, and the veterans were driven out of the city. This clash in 1932 between veterans and the federal government created a lasting tension that endured until the next world war.

In 1944, just before the end of the Second World War (WWII), another bill was introduced that would significantly change the lives of millions of returning soldiers. The Servicemen’s Readjustment Act of 1944, or GI Bill as it was known, was created to provide a “full tuition for an educational program, a modest stipend for the veterans while in school, and a dependence allowance for those who were married, had children, or had dependent parents” (Levine & Levine, 2011). It also permitted veterans to purchase homes with low-interest mortgage loans and no down payment.

With the creation of the G.I. Bill, Congress sought to make amends for past mistakes and to avoid the problems associated with the Bonus Act. At the time, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt had serious concerns about the potential for another economic depression and the
possibility of civil unrest. During this period, over 12 million American troops were returning home from war, and they needed help to transition successfully back to civilian life. “Their lives had been disrupted when they were drafted or when they enlisted. Those young people also knew how to use guns. Social unrest was a real possibility” (Levine & Levine, 2011).

To further assist returning veterans, Congress authorized a program in 1944 called “52-20” which provided each service member a payment of $20 a week for a full year or until they were able to find a job (Jolly, 2013). While many legislators supported this initiative, some feared that it would encourage veterans to become lazy and aloof and to depend on the government subsidy rather than find work. However, few veterans actually used the benefit due to the stigma attached to this type of government assistance.

In the end, only about 20% of the budgeted amount for “52-20” was ever used (Greenberg, 2008). Consequently, due to programs like this, the total number of veterans entering college after 1950 nearly tripled, with nearly 2.2 million veterans attending institutions of higher education (Trent, 2010). Because of this legislation, lower- and middle-class Americans were able to attend college for the first-time, something that had been available only to those with greater financial means. These new students were deeply motivated and dedicated to their education, and are said to have greatly improved higher education with their eagerness to learn.

The G.I. Bill was a success on many levels and contributed greatly to the growth of our national economy. By 1952, the federal government had provided over $14 billion in education benefits to veterans. Over the next thirty-five years, veterans would contribute back more than $35 billion to the national economy. “Economists estimated that the government took in $12.8
billion more than it would have otherwise in income taxes. The G.I. Bill generated about $3.50 for every dollar spent on education” (Levine & Levine, 2011).

In 2008, Congress created a program that further enhanced the G.I. Bill and provided additional benefits to service members who had been deployed to either Operation Iraqi Freedom (Iraq) or Operation Enduring Freedom (Afghanistan). Called the Post-9/11 Veteran Educational Assistance Act of 2008 or Post-9/11 G.I. Bill, this program provided more robust educational benefits by creating a comprehensive tuition package that provided funds for books, institutional fees, and housing (Miller, 2015). It also provided a monthly cost-of-living stipend to help offset the expenses associated with attending school as a full-time student. The Post-9/11 G.I. Bill had the added benefit of being transferrable to dependents, and this feature allowed children of service members to attend college.

This was a bill that came to “represent that rare breed of legislation—uncontroversial, popular across the bipartisan divide, and widely admired by members of succeeding generations. It spoke to issues that remain fundamental to the American political model, most notably the power of intelligently crafted and deftly administered governmental programs to have a transformative positive effect on individuals and society. Equally as important, it addressed the notion of special access to republicanism for those citizens who, by virtue of military service, had made special sacrifices” (Mettler, 2005).

The G.I. Bill changed the course of our nation’s history by helping to educate people who would provide advances in science and technology, and lead the nation to the greatest economic growth in the twentieth century. In his statement on June 22, 1943, President Franklin Roosevelt said: “This bill therefore and the former legislation provide the special benefits which are due to the members of our armed forces -- for they have been compelled to make greater economic
sacrifice and every other kind of sacrifice than the rest of us, and are entitled to definite action to help take care of their special problems" (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2013).

**Summary**

The advantages of the G.I. Bill were profound, and it had the potential to change the lives of those who availed themselves of its benefits. Scholars and recipients alike have credited it with building a true American middle class, moving that middle class to the suburbs, and breaking down barriers among Americans, or at least among white Americans. Those who were Catholic or Jewish especially benefited because they were able to use the educational provisions of the G.I. Bill to gain access to prestigious colleges and universities that had previously tried to exclude them. Given that an additional five million service members are expected to leave the military by 2020 (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2013), it is crucial that higher education institutions prepare for supporting this unique student population (Molina, 2015)

**Who is a student veteran?**

Many student veterans come to higher education with strong leadership skills and experience in a diverse multicultural setting, and these traits are indeed helpful on a college campus. However, these same veterans may also face serious academic challenges. According to the 2009 American Freshman Survey (Berrett, 2011), almost 1 in 5 students who entered the military immediately after graduation from high school had a grade point average of C+ or lower. Many of these students need remedial classes before they can begin their freshman year, and this places an additional burden on both the students and the college. This lack of academic prowess can be difficult to overcome, and causes some student veterans to give up before completing a degree program. Though they may have excelled in artificial and real-world
situations in the military, some may lack the experience necessary to do well in a college environment (Hassan, Jackson, Lindsay, McCabe, & Sanders, 2010, p. 31).

For these reasons, some have suggested that a two-year college may be a better option for them. Community colleges are more likely to be equipped to handle those who need remedial studies and tend to provide more personal attention to each student. Success in the first year of college can impact a student’s ability to earn a degree.

A recent study conducted in 2012 by Holly Wheeler found that 43% of student veterans chose a two-year college to begin their studies. That same study revealed that 77% of all military and veteran students attend school part-time, regardless of the type of institution, 33% have children, and 14% are single parents (Wheeler, 2012). These statistics show some of the challenges that affect student veteran success in postgraduate studies.

A study recently conducted by the Student Veterans of America (SVA) has provided the first truly in-depth look at student veterans. The study incorporated a total of 788,915 records from 2002 to 2010 (Student Veterans of America, 2014), and it was broken down into three principal parts: field of study, type of school attending, and type of degree obtained.

**Fields of Study**

According to the SVA study, many student veterans are choosing degree programs based on their military experience and the current demands in the job market. "At the associate level, the five degree fields most often pursued were in liberal arts and sciences; business; homeland security; law enforcement and firefighting; and health professions. The top five bachelor's degree fields were business; social sciences; homeland security; law enforcement and firefighting; and computer and information sciences" (Student Veterans of America, 2014).
Type of School

A significant portion of student veterans are attending public schools, approximately 79%, while a smaller percentage choose for-profit institutions 15% (Student Veterans of America, 2014). The likely reason is that the Post-9/11 G.I. Bill covers the full in-state tuition costs at most state schools. This information also helps to debunk the belief that most veterans are attending online for-profit schools like the University of Phoenix and Strayer University.

Additionally, many student veterans are now being drawn to online programs that offer greater flexibility and accelerated degree completion. According to a study conducted in 2008, almost $500 million was spent supporting online courses, and that constitutes a large portion of the overall funding of higher education classes (Brown & Gross, 2011).

While traditional colleges and universities continue to be the institutions of choice for student veterans, this population is pushing for the inclusion of more online courses. As more public and private schools offer this option, the percentage of student veterans attending will likely increase. And, since student veterans come with guaranteed funding, it is beneficial for schools to recruit them.

Community colleges also play a large part in student veteran success as enrolment at these types of institutions continue to grow. Two-year colleges have, in many ways, become better at meeting the needs of non-traditional students and already have a great deal of experience incorporating them into their programs (Rumann, Rivera, & Hernandez, 2011, p. 56).

Degree Obtained

Currently, there are over 1,000,000 veterans receiving education benefits for college and many are looking for degrees that will help them obtain employment in a specific field (Klaw,
Demers, & Silva, 2016). This however does not mean that student veterans are not pursuing higher-level degrees. Eighty-eight percent of student veterans move on from an associate’s degree and enroll in a higher degree program (Student Veterans of America, 2014). They understand the need for additional education, but base their choices on the particular field in which they want to work.

Student veterans are a unique population who bring a wealth of knowledge and experience to a classroom. Many have traveled around the world and have lived in and worked with different cultures. This kind of experience can be particularly helpful in the classroom setting, and help to provide a distinct perspective.

As more data is collected about student veterans, higher education institutions are finding themselves in a difficult situation. As of now, there has been very little information collected on veteran retention or completion rates. The federal government, which administers the G.I. Bill, only has information on how many students use their military benefits, and that has forced schools to begin tracking these data on their own (O'Herrin, 2011).

One of the only studies completed recently gives a unique and more in-depth look at student veterans, and provides more information than has been available in the past. The study was conducted by the Student Veterans of America (SVA), an advocacy group, with help from the Veterans Affairs Department and the National Student Clearinghouse (Jelinek, 2014). Not since the creation of the G.I. Bill in 1944 has as much reliable data been collected on student veterans.

The dropout rate of student veterans from both two-year and four-year colleges was reported to be 88% (Velasquez, 2012). However, after the recent study was conducted, the
dropout rate of student veterans was found to be closer to 48% (Jelinek, 2014). The contrast between these two studies, which were conducted only two years apart, has caused significant confusion and apprehension regarding the accuracy of data about student veterans.

As the latest study was completed, it was discovered that student veterans are more successful than originally thought. Now, 51.7% percent of student veterans are projected to complete their degree program, which is lower than the traditional student at 56%, but higher than the non-traditional student at 43% (Jelinek, 2014). This brings hope that programs and initiatives currently being implemented by educational institutions are in fact working, and that with more resources and support, the number could be increased even more.

In addition to the graduation rate of student veterans, the study conducted by the SVA provided a more comprehensive look into how students are doing throughout their college career. It appears that, while a majority of student veterans are completing their undergraduate degree, they are taking five to six years to do it (Jelinek, 2014). This statistic is rather close to the average college student, and also provides proof that student veterans are more successful than originally thought.

While the data from this study demonstrates success on the part of student veterans, it's uncertain how these statistics relate to previous years. Since data was not collected in previous years, it is not known if these numbers represent an increase or decrease in their rate of success.

Summary

Transitioning from military service to civilian life has been suggested to be among the biggest challenges student veterans face, and this is primarily because the two environments are so drastically different. The military is a distinctly hierarchal environment which involves
following rules supported by outside forces. In a higher education environment, self-regulation is the dominate force and the key to a success. While being a veteran is only one facet of a service member’s identity, it remains a dominate value that helps to determine many social norms and expectations. (Jones, 2013).

Challenges encountered by veterans

Veterans are best described as a subgroup of nontraditional students, and as such, they tend to face many of the same challenges (Van Dusen, 2011). For some, it may be their first attempt at college-level studies, and they may not be adequately prepared for the rigors of academic life. Basic things such as learning how to study effectively, manage time appropriately, and balance home and school life can present problems that seem insurmountable. While these challenges are not unique to student veterans, schools may be less prepared to address them in this particular population.

One of the key challenges facing colleges and universities is the difficulty associated with identifying and tracking student veterans. Many of these students prefer to go unnoticed, to “blend in” as much as possible with non-military students. Often, they do not self-identify as veterans because they believe that classmates and instructors may not welcome them or understand their experiences.

This does not imply that military students are not proud of their service. According to a study conducted by the Pew Research Center in 2011, 96% of veterans surveyed stated their belief that their experiences in the military helped them get ahead in life (Pew Social & Demographic Trends, 2011). Yet, despite being proud of their service, some veterans would rather go unnoticed on campus.
In a recent study called *From Combat to Campus* (2008), student veterans were asked about sharing their military experiences with classmates. Those who openly identified as veterans stated that some interactions made them uncomfortable. One student explained, “They always end up asking me whether I killed somebody over there or not. That’s a question I don’t like people asking me, but, of course, my answer’s ‘no.’ And I probably wouldn’t tell them if I did” (DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2008). Among those who were known on campus, some wish that they had remained anonymous. Perhaps doing so would allow them to avoid such difficult questions, and remove one of the stresses of transitioning to an academic environment.

Even in the classroom, veterans can feel isolated and reluctant to share their beliefs and opinions. The political and ideological differences between the military and academic environments can be significant, particularly when conservative and progressive ideas clash.

Military veterans often lean more toward the conservative side of the political spectrum, but there isn’t a specific explanation for this phenomenon (Cahill, 2008). It may be that significant numbers of military recruits come from conservative-leaning states, or that those who are drawn to the rigid structure of the military may tend to approach issues in a less nuanced manner. Whatever the reason, those who have served in the military may find an academic environment unsettling. The free exchange of ideas in the typical classroom may seem foreign to those who have been taught to follow orders without question.

This type of attitude, on both sides, can create a perception that veterans do not belong. And, since veterans are often several years older than their classmates, they may not share an enthusiasm for open debate. While some veterans may be eager to engage in constructive arguments with professors and classmates, others choose to remain quiet and neutral in class. Though they may disagree with a particular issue, they might not feel comfortable assuming an
adversarial position (Cahill, 2008). The resulting lack of participation can be interpreted by instructors as laziness or an unwillingness to interact with the rest of the class.

In *From Combat to Campus*, all of the student veterans expressed a desire to have faculty and staff know who they are, and to understand what makes them different from other students. However, the same study demonstrated that while many student veterans held strong opinions about the war and geopolitics, they were reluctant to share them in the classroom. One Army veteran explained, "Because of the political sway of the college and most of the students here . . . sometimes you feel a little unwelcome because of your political views. Most soldiers are conservative . . . some of the students, especially in political science, like to attack the military" (DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2008).

Student veterans in the study also described less than positive relationships with some of their professors. While citing a good rapport with instructors who had military experience and backgrounds, some mentioned an adversarial relationship with more liberal professors. The consistent message from study participants was the desire to be understood as a distinct population within the student body.

Among those who have faced the biggest challenges are veterans who transitioned directly from combat to classroom. In this situation, military students may be surrounded by students who have little or no idea how long the nation has been at war (Bellafiore, 2012). To date, over six thousand service members have perished in the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. Yet, it may be difficult for civilians to understand fully the costs of these long conflicts, and the effects on those who have served in them.
Since 2009, over one million veterans have enrolled in some form of educational program, and while there has been limited support, college and universities are finding themselves unprepared to fully and properly assist these new students (Osborne, 2014). With less than one-percent of the U.S. population having served in uniform, it can be difficult for individuals as well as institutions to comprehend the challenges that student veterans face.

In 2012, the National Center for PTSD conducted a study that found the two most common injuries among veterans returning from combat deployments are Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) (National Center for PTSD, 2014). If undiagnosed or ignored, these hidden injuries can make an individual more prone to drug and alcohol abuse, anxiety and depression, and even suicide. "Because many people who suffer from PTSD and TBI feel isolated, depressed, guilty, and/or a sense of self-blame, it may be difficult for veterans to seek help. If untreated, both injuries could prevent veterans from acclimating to civilian life, being successful at work and school, and from having healthy relationships" (Wheeler, 2012).

As previously stated, veterans tend to have a strong sense of identity and personal pride that flows from their service in the military. Decisions about where to live, work, or shop can all be influenced by their status as a veteran (Francis & Kraus, 2012). They are more often drawn to businesses and organizations that recognize and acknowledge their service. Despite this, veterans are not looking for favorable treatment. Rather, they simply want others to understand the challenges involved in transitioning from military service to civilian life.

A discussion of student veterans must also note that not all branches of the military are the same. The Army, Navy, Air Force, Marine Corps, and Coast Guard each train and manage their personnel differently. Some branches, like the Army and Marine Corps, may have a more
challenging environment while others may not be quite as demanding. These differences can also be applied to variations of military status, such as Active Duty, Reserve, or National Guard (Ryan, Carlstrom, Hughey, & Harris, 2011). Understanding these differences can greatly influence the success of a veteran program since students tend to identify strongly with their particular branch of service. Even the term “student veteran” has been called into question as not all service members are veterans. Those who continue to serve on active duty or reserve status are not yet classified as veterans. Some schools have attempted to address this problem by referring to them as “military-affiliated students” (Vacchi, 2012).

Summary

While every student faces his or her own set of challenges in the pursuit of higher education, I believe that military veterans have perhaps the greatest need. It isn’t easy to transition from the battlefield to the classroom, and much more help is needed to ensure success. Serving in the military prepares you for many things: how to survive in a hostile environment, how to focus in stressful situations, and how to become a member of a diverse and dynamic community. What it does not prepare you for is a life outside of this very structured environment. For many, the military is drastically different from the “civilian world” and transitioning from one to the other brings a unique set of challenges.

Current programs and initiatives

By understanding the background and needs of student veterans, college administrators can create and design programs to support them. Veterans are certainly not new to college campuses, and many programs are already available to assist with their transition. However, it is not known how successful these programs are, or what it costs to implement and maintain them.
In this section, current best practices and programs at different institutions will be examined, as well as the various costs associated with them.

In a report called *From Soldier to Student*, many colleges and university administrators stated that their school offered programs and initiatives to assist student veterans. Specifically, 62% of administrators who responded to the study claimed that they had dedicated programming or services, 71% stated that their long-range plans included the needs of student veterans, and 64% said that they were actively recruiting current and former military personnel (McBain, Kim, Cook, & Snead, 2012). These statistics seem to support the theory that schools recognize the needs of this unique student population, but virtually no data exist that demonstrate the success of these programs and initiatives.

While the large percentage of schools that provide support for veterans is encouraging, the level of support varies significantly. This is especially evident from the variety of titles given to staff members who work with veterans, and the different offices and departments to which they report.

Some schools have a dedicated staff member in the financial aid office assigned to answer veterans’ questions about educational benefits. Since obtaining these federal benefits can be a confusing and convoluted process, it helps to have someone available who can explain and expedite it. Nearly 67% of administrators who responded to the From Soldier to Student report claimed to have at least one dedicated staff member in the financial aid office who focused on student veterans (McBain, Kim, Cook, & Snead, 2012). For some institutions, this one staff member represented the entirety of that school’s support for this student population.
Some schools go further and provide additional resources, although these vary widely from one institution to another. Research for this project revealed that some schools seem much more concerned with the appearance of support than actually providing it.

Another office often involved with student veterans is the admissions department. A school that focuses primarily on admissions and enrollment management, however, may be successful in recruiting veterans and military personnel, but that may not translate into a supportive environment on campus once the students arrive. Some schools seem so focused on recruitment efforts that there are no funds or resources left for anything else.

The most successful student veteran programs appear to be at colleges where efforts are focused within the division of student affairs. Some schools even have an entire office dedicated to student veterans, as well as staff members who work exclusively on military and veteran affairs.

Another difference among colleges appears to be the titles and job descriptions of staff members who work with veterans. Schools that have a part-time individual, or a full-time staff member who is only slightly involved with student veterans, typically refer to these employees as a “specialist” or “coordinator.” Such a title suggests that support for military students may not yet be a priority.

Schools that have more robust programs, including those that have a dedicated office of veteran affairs, usually have a director to oversee programs and services for military students. In some cases, particularly at larger schools, there may be assistant and/or associate directors as well. It is encouraging that more schools appear to be moving in this direction and making the necessary commitment of resources to ensure the success of student veterans.
In addition to dedicated staff members, some schools are creating gathering spaces specifically for military students. These are often lounges or other types of private space where veterans can interact with other students who have served in the Armed Forces. This is especially helpful for students who may be dealing with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), or other forms of anxiety related to their military service. These lounges provide a safe haven and supportive environment to help student veterans succeed, both academically and otherwise.

A good example of this is the University of Arizona where administrators have created a "Veterans Center" to provide military students a place to escape from the demands and academic rigors of college life (Francis & Kraus, 2012). Military students and veterans sometimes need a safe place where they can be with others who have shared similar experiences and understand the unique challenges they face. While military students are often reluctant to talk about their service with civilians, they still strongly identify as veterans, and need the support and camaraderie of others who have served (Rumann & Hamrick, 2010). "Despite very limited resources, 51 of the 112 colleges in our system have established veteran resource centers on campus where student veterans can interact with one another and obtain information and services," said Brice Harris, chancellor of California Community Colleges (Rivera, 2013).

Having staff assigned to student veterans can also help resolve issues before they escalate into something bigger (McBain, Kim, Cook, & Snead, 2012). While student veterans tend to be reluctant to ask for assistance, they are far more likely to do so in an environment where they feel safe and valued.

Indiana University–Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI) is an example of an institution that has taken a unique approach to assisting student veterans. IUPUI established an Office for Veterans and Military Personnel (OVMP) which serves all military-affiliated students,
including those who are not yet veterans. The office is led by a full-time director and has seven additional staff members dedicated entirely to military student issues.

By creating the OVMP office, IUPUI has established a central resource where military students and veterans can find answers to all of their questions and concerns. While some institutions assign a single staff member to assist with financial aid, IUPUI has created a level of support that extends to every part of the university. Now, that office is one of the largest college initiatives in the country dedicated to military students (Indiana University, n.d.).

In New Jersey, Stockton University near Atlantic City has become one of the few colleges in the U.S. to provide a full-time counselor for student veterans. Based in the college counseling center, this staff member assists veterans who may be struggling with anxiety and depression, as well as those dealing with substance abuse and post-traumatic stress disorder (Careers In Psychology, n.d.). Veteran-specific counselors can also assist with other issues related to the transition from combat to classroom, even such basic things like housing and meal plans. In other instances, they can be called upon to mediate disputes with faculty and staff members, or even other students.

Counselors who work with veterans need certain traits and qualities to which military students can relate. “For instance, like other types of counselors, veterans’ counselors should be good listeners, non-judgmental, compassionate, and empathetic. However, veterans counselors should also be understanding of the struggles and challenges that military veterans face each and every day, and they should respect the traditions that many veterans cling to” (Careers In Psychology, n.d.).
By providing a full-time counselor dedicated exclusively to veterans, Stockton University continues to build a comprehensive program for student veterans. Although Stockton has not yet reached the level of services provided by IUPUI, the university recognizes that support for military-affiliated students goes beyond recruitment and financial aid.

Other programs and initiatives have been created to address a specific issue or problem. One of these, established at Stockton in 2014, seeks to address concerns and misinformation about veterans in the classroom. Known as Veterans Engaging Teachers and Students (V.E.T.S.), the program has been designed to help faculty, staff, and other students understand the challenges faced by student veterans. By encouraging interaction and communication among these groups, it is hoped that military students will feel more welcome on campus, and others will be less intimidated by them.

To achieve this goal, the V.E.T.S. program invites a small group of student veterans to share personal experiences and answer questions in various settings. In just the past year, panels of 4-5 students have been invited to speak in classrooms, clubs, and other campus organizations, and the effort has been well received by attendees. By providing opportunities for discussion and interaction, the program has helped to break down barriers between veterans and other campus groups.

Programs like this can help other students learn about their classmates, and faculty members better understand the unique challenges faced by military students. While the V.E.T.S. program is focused primarily on faculty and students, it appears to be beneficial to the veteran participants as well. Student veterans are learning to share their personal stories, and to be more open about their experiences. For those who suffer with post-traumatic stress disorder or traumatic brain injury (TBI), this can be a very positive experience (Smith, 2015).
Although the V.E.T.S. program is still in a pilot stage at the university, there is potential for development beyond the institution. Indeed, as word of the program spread, a local public school district requested a panel of veterans to speak to an assembly of parents and students. With support from faculty and administrators, it may be possible to expand in the upcoming academic year and soon, hopefully, to other colleges and universities.

As schools develop more robust and comprehensive programs to support military students, it is helpful to learn the most effective ways of doing so. In the military, information is given in a manner that is direct, specific, and clear, and student veterans will quickly lose confidence in anyone who does otherwise (Pellegrin, 2013). When interacting with these students, faculty, staff, and administrators should be honest and straightforward, particularly when requested information is not available. Military students prefer to be told that an answer or resolution is not yet known, rather than being given inaccurate information.

Sometimes, military students may not be looking for specific answers, and faculty and staff should look for opportunities to engage these students in conversation. It is tempting to think that, after serving in combat, military students are able to handle anything that happens in college. Unfortunately, that isn’t always true. Despite the appearance of strength and bravado, veterans can feel isolated and alone on campus and, because of their military training, they are often reluctant to seek help from anyone. For a student still recovering from the physical, psychological, and emotional wounds of combat, the challenges of campus life can seem overwhelming at times.

Creating a veteran-friendly campus requires more than just recruiting military students, but for many schools, that is a necessary first step. Some colleges and universities have sought to increase financial aid as a way of mitigating or removing the burden of paying for school. For
state schools, this can take the form of offering in-state tuition to military personnel regardless of where they officially reside. This can be especially helpful as it allows veterans to enroll in the school and degree program they desire, rather than being limited to schools in their geographic area.

Institutional scholarships and grants can also provide needed assistance to student veterans. To help lessen the burden of college expenses, some schools are offering an initiative called tuition discounting. “Tuition discounting is the practice of awarding institutionally-funded financial aid in the form of non-repayable grants and scholarships to students. Similar to state and federal grant programs, colleges provide aid to reduce the sticker price students pay for college” (Hillman, 2012). At Colorado Technical University, a for-profit institution founded by a veteran, up to $12,000 in scholarships and discounts for undergraduate studies are offered to service members and their immediate families. At the University of Phoenix, another for-profit school, administrators are providing over 50 scholarships worth $4,000 each through various veterans' service organizations (Field, 2008). While these amounts may seem insignificant when compared to the total cost of tuition, fees, and housing, any amount of assistance means that more military personnel and veterans can pursue higher education.

Additionally, some schools are offering veterans discounts for food services and housing. Studies have confirmed that the charges associated with living on college campuses have risen more rapidly than the typical rent off-campus in almost every year. “Room and board charges add an average $9,999 to students' university bills in 2014-2015, according to data reported by 1,109 ranked colleges in an annual survey by U.S. News” (Snider, 2014). For seven-and-a-half months of campus housing, student veterans can expect to receive approximately $1,173 of
Monthly Housing Allowance (MHA) from the Veterans Administration. While this helps with the cost of room and board, it falls below the actual amount needed for living expenses.

Some schools have also changed their reimbursement policies so that students who are activated for military duty may receive a refund or reduction in tuition and housing costs. Military students are attracted to schools that offer this benefit, particularly since they recognize the potential for deployment to active duty (McBain, Kim, Cook, & Snead, 2012).

It is not unusual for a college career to be interrupted more than once for active duty service, and leaving school in the middle of a semester can be quite difficult. Aside from the financial concerns, the academic work prior to deployment may be lost, and this can discourage a military student from returning to school (DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2008, p. 82).

Finally, like many students, veterans need help preparing for life after college. For those who successfully persevere through undergraduate studies – including additional years caused by interruptions for active duty – the prospects of finding a job are not good. A recent study conducted by the Bureau of Labor Statistics shows that the unemployment rate is almost 11% for veterans with a college degree. The number is even higher for those who have served in combat (Roost & Roost, 2014). Helping veterans succeed after graduation is yet another challenge facing institutions of higher education.

Government-sponsored programs have helped to provide additional support to military students and veterans. Operation College Promise assists colleges with student veteran success, and the 8 Keys to Success program, started by President Obama, helps students transition from combat to the classroom. The American Council on Education has produced a tool kit that shows colleges the best ways to support student veterans (Callahan & Jarrat, 2014).
The programs described in this literature review show that efforts are being made to engage and support military students and veterans on campus. Yet, according to the “2010 National Survey of Student Engagement” (NSSE), veterans continue to perceive a lack of support from their schools, and more so than other students, remain less likely to connect with faculty and staff (Osborne, 2014). While some progress has been made, it is clear that much more is needed.

As veterans return from deployments to active duty, particularly in combat situations, they can find it difficult to create and maintain new relationships. They may feel isolated and unable to connect in a meaningful way with those who have not served in the military. This sense of isolation can be compounded as veterans begin their academic journey.

While beginning college can be a challenge for anyone, it is particularly so for non-traditional students like veterans. The ability to connect with others and build good relationships is critical to success, and this includes being able to interact well with classmates, faculty, and even college staff members.

Many colleges employ a wide array of programs to create opportunities for students to bond during their first year at school. New student orientations, Welcome Week events, and First-Year Experience programs are among those offered to help students make the transition to college life. In each of these programs, the primary purpose is to enhance and promote student success by supporting both group and individual interaction (DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2008).

Like other students, veterans seem to enjoy greater success when they are actively engaged in the campus community. "Decades of studies show that college students learn more
when they direct their efforts to a variety of educationally purposeful activities’. This emphasizes students’ involvement with activities and conditions likely to generate learning’” (as cited in Coates & McCormick, 2014). While there is a substantial lack of research that focuses on the specific population of student veterans, there does seem to be agreement within the higher education community that undergraduate students perform better when they are actively involved in campus activities. "Higher levels of student engagement have been linked with better student learning outcomes, such as the quality of their output. By understanding the value of student engagement, we can better improve the learning process for all students" (Errey & Wood, 2011).

In a study conducted by the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), the relationship between student engagement and success in the first year college experience was examined (Coates & McCormick, 2014). Nineteen institutions participated in the study and provided data on the grades and retention rate of their first year college students. In the findings, it was discovered that there exists a positive correlation between engagement and academic success. "Engagement was found to have a stronger positive effect for students with lower levels of performance on a college entrance examination. The research also found that the positive relationship between engagement and propensity to re-enroll was stronger for ethnic minority students compared with their White counterparts" (Coates & McCormick, 2014). While student veterans are not typically classified as a marginalized group, they represent a population that is often overlooked.

Another portion of this study looked at the correlation between students’ engagement during high school versus their levels of engagement in college, and its impact on re-enrollment. It was found that a student’s prior level of engagement was not a good predictor of the ability to persist in college, but that their actual participation during the first year of
college was a strong determining factor. "In other words, actual engagement trumps engagement disposition in predicting intent to return" (as cited in Coates & McCormick, 2014). This is notable, particularly since student veterans might be expected to adapt better to a college environment because of their prior experience with teamwork and community building.

But, is creating community engagement the responsibility of the student or the institution? In a study conducted in 2011 by Robert Errey & Glen Wood at the University of Ballarat, researchers sought to understand the factors that influence student engagement (Errey & Wood, 2011). After surveying eighty-five students at a business school in Australia, they discovered that many students felt that it was not their responsibility to direct their own level of engagement. Rather, most believed that it was the responsibility of the educational institution. The participants in the study also felt that it was the environment created by staff and faculty that ultimately determined if a student was likely to engage in or out of the classroom (Errey & Wood, 2011).

Each year, colleges and universities look for new and innovative ways to enhance the overall experience of their students. Some accomplish this by creating and implementing new programs to promote better integration through student engagement. In an article written by Ann McClure called Put a Ring on It, the author looked at some of the problems faced by college administrators attempting to encourage student engagement. The article also provides specific methods for advancing engagement through a multipronged community approach.

According to internal studies less than ten percent of the student veteran population at Alpha University actively participates in clubs, organizations, or events that are created for them. So what can staff and faculty do to change this? They can start by working diligently and ceaselessly to build a strong sense of community throughout the school. School-
wide efforts are more likely to succeed overall than those that are focused on only one group of students. While the goal is to make every student feel welcome and respected, this can be accomplished more effectively by encouraging participation from the many different subgroups on campus. Each distinct population like Greek Life, LBGT, and others can contribute to a campus-wide sense of community without taking anything away from the identity and efforts of each group.

Faculty also have a critical role in engaging students. As the central and most visible presence on campus, professors and instructors have a strong influence on student engagement in addition to their obvious impact on academic success.

Some students, particularly non-traditional ones like military personnel and veterans, may be singularly focused on their studies and assignments. For them, the totality of the college experience exists within the classroom. Though there may be a plethora of programs and resources available to assist them, they may have neither the time nor the inclination to participate in them. For this reason, it is especially important to connect with these students during class, and to help them recognize the many experiences available outside of the lecture hall. By eliciting support from the faculty, schools can successfully engage a much greater number of their students (McClure, 2011).

Faculty members can also contribute significantly to the success of programs simply by making students aware of them. When students are asked about their college experience, they likely recall their most memorable teachers. Faculty members have the greatest influence on students, both individually and collectively, and students respect and value their opinion. For that reason, if a faculty member supports a particular program or initiative, their students are more likely to participate in it.
Another way to enhance student engagement is to create clubs or organizations specifically focused on supporting and advancing the goals of a particular group of students. For instance, LGBT students are more likely to participate in an initiative that is created specifically for them. “People need to be connected. With all of the student engagement work, particularly with entering students, it is critical to foster those relationships: student-to-student, student-to-faculty, and student-to-coursework” (McClure, 2011). By providing opportunities to create personal connections during the transition to college, schools can help to ensure the success of their students, both academically and otherwise.

As student veterans transition from the military and begin their educational career, many find themselves leaving behind the only support structure they have ever known. From the start of their first college class, some find themselves lost in a system that they do not fully understand. A student veteran organization can provide critical support during this transition, but many veterans choose not to participate in them.

The mission of the Student Veterans of America is to develop chapters that "provide military veterans with the resources, support, and advocacy needed to succeed in higher education and following graduation" (Student Veterans of America, n.d.). While the chapters at some schools are enjoying a measure of success, others reach only a small percentage of the veteran population on campus. It is unclear why veterans are choosing not to be involved with SVA groups, and more research is needed to better understand this situation.

While there are different recommendations on how to increase student engagement, most agree that it needs to be a campus-wide approach. It is not enough to have a single office or staff member direct this project; rather, it needs to be a comprehensive effort that encourages participation from everyone.
Illinois College, a private liberal arts institution located in Jacksonville, Illinois, took this approach by creating a campus-wide retreat that included all constituents. During this retreat, the participants suggested small but important changes in academic courses, campus collaboration, and knowledge of available support programs (Coates & McCormick, 2014).

Through this event, members of the Illinois campus community began to understand better the value of support and learning both in and outside of the classroom. While each college and university finds its own way to improve student engagement, Illinois College has chosen a one that includes many different groups.

"A military friendly college is not one with a single office of military student services where all military students are referred, but is a culture of support that builds on the skills veterans bring to the academic setting, and supports the veterans’ transition into the workforce" (Wilson, 2014).

**Summary**

As veterans return home, some find themselves in an environment almost as challenging as the one they left. They are no longer surrounded by the friends and “battle buddies” who have supported and protected them throughout their deployment. Nearly 50% of post-9/11 veterans have said that they experienced some type of emotionally distressing situation while on active duty, and these can create a variety of physical, cognitive, and emotional challenges (Osborne, 2013). These challenges do not disappear when a veteran arrives on campus, and may be even more evident in such a new and uncomfortable setting (Rudd, Goulding, & Bryan, 2011).

Since 2009, more than one million veterans have enrolled in some form of educational program, and while there has been some support, college and universities are finding themselves
unprepared to fully and properly assist these new students (Osborne, 2014, p. 24). Less than 1% of the population of the United States has served in uniform, and this is likely why it is difficult for many to comprehend the needs and challenges that student veterans face.

**Conclusion**

Though having military students and veterans on campus is not new, the sudden influx over the past several years has brought about numerous challenges. As troops return from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, ever-increasing numbers are seeking higher education. This is particularly true since the Post-9/11 G.I. Bill is more generous and comprehensive than previous educational benefit programs. While this is commendable on many levels, colleges and universities have been struggling to meet the many and diverse needs of this growing student population.

The review of relevant literature presents its own challenge due to the dearth of material available on this subject. Since the presence of so many military students and veterans on campus is a rather recent phenomena, there have not been many studies focused on them.

Among the issues that still need to be explored are the significant lack of participation by student veterans in programs created for them, and their inclination to remain isolated from the campus community. It is hoped that this research will help colleges and universities formulate the best and most effective strategies for serving military students and veterans.

**Chapter 3: Research Design**

The purpose of this study was to examine how student veterans experience transition from the military to a college environment. As military personnel return from active-duty deployments in Afghanistan, Iraq, and other countries, many are choosing to take advantage of
their educational benefits by enrolling in post-secondary programs. Similar to the period following World War II, the number of military students enrolled in colleges and universities has increased significantly. While some studies have begun to examine this unique student population, more research is needed to identify the many and varied conditions that impact their overall success. The manner in which military-affiliated students experience this transition impacts not only the schools they attend, but their families and the larger community as well. Because of this, the overall research question that guided this inquiry was: How do student veterans who have recently transitioned from active duty military service to their first semester at a four-year public university make sense of their transitional experience?

Since this study examined how student veterans experience the transition from a military environment to a college community, an interpretive phenomenological analysis was used. A qualitative approach was incorporated using semi-structured personal interviews for data collection. Throughout this process, the study explored the lived experiences and psychological impact of the transition process between disparate environments (Rivituso, 2014). Using Schlossberg’s Transition Theory as the theoretical framework assisted in guiding the research, and enhanced the development of adult transitional theory. By understanding how this particular group makes sense of their transition from a regimented, external-authority-based environment, educators can offer appropriate curricular and co-curricular support programs that promote transitional success (Jones, 2013).

**Qualitative Research Approach**

To explore how student veterans experience transition from one environment to another, this study employed a qualitative approach rooted in the constructivist paradigm. Qualitative research is considered to be an umbrella term that includes a wide variety of methods and
approaches used for the study of natural social life. The data collected is often associated with interview transcripts, field notes, and other data collection methods that document human experiences and feelings (Saldana, 2011). It can also be associated with different disciplines such as education, health care, business, and other fields.

A key advantage in qualitative research is that a formal hypothesis is not always needed. Exploratory in nature, qualitative research permits scientists to examine personal lived experience, and to create hypotheses based on collected data, and not on academic preconceptions (Guthrie, 2010). One of the primary reasons for conducting qualitative research is to develop an understanding of a particular phenomenon. By using this approach, researchers can investigate complex and sensitive issues to achieve a deeper and more thorough understanding of how people think and feel. Qualitative research is often used to tell a story from the participant’s viewpoint utilizing rich descriptive details that provide a summary of what a person is thinking or experiencing (Trochim, 2006).

Similar to other methods, qualitative research incorporates different approaches that help to describe and explain the purpose of the study. Phenomenology is a specific school of thought within qualitative research that concentrates on an individual’s lived experience, and his or her interpretation of an event or specific period of time. In this approach, the researcher seeks to understand how the world might appear through the eyes of the participant (Trochim, 2006).

While phenomenology is descriptive, in the sense of aiming to describe rather than explain, the constructivist-interpretivist paradigm is the perspective that best aligns with this type of study. Constructivists argue that human beings create their own social realities from their individual lived experiences. This type of research aims to understand the world of human experience and how it creates its own individual reality. Through this approach, researchers and
their participants collaborate in order to create conclusions from interactive dialogue and individual interpretation. Researchers and other scientists indicate that with constructivist paradigms, the methodology and approach to inquiry should be inductive in nature and should take on a literary style (Lazarowicz, 2015).

Methodology

Since this study was phenomenological in nature, an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was applied as the methodological approach. The goal was to generate and collect qualitative data regarding the lived experiences of student veterans as they transitioned from the military to a college environment. The use of an IPA methodology allows for a better understanding of how people make sense of their environment by examining how a participant interprets the world (Shinebourne, 2011). It is important to note that this approach is considered predominantly interpretative, and it is driven by the subject’s own cultural and environmental experience.

Published in the mid-1990s by Dr. Jonathan Smith, IPA was created based on both a phenomenological and hermeneutic methodology because of its grounding in individual lived experience, and how the participant and researcher interpret these experiences (Smith, 2010). While IPAs tend to be used more frequently in studies involving the physical and mental health fields, researchers have begun to expand its use into other non-traditional disciplines.

Even though IPAs have been established as a valuable qualitative methodology, there are some scientists who disagree with its application in phenomenology research. Giorgi (as cited in Smith, p. 201) argues that “the theory and practice he [Jonathan Smith] recommends has little to do with the continental philosophical phenomenology” (Smith, 2010). He also states that the
work of several researchers who have used IPA methodology in phenomenology research have
done so incorrectly.

Giorgi postulates that Smith has misinterpreted the work of earlier scientists and is using
their concepts improperly. He specifically references the work done by Edmund Husserl, a
German mathematician and founder of the philosophical movement of phenomenology, and
suggests that Smith’s work does not correlate with Husserl’s and presents irreconcilable
differences in ideas (Finlay, 2009). While scientists may have concerns about new and
innovative ideas, IPAs have been well established as a legitimate approach to research.

Smith indicates that the use of an IPA can be a creative process that will compel
researchers to be thoughtful in their interpretation of participant data (Smith, 2010). Because
IPAs focus on first person experiences, studies must incorporate a data collection method that is
able to gather both personal and detailed information from a subject. Among these methods, the
most commonly used is the personal, one-on-one interview. Other data collection methods may
include personal diaries, focus groups, or email correspondence.

Personal interviews typically consist of several open-ended questions that engage a
participant in a dialogue about a personal experience during a specific situation or event. An
example of this might be, “What was your experience like during the transition from high school
to college?” Additional follow-up questions may be asked to elicit more specific information or
to bring the participant back to a particular subject area. Smith suggests that it helps to envision
this interaction as a conversation rather than an interview, specifically because this permits both
the participant and the researcher to better influence the interaction. “During the interview, it
may be more fruitful to follow unexpected turns initiated by the participant’s accounts, rather
than adhering to the specific questions in the original sequence” (Shinebourne, 2011).
“Unexpected turns are often the most valuable aspects of interviewing: on the one hand they tell us something we did not even anticipate needing to know; on the other, because they arise unprompted, they may well be of particular importance to the participant” (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Through the use of individual interviews, the researcher will be able to create an open dialogue with the participant that will promote the sharing of personal experiences (Shinebourne, 2011).

While personal interviews may be more challenging than other methods, they can be the best means for understanding a participant’s lived experience. In a way, it allows the researcher to share in the experience by generating a dialog where information is shared openly and honestly. Through this understanding, emerging themes are identified and are later used to code and compare information gathered from other participants. It is important to note that IPAs are not a single-step data analysis, but include the following characteristics: “(a) movement from what is unique to a participant to what is shared among the participants, (b) description of the experience which moves to an interpretation of the experience, (c) commitment to understanding the participant’s point of view, and (d) psychological focus on personal meaning-making within a particular context” (Shinebourne, 2011).

When coding begins, it will consist of an initial stage that will examine the content of the interview looking for specific language and interpretative comments. A second stage coding will also be used to create emerging themes which will form the basis for a narrative that can be used to present the findings. This method of analysis follows an idiographic approach that is consistent with an IPA methodology (Griffiths, 2009).
Participants

Like most qualitative studies, IPAs usually have a limited number of participants (8 to 12) which can be either selected at random or taken from a specific group of individuals. A practice known as “snowballing” can also be used to help find and recruit participants that are not easily identified or accessible to the researcher.

Research Population

The participants selected for this study included: (a) individuals who have served in the United States Armed Forces, (b) participated in at least one deployment in support of Operations Enduring Freedom or Iraqi Freedom, (c) were enrolled as a full-time student at the host institution, and (d) a first-time degree-seeking individual currently enrolled in the first semester of freshman year. These criteria, along with other demographic information, were used to screen participants through the use of a pre-interview survey. When potential subjects met all four requirements, they were asked to participate.

Purposive sampling, a research method used to select participants from a particular group of people, was used to identify the initial nine participants who met the criteria of the study. This approach requires researchers to use individual judgement when selecting potential subjects who fit the parameters of the study. This type of technique is also known as judgmental, selective, or subjective and is an example of non-probability sampling. The primary goal of purposive sampling is to focus on the characteristics of a population which will enable the researcher to answer specific questions about that population (Ritchie, Lewis, McNaughton Nicholls, & Ormston, 2014).
In the end, eight participants were selected and agreed to participate in the study. All were previously deployed members of the U.S. Armed Forces currently enrolled in the first semester of their freshman year at the host institution. Seven of the participants were male and one was female. Efforts were made to achieve a greater balance regarding the gender of the participants; however, only one female who met all of the criteria agreed to participate in the study. Inadvertently, the ratio of male to female participants happened to reflect the same gender ratio of troops presently serving in the U.S. military.

Each of the participants in this study was assigned a pseudonym to protect their identity and encourage a more open dialogue. Upon being assured of anonymity, all of the participants appeared more relaxed and willing to share their experiences, and most proceeded to answer questions in greater detail.

The average age of the participants was twenty-seven, with the youngest being twenty, and the oldest thirty-three. Five were soldiers in the Army, two were members of the Marine Corps, and one served in the Air Force. One was Asian, two were Hispanic, two were African-American, and three were Caucasian. The names (pseudonyms), ages, ranks, and occupations of the service members who participated in this study are as follows:

Adam, a 28-year-old male who served in the U.S. Army as a sergeant (E-5) in an infantry unit and was deployed to both Iraq and Afghanistan.

Brent, male, 29, a mechanic with the rank of specialist (E-4) who served in the U.S. Army during deployments to Iraq.

Chad, a 21-year-old male, also a mechanic who served in the U.S. Army as a private first class (E-3) in Iraq.
Dawn, 33, the oldest participant and only female, served with a U.S. Army unit in Afghanistan as a logistical specialist with the rank of E-4.

Eric, a 26-year-old male and member of the U.S. Marine Corps, served in an infantry unit in Afghanistan with the rank of sergeant (E-5).

Frank, 29, male, the only other Marine to be interviewed, served with the rank of corporal (E-4) in an infantry unit in Afghanistan.

Gavin, a 28-year-old male served in the U.S. Army as a mechanic with the rank of specialist (E-4) in both Iraq and Afghanistan.

Hoyt, a 20-year-old male, the youngest participant and only member of the U.S. Air Force to be interviewed, served as an engineer in Iraq with the rank of private (E-1).

Site Selection

The research site selected for this study is Stockton University, a medium-sized four-year public college located in the northeastern region of the United States. The institution was founded in 1969 and has a student population of approximately 8,500; however, only about 35% live on campus. This institution was selected because of its proximity to the researcher’s location and access to the student population needed for the study.

The institution has received awards for its support of student veterans and has a graduation rate higher than the national average for this population. From 2015 through 2018, the institution was awarded the designation “Best for Vets” by Military Times, a publication that provides print and online editions for every branch of the Armed Forces. With a military population of approximately 400 students, the institution appears to offer more support for
veterans than other similarly-sized colleges and universities. These include a full-time Director of Military and Veteran Services, a program coordinator, counselor, office and meeting space, lounge, and computer lab. There are designated points-of-contact in every office on campus, and these faculty and staff members are trained to assist with the specific needs of this population.

**Recruitment**

The students who participated in this study were identified with assistance from the school’s Office of Military and Veteran Services which provided email addresses for all service members currently enrolled in their first year of studies. Each candidate was contacted via the school’s email system with a message that included a short summary of the study and a link to an online survey. The communication also explained that participation in the study was completely voluntary and all information shared would remain private. In addition, the researcher asked potential candidates to recommend other potential participants.

After identifying a sufficient number of candidates that met the general requirements of the study, a follow-up email was sent to each of them. This second email repeated a short summary of the study, as well as a request to meet in person to conduct a one-on-one interview. It was explained that the interview would take place in a private conference room at the participant’s school, and included a reminder that participation in the study was voluntary. When a participant agreed, a date, time, and location for the interview was selected.

**Procedures**

Upon receiving approval for the study from the Institutional Review Boards (IRB) of both Northeastern and Stockton University, formal recruitment of participants began.
Data Collection

The data collection for this study incorporated IPA principles and guidelines, and came from two primary sources: the pre-interview survey and the semi-structured one-on-one interviews. These interviews were conducted using a specific protocol to guard against potential biases of the researcher and ensured that all questions were presented in the same manner to each subject. This “interview protocol” assisted in scripting the presentation so that both the researcher and participant remained on topic, and ensured that no unnecessary influence was imparted during the interview. Before the scheduled meetings, participants were presented with the protocol, as well as the specific questions that were to be asked. Each interview lasted approximately one to two hours.

The interviews were conducted in a private meeting room at the institution where each of the participants was enrolled. All meetings were digitally recorded and the audio files were stored on a private hard drive. At the beginning of the interview, participants were reminded that their involvement in the study was completely voluntary, and that they could withdraw from the process at any time. It was also disclosed that the interviewer was employed by the institution, but acting solely as a researcher for the purpose of this study. Throughout the study, pseudonyms were used to identify the participants with their actual identity revealed only to the researcher and the chair of the doctoral committee.

Data Analysis

Upon completion of the interview, each digital recording was transcribed by Rev, an online transcription company. To protect the confidentiality of the participants, no identifying information was shared with the transcriber. Unique files were created for each participant that
included the pre-interview surveys, notes from the interview, and the audio transcripts. These individual files were kept separate during the data analysis process so as to not unduly influence the coding.

Because a cross-case analysis was used to evaluate the data, the coding process required individual examination of all data sets using basic inductive techniques. Using this approach, each participant file was examined and coded independently. This method was used because small data sets, such as in this study, assist in identifying the different invariant patterns that exist within each case.

While there are advantages to using this technique, a tendency on the part of the researcher toward overgeneralization can impact the conclusion of the study. This challenge can be counteracted by producing results that can be compared and transferred to other studies. If the data is sufficiently well described and defined, other researchers will be able to use the results of this study as a basis for comparison (Khan & VanWynsberghe, 2008).

Coding

The study followed the procedures of IPA as explained in Smith et al. (2009). This section describes the analytic steps that were used to document the transitional experience of student veterans (Lyons & Coyle, 2007). The first step involved a detailed reading of the data in order to gain a holistic perspective on the participant’s account. This was followed by a second step that identified initial themes which were then organized into clusters. During the third step, the clusters were condensed and examined for connections and similarities. The fourth and final step involved the creation of a narrative that described the interplay between the interpretative activity of the researcher and the participant (Smith and Osborn, 2003).
During the first and second steps of the analysis, an initial reading of the transcript was conducted to help identify general thoughts and themes of the participant. Notes were added to the margins of the transcripts to identify specific areas of interest. Several additional readings were conducted to better familiarize the researcher with the information, and to ensure that all concepts and themes were identified.

The third step utilized the notes identified in the margin to further reduce the information into more specific themes and, during this process, the information was merged into different clusters. Some ideas and themes were dropped because they did not fit with the emerging structure (Lyons & Coyle, 2007). Deciding which themes to keep or eliminate can be a challenging process; however, it should be based on whether or not the themes help to illuminate key aspects of the participant’s account (Smith and Osborn, 2003).

The fourth and final stage used these themes to write a narrative that outlined the experiences of all the participants. This stage focused on translating the themes into an account that used verbatim extracts to form the narrative argument. During the process, it was important to clearly distinguish between what the respondent said and the analyst’s interpretation (Smith and Osborn, 2003). Sufficient data presented in the narrative allowed the reader to evaluate the usefulness of the interpretations.

**Trustworthiness**

When conducting research, it is necessary to consider the validity and reliability of the information being examined. The researcher must be certain that the data is measured exactly as proposed, and that none of the information is flawed or inaccurate (Guthrie, 2010). Through the
use of different strategies and techniques, researchers can ensure that the information is both authentic and trustworthy.

According to Lincoln and Guba’s Evaluative Criteria, there are four ways to help establish trust in a study: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (1985). In order to verify credibility, this study utilized a technique called member-checking which allowed participants to assess the information being recorded. This was done to correct any errors that may have been present and to evaluate the interpretation of the information provided. Transferability is verified by providing enough detailed information about the phenomenon, which allows conclusions to be transferred to other times, settings, situations, and people.

Creating dependability is a process which uses external audits to evaluate the accuracy of the findings. In this study, an external audit was conducted by faculty and staff familiar with this student population. This process helped with confirmability as it invited external parties to challenge or confirm the information and findings that were gathered. Since personal interviews were employed as the primary collection method for this study, there may have been concern as to whether the data accurately represented the ideas and opinions of the participant. Lincoln and Guba's Evaluative Criteria was used to ensure that the information best represented the views of the individual, and not the bias of the researcher.

**Ethical Considerations**

When conducting research which involves human subjects, there are ethical concerns that must be considered. Although the research being conducted may have far-reaching benefits, a scientist does not have the power or authority to control a participant’s involvement (Guthrie, 2010). Professional standards demand that the researcher receive permission from both the
governing authority sponsoring the research, such as the school, institution, or other organization, and every participant who will be involved.

For this study, approval from Northeastern and Stockton University’s Institutional Review Boards were obtained. This was done to ensure that the research was ethical and followed the guidelines set forth by both the host and sponsoring institutions.

Once approval was received from both institutions, the researcher obtained informed consent from every participant regarding their contribution to the study and the information that was to be collected. In addition, all participants were informed of the purpose of the study, how the collected information would be used and stored, and who would have access to it. Each participant’s consent was obtained before any information was collected, and it was confirmed again at the end of the interview process.

For this study, an email message was sent to all prospective participants according to the professional standards described above. The email outlined the purpose of the study, how the information would be used and stored, and with whom the information would be shared. Each prospective participant was assured of anonymity by the removal of all identifying information and personal references from the research. Each person was identified by a unique pseudonym randomly created at the beginning of the study.

Furthermore, each member was provided several opportunities throughout the investigation/interview to opt out of the study and to have their information deleted from the collection. By providing participants the opportunity to remove themselves from the study, the researcher ensured that the information collected was accurate and, just as importantly, caused no harm to the contributor.
Potential Research Bias

As a social scientist, each researcher has the responsibility to respect a participant’s personal values and viewpoints. While this may present a challenge, it is essential to the integrity of the research. During the interview process, a participant may feel uncomfortable or embarrassed by questions about viewpoints contrary to their own. This can be mitigated by allowing the participant to guide the conversation and to choose the depth of information that is shared. It is also essential that the researcher remain unbiased and not influence or judge the participant’s beliefs (Guthrie, 2010).

As both a military veteran and student affairs professional, the researcher might feel overconfident about what other student veterans experience as they transition from combat to campus. This personal experience can be an asset, but it can also lead to a bias in interpretation of the problem and its contributing factors. While it may be difficult to remain detached from the experiences of the participants, familiarity with the subject of the research may also allow the researcher to gather more in-depth information. “It is impossible to talk of respect for the student and of the dignity that is in the process of coming to be, [...] without taking into consideration the conditions in which they are living and the importance of the knowledge derived from life experience” (Freire, 1998).

The researcher’s experience as both a student and military veteran contributes to a unique passion for this problem of practice. However, the research must be conducted in a way that identifies the actual problem without being compromised by personal bias. By striving to preserve objectivity and impartiality, the researcher intends to provide data that accurately identifies the problem, as well as provide solutions to address it.
Limitations

While this study utilized a specific theoretical framework and methodology supported in other scientific research, there are nonetheless limitations which may need to be addressed with additional research (Griffiths, 2009). One of these limitations associated with using an IPA methodology is its dependence on interpretation. As the participants attempt to make sense of their own world, the researcher is attempting to do the same with them. It is a dynamic process that requires the researcher to have an active role in interpreting what the participant means. While this limitation can be overcome with rich quality data, care must be taken to clearly distinguish between what the respondent has said, and how the researcher has interpreted it (Smith & Orborn, 2008).

Summary

This study explored the experiences of military-affiliated students as they transitioned from a combat environment to a college campus. Through the use of an IPA methodology, this study investigated the lived experiences and psychological impact of the transition process between disparate environments (Rivituso, 2014). Specific IPA techniques and practices taken from Smith et al., 2009 were used to ensure the validity of the findings.

Chapter 4: Findings and Analysis

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to understand how student veterans experience transition at a four-year public university during the first semester of freshman year. The knowledge generated from this study is intended to inform senior-level administrators, directors, and managers on the best ways to serve and support this student population as they
transition to college. Because student veterans tend to be older than typical college freshmen, they often have needs and challenges that are different from those of their younger classmates.

While the process of transitioning to post-secondary education can be difficult for any student, it is typically more so for those who have served in the military. Supporting this particular population requires a knowledge and understanding of the challenges they face, and a willingness to address them in an effective manner.

The eight participants in this study have all served in the Armed Forces and are enrolled in the first semester of freshman year at the institution. The data gathered from interviews with each of them provided the substance for this chapter.

After completing the analysis of the interview data, three superordinate and seven sub-themes emerged. These include: 1) Developing Identity (1.1 Coping with experiences, 1.2 Understanding self-image, 1.3 Personal goals/direction); 2) Challenges (2.1 Interpersonal relationships, 2.2 Mental health); and 3) Environmental Support (3.1 Personnel and services, 3.2 Support from peers). These themes were identified because they appeared in a majority of the interview data. Table 1 shows the superordinate themes and corresponding sub themes, as well as the recurrence of each theme for each participant.
Developing Identity

Service in the military can prepare an individual for many things, including how to work in a team environment, become a member of a diverse and dynamic community, and conform to specific rules and regulations; however, it does not prepare someone for the challenges he or she may face when returning to civilian life. The ability to regain one’s identity as an individual is one of the most significant of these challenges. The first superordinate theme that emerged in the study was the participants’ struggle to transition from an extremely structured and disciplined environment to one that relies more on individual choice and personal responsibility. When one joins the Army, Navy, Air Force, or Marines, his or her personal identity becomes secondary to that of the group. The entire time in the service is focused on interaction and cooperation with
the members of one’s group. It does not matter if the group is as small as a unit, or as large as the
individual’s branch of service. One’s identity is forged as a part of the whole, and represented by
the uniform that is worn. When service members complete their obligation and return to civilian
life, it can be very difficult to reclaim the sense of identity and individuality they had before
entering the military. This theme of Developing Identity can be broken down further into three
sub-themes: 1) Coping with experiences - the participant’s reasons for joining the military, and
the unwillingness or inability to process their experiences in combat, 2) Understanding self-
image - the participant’s difficulty in reorienting to civilian status, and 3) Personal
goals/direction - the lack of personal goals or purpose that are often associated with transition.

Coping with experiences

All of the participants appeared to have difficulty speaking about their military career and
what specifically informed their decision to join the armed forces. Surprisingly, like Adam, some
joined out of “boredom” or lack of personal direction after high school or a first attempt at
college. Adam described it like this:

A lot of it was due to boredom. I was just tired with what I was doing with my life. Went
to college, well, community college. It didn't work, because it was just high school part
two, and I hated high school to begin with. Dropped out of that, just started working, and
one day I just decided to sign up.

Other than boredom, Adam could not identify any other specific reason for why he chose
to join the military. Another participant, Gavin, stated that he simply didn’t know what to do
with his life:
You know, at the time, I felt like I just needed a change in my life and I didn't know what to do. I actually was in a community college at the time. I didn't do too well. So I dropped out of that and I just didn't know what to do, so I joined the Army.

Similar experiences were found among three of the other participants. Additionally, two suggested that they joined for personal reasons, and the final participant joined to continue a family tradition. The decision to join the military seemed to be based on different factors, including the participant’s particular circumstances at the time.

Each participant described his or her military service differently. While some like Frank were eager to experience the war and come “face-to-face with the enemy”, others like Dawn simply wanted to do their assigned job and, hopefully, make a difference. Nearly every participant was reluctant to speak about their experiences in combat, and when they did, they tended to minimize the risks and dangers they faced.

When Chad described his first ninety days in Afghanistan, he spoke about being injured by a roadside bomb, “I wasn't in Afghanistan long, just ninety days. But in that time, I did get blown up once, which was not a fun experience.” Brent was also rather casual in his description of combat experience saying:

It was pretty much like we sat in our tent, and anytime something happened ... like somebody was getting shot at or something, or there was an IED that went off, or they were getting small arms fire, we were called out to go and pretty much help them out.

For some service members, deliberately minimizing the dangers of combat seemed to make recalling it easier to handle. Some participants seemed to block out their combat
experiences entirely, and instead focused on other aspects of their service in a war zone. Dawn described her reaction to arriving in Afghanistan:

It was mind-boggling, because I don't like sand, and it was a lot of sand and mountains. The weather was all jacked up from 60-degree days and below zero at night and sandstorms, something you don't see in the United States, so that was an eye-opener, and raining mud. I cried that day.

Eric spoke of dealing with challenges beyond direct combat, the nitty-gritty tasks of being a soldier in a theater of war:

Certain situations dealing with bodies and stuff like that. That bothered me. At first, it didn't, but later when I came back, that's when it started bothering me. Sometimes being sick and actually having to go on missions and stuff like that, that was another thing, but the thing that kept me going is that because I actually really care about the people I was with.

He describes even more vividly the challenge of being ill, but not having the option to stop and rest:

There was a few instances where I was sick and I still went on patrol and then you would see me puking in the back … I was puking, but I was doing my job. I would just keep walking and it was good.

It can be very difficult for civilians, or anyone who hasn’t experienced a combat deployment, to understand this level of commitment. From these interviews, we come to understand that no matter how ill one might be, or how traumatized by recent events, there is little time for rest or
recuperation. The lives of other soldiers depend on each person doing his or her job, and losing focus for even a moment can mean the difference between life and death.

**Understanding self-image**

Past studies have suggested that the transition from military service to higher education can be extremely challenging, mostly because the environment on a college campus is so different from that of serving in the military. Each service member’s experience is unique; however, almost all described feeling isolated, afraid, or even angry during the transition process. One participant, Adam, described his first few days of classes as strange and uncomfortable:

It's weird, because ... they make you take those freshman seminars and everything like that, so you're sitting in the classroom with eighteen-year-old kids who just graduated from high school, getting treated pretty much the same as them. Having to listen to them bitch about their mundane problems that they have.

Another participant, Dawn, describes her first days of college as “absolutely horrific.” She stated:

My body went through all types ... oh my god, why is this person so close to me? Indulging too many anxiety pills just to sit through the first 20 minutes of class. I was like, okay, you have to try to relax. Try to open up. Try to be friendly. Stop sitting in the back of the class. Stop telling people, I don't want to talk to you, because I don't like you, and it's not the case. I was like let's try to be friendly.
As a parent and older than her fellow students, Dawn expressed that, at times, it felt like she was interacting with her own children. Another service member, Hoyt, spoke of trying to adjust to living on campus and not having the presence and support of the others in his military unit:

I would just hang out in my room by myself. Not being with my guys … knowing that, yeah, in the bed next to me, and to the left and the right, there's guys that I will go to great lengths to help defend. You build a brotherhood. Not being around my brothers was definitely different.

As military and veteran students attempt to adapt to life in college, they encounter many similar challenges. Not the least among these is the difference in age and maturity between them and their classmates. Sitting in a classroom and interacting with recent high school graduates can be especially daunting and, as we heard in these interviews, some military students withdraw as a coping mechanism. Others take on a more confrontational approach which makes communicating with other students and faculty even more difficult. Though each of the participants described it differently, all expressed feeling a sense of isolation and confusion. Hoyt summarized it well when he said, “I felt like I didn't fit in. The other people gave me anxiety.”

Adam explained that, for him, the challenges of transition didn’t become easier as time went on:

I still don't really like them, but it's not because they didn't serve or anything like that. They're just young and whiny and I don't have time for that ... There's enough time between when I was in and now that I can put distance between myself and the military
which, when I first started, was basically my identity. When it came to school, I was like, "I am a veteran." Now it's, "I'm a student."

**Personal goals/direction**

All of the participants were enrolled at the institution as first-time students, but as previously mentioned, they arrived at the decision to attend college for different reasons. One of the most common was a lack of direction or goals. Frank chose to attend college because he felt it was expected, and because his mother wanted him to go:

My mom really wanted me to get a degree, and I did try to get some schooling done before I went in the military and it just wasn't going well. I think it still was a part of me that I wanted to earn a degree, so I think from my parents' influence and even society's influences of the norms of just everybody goes, gets their degree to keep moving.

Hoyt mentioned something similar, “Honestly, I never really planned on going to college. It was always preached to me, and I'd always nod my head and say, ‘Yes, yes, sure’.” Another participant, Eric, said he went to college because he wanted to learn about a particular subject and thought it would be better than reading about it. In his interview, he said:

I wanted to go to college, but the only reason I did it was because I really like history and I wanted to learn more about it. So might as well do it, go to college with it. Instead of buying the books and reading it.

Brent stated that he likely wouldn’t have even considered college if not for his service in the military. “I got injured when I was over in Iraq, and I was medically retired from the service about six months or so after coming back. I had planned on staying in the military for whoever
knows how long.” His combat injury forced him to reconsider his future, especially since military service was no longer an option. He tried working, but quickly found himself frustrated with his coworkers. “I was angry at the people I was working with because they were just not disciplined in doing work. They were lazy, and I just couldn't deal with people like that.” He quit his job and decided to explore the possibility of attending college. Realizing that benefits from the Post-9/11 GI Bill would cover many of the expenses, he decided to enroll.

While attending college was not necessarily a priority before or even immediately after their military service, seven of the eight participants felt that going to school has helped them decide what to do with their lives. Adam stated “I needed something to do, the GI Bill was going to cover my living expenses for while I was in, so it would give me time to figure out what I wanted to do in the civilian world.” Based on the information given by the participants, attending college afforded them time to find out what they wanted to do.

Conclusion

The interviews with the participants revealed that reclaiming one’s personal identity after service in the military can be particularly difficult, and this is something with which many veterans struggle. The transition from a profoundly structured environment where everyone is told what to do and how to act in any given moment can be quite stressful, especially as each veteran tries to relearn how to function independently again.

Just as every person approaches challenges in their own unique way, veterans tend to handle these issues differently as well. Some are proud of having served in the Army, Air Force, Navy, or Marines, and seem eager to be recognized and thanked for their service. Others, however, are not as willing to be identified as veterans, and there are different reasons why they
might feel this way. Some may be eager to forget their time in uniform, to put everything behind them and move on with their lives. They may have seen and experienced things they don’t want to remember, and therefore are unwilling to talk about their service. Others appear willing to share what they experienced, but tend to minimize any contributions they may have made. They speak of accomplishments as a “group effort” and are unwilling to take any personal credit for successful outcomes. This is particularly true of troops involved in the most heroic situations. Men and women who have made great sacrifices at extreme personal cost often seem the least willing to take credit for their actions. Still others appear reluctant to be identified as veterans out of concern that doing so may diminish the service of others.

This attitude appears to be a reflection of their own self-image and how they perceive themselves in the world. When they were actively serving as a member of the military, they identified as a member of a group. This personal identity was linked to that of the unit, the group in which they served. Once discharged, however, many grapple with a sense of loss, and find it difficult to rediscover their personal identity. Without the support of their brothers and sisters in arms, many veterans lose their sense of self-worth and feel alone and isolated.

Not clearly understanding who one is and where one belongs in society can contribute to feelings of confusion and isolation, and this can lead to emotional and mental health problems. These problems will be identified further in the next section as we explore how social interaction and mental health can affect the transition experience.

**Challenges**

The second superordinate theme that became evident in the study is challenges that participants face as they struggle to cope with the new and ever-changing environment of a
college campus. Success in the military requires depending on other service members. In a similar way, success in college is influenced by one’s ability to connect and interact with others in the campus community. Building positive relationships with faculty, staff, and other students can greatly increase one’s chances of overall success in an academic environment. However, doing so may be one of the most difficult things for military-affiliated students to accomplish.

Contributing to this difficulty are the many emotional and psychological challenges that are common among those who have served in combat. Of these, anxiety, fear, and depression are particularly prevalent. While the transition to college life can be daunting for any student, it is especially so for those who are experiencing mental health issues. Though military students are often reluctant to discuss these types of challenges, some of the participants in this study chose to reveal them in their responses to the interview questions.

These two sub-themes, 1) Interpersonal relationships, and 2) Mental health, are the focus of this section. These two themes were evident in much of the information gathered during the interviews, and appeared to be among the biggest challenges faced by the participants. While each person described them differently, most revealed issues with either interpersonal relationships, mental health, or both.

**Interpersonal relationships**

Veterans typically undergo a period of readjustment while transitioning from the military to civilian life. This period, while exciting, can also be a time of uncertainty and confusion. When placed in difficult situations, people often cling to what they know, and find comfort in things that are familiar. However, when these are no longer available, such situations can be even
more difficult. For veterans who are accustomed to the type of relationships developed in the military, learning to relate to others in a different way can be quite challenging.

Though some veterans embrace this particular challenge and succeed with help from friends and family, others find themselves feeling alone and isolated. While trust in one’s buddies in combat may have come much more easily, learning to trust faculty and classmates can seem almost impossible at times. A young man or woman who has served in combat may find little common ground with a student who recently graduated from high school, or even with a professor who has never shared that experience. Overcoming these barriers requires a commitment that some may be unwilling or unable to make.

A common thread found among the participants in this study was a sense of isolation that prevented them from full and active participation in the college community. This isolation, however, often appeared to be self-imposed as a way of coping with new and unfamiliar surroundings.

An example of this is Brent’s statement, “That first semester all those classes, I was like well I feel a little awkward and left out. I was like, I don't really feel like I should be in this class.” Brent went on to explain that, even though he did well in most of his classes, he felt different from his classmates. He described feeling resentful when other students deferred to him because of his age or experience. Though they were likely recognizing him in a positive way, Brent said that it made him feel even more disconnected from them. For him, it felt like they were emphasizing that he didn’t fit in.

For Adam, this same feeling of being older and different was reinforced when some students asked him why he took so long to begin college. “Because when I started, I was 26
turning 27, so I was already eight, nine years older than everyone else in the class. You never really feel like you fit in in college.” He described feeling like he was “an island” in the midst of a bustling campus. During his very first class, it was pointed out that he was older than the professor, and that added to Adam’s sense of being different. His feelings of isolation were heightened by his decision not to engage with the student veteran group on campus. Rather than look for support and camaraderie from other students experiencing the same challenges, Adam decided to keep to himself.

Another participant, Chad, described feeling as though a barrier or wall existed between him and his classmates. He believed that the wall was created as soon as he told anyone that he had served in the military:

It's not like I go out of my way to tell people that I served, nor do I go out of my way to hide the fact that I served. It's just that when people know, there's that kind of unconscious barrier that they feel. I shouldn't put the blame on them. But there's like an unconscious barrier that kind of just comes up, where they're ... It's like looking at you through a window, on display.

While Chad was uncomfortable interacting with his fellow students, Gavin had a much more intense experience that almost forced him to leave college:

I would feel like really uncomfortable to even be around them. Like I don't know what to say, I don't know how to act around them, I just can't be normal. I can't walk into a room or talk on the phone. I can't just do it and it just be a normal thing. Like i have to think about every action, every thought, every ... Am I showing enough affection, am I ... I don't know. It just no longer was natural anymore.
The difference in age between student veterans and their classmates emerged as a common obstacle, and whether real or perceived, it was seen as a barrier to developing relationships. From the moment some veterans arrive on campus, the age difference becomes evident. New student orientations are typically geared to recent high school graduates, and rules and regulations that make sense for them can seem rather absurd when applied to older, non-traditional students.

Beyond these obvious challenges that older, non-traditional students encounter, veterans may find it particularly difficult to relate to younger students. Most tend to mature more quickly while serving in the military, especially those who have been deployed to theaters of combat, and they may have little patience for the challenges and struggles of their younger classmates.

Dawn was in her late thirties when she began college and, at the time, was already the mother of three children. During her first class as a freshman, she realized that some of her classmates were the same age as her oldest child:

“When I first started, there's 18- and 19-year-olds, and they were like my oldest daughter's age. Y'all are young. Let me just separate, because I'm older. It was just hard to interact with classmates because of the age gap.”

Like many veterans, Dawn choose not to engage with her classmates, and that added to her sense of isolation. She had difficulty finding common ground with younger students, and sometimes felt the urge to relate to them as a parent. At times, Dawn said that she wanted to put on her “mother hat” and correct some immature behavior much as she would with her own children. Some of the other participants also described their classmates as childish or immature. Adam opined that “they're just young and whiny and I don't have time for that.” Unfortunately, he did
not see any need or benefit in reaching out to them, and possibly getting to know them better. When asked if he felt any desire to interact with younger students, he made it clear that he did not.

Dawn and Adam were certainly not alone in their initial observation of other non-military students, but some of the participants found that, over time, their perception changed. One interviewee, Frank, said that while he previously got nervous in class and kept to himself, he learned to feel more excited about interacting with other students:

Opening up I think or socializing takes a couple weeks. I think just like everybody getting to know the people that you sit around. My big thing was that I hear vets not being able to kind of connect with college students and how it's just not, some people don't like it. It's just two different sides. The way I tried to look at it was unbiased. I think no matter who you are, you're a student here. You want a degree, and everything prior to you getting here was like their own story, so I try not to be too harsh on how I view them. I think having the openness has helped me enjoy the experience a little bit more.

Throughout the course of the interviews, it became clear that social interaction was one of the bigger challenges for service members transitioning to college life. While there were some differences in how this challenge was expressed or experienced, it nonetheless appeared to be a common obstacle.

Each of the participants spoke of their close interpersonal relationships in the military, and how difficult it was to find anything like that in civilian life. While some hoped to forge those kinds of friendships with their classmates, most did not find a way to accomplish it. Not having that type of support structure made the transition to college even more difficult.
Mental health

Throughout the history of the U.S. Military, service members have had to deal with difficult situations. As evidenced by the number of veterans who have been diagnosed with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), these experiences can cause problems long after military service has ended. Though many veterans successfully manage past traumatic events, some have difficulty coping, especially after transitioning back to civilian life. These challenges can manifest in social dysfunction, substance abuse, employment difficulties, physical health difficulties, legal problems, and more (Brennan, 2017).

Many of these problems can be addressed with help from mental health professionals, but studies have shown that a significant number of veterans never seek out assistance (Rudd, Goulding, Bryan, 2011). Service members may feel that asking for help is a sign of weakness. After years of training that emphasizes personal responsibility and problem solving, it can be hard to ask for help, or to admit that one is unable to manage something on their own. This may be attributed, at least in part, to the continuing stigma attached to mental illness and treatment.

Several interviewees identified key moments when they experienced mental health issues during their transition from the military to college. Dawn described her anxiety immediately following her discharge from the military:

The relationship I have with my kids, we were inseparable before I left. Then, when I came home, it was like, ‘you got to give Mommy a couple of minutes’. I didn't want to take them to school. I didn't want to take them out to eat because it was too many people for me after coming home. They were still young, and they really didn't understand, so it
was hard to try to talk to them about what's wrong with mommy and mommy doesn't know. It took months for us to get back to I'll take them to a playground.

Although Dawn spoke about her anxiety while interacting with her family, it also played a role in her academic performance. Just as it was difficult for her to deal with her children after coming home, it was just as significant a challenge to interact with her fellow students and teachers on campus.

The first few days was absolutely horrific. My body went through all types ... Oh my god, why is this person so close to me? I was Indulging in too many anxiety pills just to sit through the first 20 minutes of class. I was like, okay, you have to try to relax. Try to open up. Try to be friendly. Stop sitting in the back of the class. Stop telling people, "I don't want to talk to you, because I don't like you."

Another participant, Brent, described a similar experience:

The first two weeks I was actually afraid to drive my own car ... We had an incident where a suicide bomber blew up a bridge, and it kind of made me a little cautious driving on the roads because we encountered a lot of different IEDs. I wasn't comfortable driving anywhere for a couple weeks since I was home.

Many of the participants expressed a belief that faculty and other students were unable to comprehend military service and the challenges of transitioning back to civilian life. Some felt that others were afraid of them because of their experience in the Armed Forces. One participant, Hoyt, said that his sense of fear and anxiety followed him wherever he went. Because of this, he was reluctant to identify himself as a veteran, and when he did, he believed that it changed how other students related to him:
Here everyone thinks that we're broken. Everyone thinks that if you say one wrong thing to us, that we're going to flip out and try to kill them. They think that we're all loose in the head. That's difficult to deal with, because people don't know how to talk to you, and it's very hard having a normal conversation with that. Very hard.

Most participants shared similar concerns about how other students perceived them, and some even believed that faculty members treated them differently because of their veteran status. Several, like Hoyt, believed that professors and instructors who have not served in uniform could not possibly understand the challenges faced by those who did. Other participants felt that they were being treated more harshly by faculty members who neither understood nor supported their decision to serve. Whether or not this is accurate, it is nonetheless a perception shared by several of the participants in this study, and as such, it represents yet another challenge that student veterans must struggle to overcome.

Mental health problems observed in the veteran population are an ongoing concern, and one that hasn’t yet been adequately addressed. Shortages of professionals trained to deal with these issues makes it difficult to provide care to all who need it (Rudd, Goulding, Bryan, 2011). Recent service members returning from extended and repeated tours of duty in Afghanistan and Iraq sometimes exhibit PTSD, depression, anxiety, and fear. While these disorders may not be identified during active duty service, the information gathered here suggests that they may be revealed during stressful situations. Since transitioning to college life can be quite stressful, it was not unexpected to find these problems among the participants in this study.
Conclusion

The information provided by the students interviewed for this study suggests that most faced challenges with interpersonal relationships and mental health issues. The experiences described by the participants reveal significant anxiety and fear, especially when engaged in stressful or unfamiliar situations, and these emotional responses affected their ability to develop positive relationships with teachers and peers. Despite this, most of those interviewed seemed unwilling or unable to ask for assistance, and this had a negative impact on their first semester experience.

Though excessive fear and anxiety might be more routinely expected among those who have served in combat, most of the participants experienced them, at least to some degree, during the transition to college life. Each described different events in which they felt fearful or anxious, and they believed that discomfort was connected to experiences they had in the military.

The extent to which a participant engaged in social interaction appeared to be a factor in overcoming these emotions. The more that a student veteran withdrew from others, the more likely he or she seemed to struggle with anxiety and fear. Those who forced themselves to interact with others seemed to become more comfortable in doing so.

In the military, troops are placed in situations where they are required to work closely with others. Even when not serving in combat, one must learn to function well with other members of the unit. This can be challenging, especially with certain people, but the environment in which one lives and works demands it. When transitioning to college life, however, student veterans are no longer required to work that closely with others. In some cases, they may go out of their way to avoid other people, particularly when doing so triggers some
difficult emotions or memories. How schools and professionals recognize and respond to this reality will determine how successfully they engage this student population. The next section of this chapter will explore how colleges and universities have chosen to address these needs.

**Environmental Support**

Since President Franklin Delano Roosevelt signed the first G.I. Bill into law in 1944, hundreds of thousands of troops and veterans have used their military benefits to pursue post-secondary education (Cate, 2014). In more recent years, there has been a surge in college attendance by service members returning from combat deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan, and this has presented a new set of challenges for the schools and universities in which they choose to matriculate. Programs created to serve veterans in the past may no longer be sufficient to meet the needs of a new generation of battle-hardened troops.

The manner in which institutions assist and engage these students directly influences their ability to succeed. Military veterans come with a unique set of challenges, and many have additional obstacles to overcome. As evidenced by their lack of success in some for-profit schools, this population requires a more definitive and comprehensive commitment from the schools they attend (Hernandez, 2018). Left on their own, veterans are more likely than other students to fall behind in their coursework and withdraw. Therefore, it is incumbent upon faculty and staff to recognize these challenges, and to make concerted efforts to mitigate them.

As discussed in the previous section, one of the reasons that veterans have a difficult time adjusting to college life is their inability or unwillingness to integrate socially on campus. Based on feedback from the participants in this study, support from peers had a significant effect on
their success and sense of well-being. Whether encouraged by the institution, or sought out by the students themselves, interaction with peers plays a crucial role in a student’s ability to persist.

The third superordinate theme in this study involves environmental support, or the resources that exist to help service members transition to the college environment. The two subordinate themes are: 1) Personnel and services - the staff and services provided by the institution, and 2) Support from peers - the support that participants received from other military-affiliated students.

**Personnel and Services**

There are many and varied factors that contribute to a student veteran’s success in post-secondary education, but among the most important appear to be the programs and services offered by the institution they attend. Many colleges still provide very limited support to military-affiliated students, such as a part-time coordinator whose primary job is somewhere else. Often, these staff members work in the admissions, registrar, or bursar’s offices, and their assistance is limited to recruitment or financial aid issues. Other schools often slightly more, including a full-time student affairs position that overseas military and veteran services.

Currently, there are no standards or guidelines to inform schools on best practices in this field. Each institution is left to figure it out on their own, and while some provide a substantial level of assistance, others offer very little.

The participants in this study attend a school that has made a commitment to providing comprehensive services, including an office and staff that serves military students exclusively, a dedicated counselor, a physical space in which to gather and socialize, a separate computer lab, and other amenities. This type of commitment has propelled the institution into the top rankings
of military-friendly schools by U.S. News & World Report, Military Times, and other agencies and publications. Other schools routinely contact the institution for advice, guidance, and assistance in serving their military student populations.

Because of this, feedback from the participants was generally positive regarding the institution’s level of commitment to serving military students. This section will review how the students interviewed perceive the programs and services offered by the institution, and specific examples of the ones they believe that, in their experience, have been most effective.

One of the most frequently mentioned by participants was the practice of offering classes in which enrollment is limited to military-affiliated students only. Several stated that having classes exclusively for service members helped them transition more easily to college life, especially during the critical first semester of freshman year. Gavin spoke of his veteran-only course in this manner:

We were in the classroom, and they were all veterans, it was the most comfortable class I was in. Everybody, we talk differently and ... As soon as I came in, I just felt comfortable.

Another participant, Chad, said that this type of class helped him “open up” and eased his transition into college, especially since some of the other students were upperclassmen. Chad felt that attending classes with more experienced students gave him more confidence in his own potential, particularly as he observed other veterans successfully pursuing their undergraduate programs. Like Gavin, he felt more comfortable learning and interacting in a classroom where all of the other students had experience in the military.
While the practice of restricting certain classes to veterans has received a mixed response from administrators and faculty, these types of courses were strongly supported by the participants in this study. Those interviewed stated that they felt more relaxed in veteran-only classes, and believed that these courses demonstrated the institution’s level of commitment to military students. While it is not the only benefit of attending this school, it is by far one of the most popular.

Another positive thing that was mentioned frequently was having faculty members, from tenured professors to part-time adjunct instructors, who are both understanding and knowledgeable about what it means to serve in the military. It is especially helpful if there are any faculty members who have direct personal experience in the Armed Forces.

One participant, Brent, spoke about how this affected his first-semester experience as a freshman:

The faculty members were fantastic. I never had an issue with the class or not being able to attend if I had an appointment somewhere with the VA. Never had an issue of me being late to class or missing something.

While this level of accommodation may not always be feasible, the support and understanding displayed by the faculty member made Brent’s experience so much better and allowed him to balance his schoolwork with his health care and other demands of daily life.

Similarly, Dawn was diagnosed with a severe form of PTSD which caused her to lose focus in class and miss some of the information that was presented. Because she trusted her professors and developed a positive relationship with them, she felt more comfortable sharing her situation with them:
I try to let the faculty know from the start I have this problem, and I can't always ... I'm there in the class, but I might not be there paying attention. They work with me very well, so I try to work with them.

Knowing that she suffered from PTSD, and how it impacted her educational experience, Dawn’s professors and instructors were able to modify coursework and assignments in a manner that helped her stay motivated and succeed.

Another participant, Gavin, mentioned a faculty member who provided the additional support he needed to succeed:

I had a bad week where I had some serious, serious depression, I just couldn't be around anybody. I talked to one of my professors after class, and I just said, "Hey, I apologize for how I was acting earlier. She actually gave me time, and she actually pointed me in the right direction to get help.

This type of experience can have a profound and lasting impact on a student veteran, and it demonstrates that the institution’s commitment to their success is genuine. Several of the participants also wanted to make it clear that they were not seeking special treatment because of physical or mental health challenges. They simply wanted to be successful in their academic pursuits, and expressed gratitude for the accommodations that the institution and its faculty so graciously provided.

In addition to positive experiences with faculty and staff, participants also highlighted the importance of having a separate physical space where student veterans can gather and interact. Their school is one of the few that provides a comfortable lounge for military-affiliated students, and this space has been quite popular since it opened in 2009. Throughout day and evening
hours, students gather there to relax, talk with one another, complete assignments, play games, and various other activities. One participant, Brent, said that “It made school a lot easier. I was able to go in there and hang out with people my own age and see people who had similar life experience as me.” Frank also mentioned how much he appreciated have a dedicated space for students like him:

The lounge I think is awesome. It's at least a place where you can interact, because Taylor was my only friend when I came here, but through this whole year really just meeting a lot of good people and more friends and giving me more things to do outside of school rather than sitting in my house. I really like it.

Based on feedback from the participants in this study, it appears that supportive programs and faculty are critical to the success of military-affiliated students. Transitioning from combat to campus life can be daunting, but institution-wide support can make the difference between success and failure. For many schools, that level of support has not yet been attained, but the students involved in this study demonstrate how truly effective it can be.

**Support from peers**

Christine Rufener; Ph.D., says that “In general, people tend to seek out others with the same identities to find solidarity and understanding” and this appears to be true with the student veterans in this study (Rufener, 2017, p. 424). Almost all of the participants mentioned that peer support from other service members was key to their success, including having a student veteran organization on campus. Adam said that interacting with fellow service members helped him to connect with other students: “It really was getting involved in the Student Veteran's Organization. It helped me bridge that gap between veteran and student.” Brent and Hoyt said
that it helped them better connect with the campus community. Brent said “I would say what made the transition easier was the student veteran’s organization here.” Hoyt described it as: “We tend to gravitate towards each other. Tend to stick around each other a lot more. And the best part about Stockton was the SVO.”

Another participant, Frank, stated that the use of technology helped him to stay connected with fellow service members by providing a secure and convenient format in which to discuss issues they were facing:

We have this group, I think six or seven guys that I serve with, we have a group chat that we just use every day. You'll just send a text or something funny, and it'll end up going on for hours, and then you might go a day without saying something, but then it kind of kicks back up.

Being able to stay connected with other student veterans on campus was very important to Frank, and it helped him manage the anxiety that affected him on a daily basis. Frank said that he also used online video gaming as another tool to stay connected and socialize with fellow service members, even though some of them might be far away:

Another thing, while I was in [the service], everybody had an Xbox so everybody would be playing, and when I got out I kind of missed that, so I was like, All right, that's a reason to get an Xbox now and reconnect with the guys. I think being able to have someone or a group of people that you can speak your mind and not feel kind of conscious about what you're saying, I think that helps alleviate stressors.
Like the other participants in this study, Frank found support from peers to be a critical and necessary component of his transition to college. For him, it was easier and more effective to access this level of support through gaming and other online social platforms.

Having access to others who have shared the same experiences allowed student veterans to be more trusting and open with their peers. Most described being able to share their thoughts and feelings without fear of being judged, and that allowed them to develop closer relationships with others. However, some of the participants revealed that they did not feel that way toward non-military students. It was clear that relating to them would take longer and require greater effort, and some were not certain it would ever happen.

While most of the participants drew strength and encouragement from their peers, one veteran felt differently. Dawn stated that, instead of looking forward to spending time together, she often went to great lengths to avoid other veterans on campus. During her interview, Dawn explained that her interactions with other veterans often felt like a competition; that she was being judged as inadequate compared to others. Although she was the only participant who described this type of negative experience, it should be noted that peer support may not work for everyone. Nonetheless, the negative experience of only one participant does not diminish peer support as an effective component of a successful transition program.

**Conclusion**

As each new academic year begins, first-time students arrive on campuses across the country to begin their academic journey. Orientation programs are offered, social programs are set, and faculty and staff collaborate to ensure each student’s success. However, despite every effort, first-year students often flounder, and some struggle more severely than others. Student
veterans often find themselves in this latter group, particularly because some arrive on campus with a host of issues related to their military service. Depending upon how severe and pervasive, these issues may further complicate a student veteran’s chances for success.

In some cases, these difficulties might not be the only challenges faced by veterans transitioning from military service to post-secondary education. Colleges and universities have been slow in adapting to the needs of this unique population, and veterans may be forced to navigate rather archaic systems that were designed for less mature students.

Most of the participants interviewed during this study expressed their appreciation for efforts made by the institution to welcome and assist them. Nonetheless, as several pointed out, some progress is still needed. Policies and procedures established for recent high school graduates may be cumbersome and unnecessary for those who are older and have served in combat. Most also felt that the school was not sufficiently allowing them to be part of the process.

**Conclusion**

This study draws on information provided by eight student veterans who were enrolled in the first semester of their freshman year in college. The data collected through personal interviews with each of the participants revealed several common patterns, and these were used to identify three superordinate themes and seven sub-themes prevalent in their shared experiences. The narratives outlined in this chapter inform and advance our understanding of how student veterans experience the transition from the military to college life.

In the first superordinate theme, developing identity, the participants revealed that the process for reclaiming one’s personal identity after serving in the military is a difficult and
complicated process. It requires each veteran to come to grips with their own personal experience, and to try to remember the person they were before joining the military. From the information collected, it is clear that the participants experienced several profound changes from the time they enlisted in the Armed Forces to their first semester at college. Their service in the military required each of them to learn to work together closely as members of a team. The relationships forged by those who fought in combat were shown to be particularly strong. Learning to trust other troops with your life, and doing the same for them, makes relationships with those other people unlike any other.

Because of that, transitioning back to civilian life can create a powerful sense of loss. Service members often find themselves unable to develop close relationships outside of the military, and may even find that they distrust others and feel lonely and isolated. These issues make the transition to college life even more challenging than it would typically be. Overcoming that sense of loss, and learning to trust others again, can be a daunting challenge.

The second superordinate theme revealed challenges the participants faced during this time of transition. As already mentioned, learning to connect with others can be a long and arduous process, especially when that process is complicated further by mental health issues. Many of the participants had trouble connecting with their fellow students, particularly those who did not serve in uniform, and this contributed to the challenge of relating to them. Without supportive relationships, the process of transitioning to higher education can be infinitely more difficult.

Fear and anxiety emerged as the most prevalent mental health issues affecting the participants, and these impacted almost every aspect of their college experience. Each of the
interviewees described events that triggered fear and anxiety, and remarkably, each mentioned many of the same events and situations.

The third, and final, superordinate theme was the environmental support within their personal lives as well as the institution. Each of the participants spoke of factors that contributed to their sense of success and well-being. In contrast to the challenges and obstacles they had to overcome, they mentioned a number of things that contributed to a more positive environment. Among these were supportive and understanding faculty and staff, veteran-specific classes, and a dedicated space reserved exclusively for military-affiliated students. Most of the participants also pointed out the importance of having support from their fellow veterans on campus, particularly those who were already upperclassmen. While the challenges they face are many, the participants felt that having these types of supports made it more likely that they would persist and succeed in their degree programs.

This study has attempted to delve more deeply into the personal lives and experiences of eight student veterans transitioning from military service to the first semester of freshman year in college. From interviews with the participants, and the information that has been collected, it is clear that the already challenging task of transition to higher education is made even more difficult by the additional obstacles and difficulties faced by military-affiliated students. With this information, hopefully more can be done to support and retain this unique student population. The final chapter of this study will discuss how these findings can be applied to practical situations and provide recommendations for future research.
Chapter Five: Discussion and Implications for Practice

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to understand how student veterans experience the transition from military service to a public university during the first semester of their freshman year. The research obtained from this study is intended to help senior-level administrators, directors, and managers serve and support this unique student population and to increase awareness of the many challenges these students encounter as they transition from the Armed Forces to higher education.

Schlossberg’s Theory of Transition (1984) was used as the theoretical framework to examine the transitional experience of the student veterans interviewed in this study. In this theory, Schlossberg created a structure to help researchers understand how adults experience transition, and identified a series of phases that are involved in the process (Evans, et al., 2009). These phases can be described in three specific steps: “Moving In”, “Moving Through”, and “Moving Out” (Chickering & Schlossberg, 1994).

During the first step, “Moving In”, one is forced to confront the realities of change and how one fits into a new environment. The second step, “Moving Through”, occurs as one becomes more comfortable and is able to function effectively in the new role. In the final step, “Moving Out”, the transition process reaches completion as one assimilates to the new environment and reaches a level of comfort where success is more likely (Tuttle, 1995).

By using Schlossberg’s Transition Model as the theoretical framework, this study was able to identify unique factors associated with the process through which student veterans experience the transition from combat to campus. These factors include:
• To what degree has the individual’s life been altered, including changes in roles, relationships, routines, assumptions?

• What resources are currently being utilized, and which of these are helping to make the transition more successful (Schlossberg, 2011)?

One of the principle components of Schlossberg’s Transition Theory is the concept of personal development, and this is critical to understanding how transition affects college students (Evans et al., 1998). Recognizing how this relates to student veterans allows practitioners to develop better tools and techniques with which to support this unique population. With this in mind, this study was able to identify key factors that contribute to the overall success of student veterans (Powers, 2010).

To explore how student veterans experience transition from one environment to another, this study employed a qualitative approach rooted in the constructivist paradigm. As previously mentioned, qualitative research includes a wide variety of methods and approaches used for the study of natural social life. The data may be collected from interview transcripts, field notes, and other methods that document human experiences and feelings (Saldana, 2011).

Since this study was phenomenological in nature, an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was utilized as the methodological approach. The goal was to collect qualitative data about the lived experiences of student veterans during their transition from military service to higher education. Through the use of an IPA methodology, this study was able to examine how participants made sense of their environment, and in the process, provided a better understanding of how they interpret it (Shinebourne, 2011).
Since an IPA is considered predominantly interpretative, it is drawn from a subject’s own cultural and environmental experience. The methodological approach used in this study led to the collection of data that revealed several prominent themes, including three superordinate and seven sub-themes prevalent in the shared experiences of the participants.

The three superordinate or principal themes that were identified were Developing Identity, Challenges, and Environmental Support. These themes emerged from seven sub-themes that were mentioned most frequently by the participants.

The sub-themes related to Developing Identity were Coping with Experiences, Understanding Self-Image, and Personal Goals/Direction. The second superordinate theme of Challenges had two sub-themes, Connecting with People, and Mental Health. Finally, the two sub-themes of Environmental Support were Personnel and Services, and Support from Peers.

This final chapter is based on the findings that became evident during the analysis of data that was gathered through in-person interviews with each participant. For the most part, these findings helped to support other research published in current literature. The implications of these findings will be used to recommend specific areas of future research as well as propose improvements to current practices.

**First Finding**

The first finding that emerged from this study was the loss of identity that service members experience during their transition from the Armed Forces to civilian life. As mentioned in previous chapters, the military is a highly regimented and disciplined institution that provides service members with a sense of order, community, and purpose. While these qualities may serve them well in the military, they can also act a detriment to their transition back to life as a civilian.
For many service members, the military is not just a job, but an integral part of who they are. Each training, deployment, and combat experience builds upon their identity as a soldier, sailor, airman, or Marine (Francis & Kraus, 2012).

In a research article, Smith & True (2014) found that the process of indoctrination into the military “systematically strips each soldier of his or her individuality and agency.” By the time service members are discharged, they are so entrenched in military culture that they often forget how to function as civilians. This is because the military, from the first day of basic training, works to disassemble a recruit’s identity and sense of self. From the moment one arrives on base, he or she is taught about the importance of teamwork. An emphasis on discipline and order, and being part of something greater than oneself, requires recruits to abandon their own needs and desires. In many ways, one can feel that the military owns everything about them. Their body, their mind, even their very identity are now part of something else. When one puts on the uniform, he or she is no longer an individual (Smith & True, 2014, p. 158).

Keeling (2018) published a study about the role of identity in the transition process from military service to civilian life. The study described how membership in the military requires “subordination of the self to the team” and contrasts that to the unbridled narcissism and individualism of civilian society. While individual goals and successes are greatly valued among civilians, these are of little use in the military environment. By contrast, sacrificing one’s own goals for the good of the team is paramount (Keeling, 2018).

The first finding supports current literature by corroborating the loss of identity that occurs during transition from the military to civilian life. Throughout the course of this study, it became clear that many of the participants had similar experiences when they left active duty.
After being discharged, they described a loss of identity that made it difficult to understand their place in the civilian world, especially in their new role as students.

The findings of this study support the difficulty of reclaiming identity as a civilian upon leaving the service. Some veterans spoke of their relationships in the military as a kind of “brotherhood” and described how difficult it was to be separated from the brothers on whom they had come to depend. Trying to function in a new role was bewildering, especially as they struggled to become independent again.

Others spoke of the manner in which their sense of identity evolved after arriving on campus. One said that, “When I came to school, I was like, ‘I am a veteran.’ Now it's, ‘I'm a student.’” His sense of identity was tied directly to his role, and being a student helped him create a new identity apart from the military.

Most of the participants in this study described similar experiences related to their sense of identity. As described in much of the current literature, their sense of self was tied to that of the military as a whole. After years of service, it was difficult to learn how to function as individuals again, and to develop a more personal understanding of themselves.

This finding suggests that the loss of one’s identity in the transition from the military to civilian life can cause significant concern for veterans and should be considered by colleges and administrators when developing support programs (Smith & True, 2014, p. 158). Upon entering college, many veterans are still trying to understand who they are and how they fit in the world around them. The next finding will build upon this as it explores how veterans attempt to connect with others after returning to civilian life.
Second Finding

Another significant finding of this study was the challenges that participants faced as they attempted to connect socially with other students, especially those who had never served in the military. A study conducted in 2017 found that veterans often find it hard to adjust to college life primarily due to the difficulty of interacting with traditional students (Borsari et al., 2017, p. 167).

This difficulty with social interaction may become apparent in different or unusual behaviors. Many veterans tend to sit in the back of the classroom by themselves, some may have trouble participating in group discussions, and others may exhibit a continually heightened state of alert. This kind of behavior may lead some to believe that the student is being antisocial; however, in many cases, military students are simply trying to adapt to a new environment. In their minds, keeping to themselves may be the best way to accomplish that.

This is unfortunate because a supportive social environment is critical to the transition process. The support of peers and others can help one overcome the emotional and psychological challenges of adapting to a new environment; and conversely, the lack of support can make the process more difficult (Kessler and McLeod, 1985).

This second finding also validates the difficulties faced by troops and veterans during their transition to college life. This study documented numerous occasions where participants struggled to connect socially with other students, and several described situations where they felt isolated from the campus community, especially in the classroom.

Recognizing this, some institutions provide opportunities for new students to connect with others even before they arrive on campus. Most provide at least basic orientation programs,
while others go further and offer enhanced opportunities like First-Year Experience, Welcome Week, and other similar initiatives. These initial efforts can be especially impactful since they lay the groundwork for social engagement that will last throughout a student’s college career (DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2008).

Convincing students to participate in these programs and activities, however, is not an easy task. Doing so requires collaboration among faculty, staff, and administrators to create an environment where students will want to be involved. This is especially appropriate because many students believe that it is ultimately faculty and staff, and the manner in which they interact with students, that create opportunities for engagement on campus (Errey & Wood, 2011).

Despite an institution’s best efforts to encourage this engagement, there remain barriers to doing so. In particular, some civilians do not fully understand the concept of military service. Some may ask questions that are inappropriate or trigger difficult emotions on the part of students who have served in combat, and others may even blame the military for the actions and whims of politicians (Borsari et al., 2017, p. 167). Attitudes like these can make veterans feel even more uncomfortable and thus contribute to their sense of isolation.

During interviews for this study, participants spoke of often being uncomfortable with other students. Some felt awkward and out of place in their classes, not only because of their status as veterans, but due to being older than the other students. These challenges contributed to their inability to connect with others in a meaningful way.

One participant went so far as to describe himself as an “island” in the midst of a busy campus. This sense of aloneness and isolation was difficult for him to comprehend. To counter
similar feelings, another participant made a concerted effort to connect with other veterans. Utilizing social media and text messaging, he kept in touch with “six or seven other guys” and described how that helped him through periods when he felt isolated.

Many of the participants mentioned that connecting with civilians often required more effort than they were willing to expend. In the military, relating with others comes much more naturally; however, on a college campus, social interactions require a greater commitment. The responsibility, though, must not rest with military students alone. Non-military members of the community should be encouraged to reach out, in whatever ways possible, to engage and develop relationships with the troops and veterans around them. The third and final finding of this study will address the measures that can be taken by administrators, faculty, and staff to facilitate this process, as well as to support the overall transition experience.

Third Finding

While there are many and varied factors that contribute to a student veteran’s success, one identified as being of primary importance was support from faculty and staff. Many participants mentioned how much it meant to them to have faculty and staff who understood the challenges of military service, and most stated that it made their transition to school easier. This third finding demonstrates how vital it is for colleges and universities to make a robust commitment to this student population, especially by providing a well-trained and supportive professional staff.

Though the participants in this study attend a school that has a comprehensive program for military-affiliated students, this is not the norm for many other institutions of higher learning.
While it can be difficult for administrators to see the value and return on investment in such an initiative, it is nonetheless critical to the successful transition of these students.

During their college career, students interact frequently with faculty and staff; however, many schools do not provide the necessary training to enable them to help student veterans effectively. Because of this, opportunities to provide assistance and referrals may be missed (Albright & Bryan, n.d., p. 3).

Albright and Bryan (2018) examined over fourteen thousand faculty and staff members on their perception of competence in assisting student veterans. Their findings suggest that many feel ill-prepared to support this student population:

- “More than 70% said they do not feel adequately prepared to recognize when a student veteran is exhibiting signs of psychological distress including depression, anxiety, and thoughts of suicide.
- “More than 75% said they do not feel adequately prepared to approach such student veterans to discuss their concern.
- “44% said that they are not knowledgeable about the common challenges facing the student veteran population” (Albright & Bryan, n.d., p. 4).

While the survey suggests that faculty and staff members may not be prepared to assist student veterans at their institutions, most believe that it is their responsibility:

- “More than 95% said that it is part of the role of faculty, staff and administrators to help create a supportive environment for the student veteran population and to connect student veterans experiencing psychological distress with mental health services.
• “Almost 94% said that all faculty, staff and administrators in my academic institution should take a course on military competency and veteran’s mental health” (Albright & Bryan, n.d., p. 4).

The findings of this study indicate that faculty and staff members are eager and willing to support student veterans, but many believe that they lack the necessary training and skills to do so. It is incumbent, therefore, upon administrators to provide the necessary training and support that will allow their faculty and staff to confidently reach out and engage these students (Albright & Bryan, n.d., p. 4).

The American Council on Education states that knowledge is critical to effective communication and establishing mutual respect. Faculty and staff should be sufficiently familiar with resources on campus to be able to recommend them confidently to students. These resources may include academic help and accommodation, assistance with veteran educational benefits, counseling and mental health services, and any other programs or offices that can support them (American Council on Education, n.d, p. 9).

The third finding of this study does not support current literature that suggests a dearth of training and competence on the part of faculty and staff in relating to student veterans. On the contrary, the participants in this study spoke highly of the level of assistance they received at their institution, especially during their first semester. Medical appointments and other commitments caused some to be frequently late for class, but professors provided accommodations to ensure that they remained current with classwork and assignments.

As mentioned in a previous chapter, some veterans suffer from PTSD which impacts their ability to focus in the classroom. They may be reluctant to share information about their
disability, but problems may necessitate it. If professors and instructors are knowledgeable about the effects of PTSD and other mental health challenges, they will be better equipped to deal with situations that may arise with veterans in the classroom, particularly those who have recently transitioned from combat.

The findings revealed that some professors are already providing extraordinary support and encouragement to military students. Several participants mentioned that they felt valued and respected in the classroom and, as a result, were more comfortable participating and expressing their opinions in class. Student veterans are often reluctant to ask for assistance or special treatment, but having a caring faculty and staff can help resolve issues before they become more serious (McBain, Kim, Cook, & Snead, 2012).

Even though this finding did not support current literature, it demonstrated the impact that a knowledgeable and compassionate faculty and staff can have on student veteran success. With military-affiliated students becoming a larger and more visible presence on college campuses, it is more important than ever to find ways to support them and increase their chances for success.

The three findings identified here suggest that the transition experience for veterans is a complicated and challenging process. While each student’s experiences is unique, there are many and varied factors that impact his or her success. In the next section, recommendations will be made to further assist administrators in developing programs and resources for military students.

**Conclusion**

The purpose of this study was to explore how military-affiliated students navigate and experience transition from the military to higher education. Through an extensive review of
current literature and interviews with participants, a greater understanding was developed regarding the particular challenges faced by this student population. This study also provided a more personal look into the actual experiences of a small group of veterans as they moved from active duty service to the first semester of their college career.

These findings suggest that military students are more likely to succeed when colleges and universities recognize the needs of this unique population and provide the necessary staff and resources to support them. As demonstrated by the participants involved in this study, transition from the military to higher education is a process fraught with obstacles and challenges, many of which can derail even the most dedicated students. Some find themselves lost in an unfamiliar environment that is not the most conducive to non-traditional students. However, when institutions provide the necessary staff and resources, there is a much greater likelihood that these students will persist and graduate. It is intended that the information collected during this study will help college administrators recognize and address the needs of this student population and be better prepared to welcome them into the campus community.

**Recommendations for Practice**

One of the biggest challenges for college administrators is to identity and track unique populations like military-affiliated students. These students in particular are often reluctant to self-identify and may blend into the general campus community. It is difficult, if not impossible, to effectively engage and support these students without first knowing who they are.

To that end, the first recommendation of this study is to create a robust system that enables tracking of every military-affiliated student on campus. The data should include active-duty service members, Reservists, National Guardsmen, veterans, and dependents, and requires
collaboration with each of the offices, departments, and divisions on campus that interact with them. To be most effective, the system should be managed by a primary staff member who is responsible for the collection and reporting of all pertinent data.

While there are numerous entities on campus that may assist in this endeavor, such as the Office of Admissions, the Bursar, and the Registrar, the Office of Financial Aid is particularly helpful since most military students make use of federal educational benefits like the GI Bill. However, other than financial concerns, this office should not be the primary resource for this student population. The needs of military-affiliated students go far beyond financial matters; therefore, a more holistic approach should be adopted to help them succeed.

Using the example of the institution profiled in this study, the second recommendation is to provide an appropriate level of staff members, resources, and infrastructure to serve these students effectively. While this may vary based on the size of the military population, these should include, at a minimum, a full-time permanent staff member dedicated exclusively to military students, as well as sufficient staff, space, and resources necessary to help them succeed. A staff member who holds a separate, albeit related, position cannot possibly provide the level of support and assistance that these students require.

At the university attended by the participants in this study, there is a full-time Director of Military and Veteran Services, a staff that includes a program coordinator and counselor, dedicated office and meeting space, as well as a lounge, computer lab, and outdoor veterans’ park. There are also designated points-of-contact in every office on campus, and these faculty and staff members are trained to assist with the specific needs of this population. In addition, academic departments offer some classes exclusively for military-affiliated students, as well as
opportunities for study abroad. Military students also have separate registration and orientation events that are adapted specifically for them.

While this institution might serve a model for best practices in this field, it is unfortunately not the norm. Many other institutions of higher learning are still exploring potential options for serving the military community, and there are currently no standards that can assist in accomplishing this goal. In the absence of standards, or even guidelines, schools and administrators are left to address the issue on their own. While some schools have taken an admirably robust approach, most still offer the barest minimum of support.

There are currently several rankings of “military-friendly” schools published by sources like Military Times, and U.S. News & World Report; however, there are also several for-profit rankings that offer less reliable data. This creates significant confusion, not only for schools, but for military students seeking a supportive environment in which to learn.

As with other non-traditional students, particularly those who are older than recent high-school graduates, service members present unique challenges to the colleges and universities they attend. Among the most significant of these is the challenge of effectively integrating them into the campus community.

When students begin college immediately after high school, the campus often becomes their entire world. Their primary focus is to attend and pass their courses. Older students, however, often have many other things competing for their time and attention. Family concerns, career responsibilities, and a multitude of other obligations must be balanced with their studies. For that reason, it can be difficult to engage older students, particularly with a one-size-fits-all
approach. Efforts that are successful with younger students might be much less effective with military veterans.

Therefore, the third and final recommendation of this study is to define and develop more effective ways to engage this population. A study conducted in Australia revealed that students who are more engaged in their college experience are more likely to persist and succeed (Errey & Wood, 2011, p. 29). Thus, it is particularly important to provide programs and other opportunities that appeal directly to these students.

In the military, service members learn to work together as members of a team. Since collaboration with others is required for nearly every task or mission, it is rare to find anyone whose job doesn’t involve working in a group. Troops and veterans are accustomed to an environment in which they are continually and actively engaged with other people. When they transition to college, they often have difficulty adjusting to the level of independence typical in higher education.

Because of this, military-affiliated students may keep to themselves, and find excuses to avoid interaction with others. Rather than participate in extracurricular activities or events, they may focus solely on attending classes, especially if they do not reside on campus. They may overlook opportunities for learning that take place outside of the classroom, particularly when these are not specifically required for their degree path. They may also not seek out staff and resources that the school has provided to assist them. In many cases, a military student may be focused entirely on completing his or her degree, and consider everything else a distraction from that goal (McClure, 2011). While participation in extracurricular activities is usually not
mandatory for completing a degree program, studies have identified a distinct correlation between student engagement and academic success.

During service in the military, troops often view themselves like individual cogs on a gear. Each person has a specific role, and the success of the entire team depends on everyone doing his or her job well. Upon leaving the military, they may no longer feel that they have such an integral role. It may be difficult for them to view a campus community, or even an individual class, in the same way. One of the best ways to engage military students is to encourage that sense of purpose, and to provide opportunities that require them to work with others. Doing so should help improve retention and graduation rates, and provide a more supportive community for everyone on campus.

For many college administrators, these three recommendations may seem daunting, especially if institutions lack the necessary staff and resources to adopt all of them simultaneously. Therefore, the best place to start is the creation of a resource team consisting of a network of professionals throughout campus. These faculty members, staff, and other employees agree to serve as the primary points-of-contact in their locations providing assistance and guidance to military students. These team members become ambassadors of sorts and can direct students to appropriate resources on and outside of campus. Thus, every office, department, and location shares in creating a truly military-friendly campus.

As previously mentioned, schools and administrators are left with little guidance in supporting military-affiliated students; therefore, this study will be used to inform and create initial best practices for colleges and universities in the State of New Jersey. The New Jersey Coalition of Student Veteran Educators has been formed to develop standards for serving
military-affiliated students in higher education. It is intended that the data and recommendations outlined in this study will be used as the foundation for this endeavor.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

The first recommendation for future research is to evaluate how colleges and universities identify and track their military-affiliated students. Recent changes from the federal government regarding military education benefits require greater oversight and transparency from institutions of higher learning, and schools are being asked to provide better data on the success of their military student populations. However, at this time, graduation rates are the only metric that has been defined. Since there are many other variables that affect student retention and success, additional research is needed to learn what specifically contributes to these outcomes.

The second recommendation is to identify which programs, initiatives, and resources currently being offered by schools are most effective in driving a student’s intent to persist. With this knowledge, schools may be better equipped to provide the kind of supportive environment that enables more students to complete their degree programs. Since minimal research has been published so far, there are many options available for future studies that would advance the body of knowledge in this field.

With so many military-affiliated students seeking higher education, it is more important than ever to find ways to help them succeed. Graduation rates vary considerably from one institution to the next, and currently, no clear guidelines exist on the best ways to serve this unique population. Nevertheless, it is intended that this study will drive additional research and provide encouragement and support for all who teach and work with military-affiliated students.
Appendix A

Recruitment Email/Letter

Dear Stockton Student:

My name is Jason Babin, and I am a staff member here at Stockton University. I am also a doctoral student at Northeastern University in Boston, and am writing to invite you to participate in a study I am conducting with student veterans.

When I returned from Afghanistan, I enrolled as a freshman at a four-year university. My doctoral study focuses on the experiences of other military veterans as they transition to a college environment. This study is not an evaluation of Stockton’s efforts or programs; rather, it will try to answer the question: “How do student veterans at a four-year public university, who have recently transitioned from active duty military service, make sense of their transitional experience?”

The study consists of a short online questionnaire and a one-on-one personal interview that will take approximately 60-90 minutes. Information gathered from the questionnaire and interview will be kept confidential, and participants will be identified only by fictitious names. No one is required to participate in this study, and you can change your mind and withdraw at any time.

If you are interested in participating, please complete the online questionnaire, which can be found below. As a fellow veteran, I greatly appreciate your assistance.

Link to Questionnaire

Thank you,
Jason

Jason P. Babin, M.S., M.Ed.
Stockton University
Office: 609-626-3585
Email: Jason.Babin@stockton.edu
Appendix B
Permission to Conduct Research

Todd Regan
Executive Director
Office of Research and Sponsored Programs

February 9, 2014

Dear Mr. Regan,

I am a staff member at Stockton and a doctoral student at Northeastern University in Boston. As part of my dissertation process, I am completing a study involving student veterans in higher education. I am writing to request permission to conduct research here at Stockton University.

This study is not an evaluation of Stockton’s efforts or programs; rather, it will focus on the experience of military veterans as they transition from active duty to a college environment. My goal is to interview a small number of student veterans at Stockton as part of this study.

As military personnel return from active-duty deployments in Afghanistan, Iraq, and other countries, many are choosing to take advantage of their educational benefits by enrolling in post-secondary programs. The manner in which military-affiliated students experience this transition impacts not only the schools they attend, but their families and the larger community as well. The overall research question guiding my study is: “How do student veterans at a four-year public university, who have recently transitioned from active duty military service, make sense of their transitional experience?”

Data would be collected from eight to twelve first-year students who are military veterans. All participants will be volunteers, and their identity will remain confidential. If I receive your approval, I will apply to Northeastern University’s Internal Review Board for further approval to conduct research with human subjects. Please let me know if you have any questions, or need additional information.

Thank you,
Jason

Jason P. Babin, M.S., M.Ed.
Assistant Director, Office of Student Rights and Responsibilities
Stockton University
Office: 609-626-3585
Email: Jason.Babin@stockton.edu
Appendix C

Consent Form

Northeastern University, Boston, MA  
Department: College of Professional Studies (CPS)  
Name of Investigators: Joseph W. McNabb, PhD, (Principal Investigator)  
Jason P. Babin, MS, MEd, (Student Researcher)  
Title of Project: An Exploration of the Perceptions and Experiences of Veterans Transitioning to Higher Education.

Informed Consent to Participate in a Research Study
You have been invited to participate in a study that will explore the experience of veterans as they transition from the military environment to a higher education community. This form will help explain how the study will take place and your role in it. You may ask the researcher any questions that you have, and when you are ready to make a decision, you may tell the researcher if you wish to participate or not. We ask that you read this form carefully before making your decision. You are not under any obligation to do so, but if you decide to participate, you will be one of several other contributors to this research.

Why am I being asked to take part in this research study?
You are being asked to take part in this study because you are a military veteran who has been deployed in support of either Operation Enduring Freedom or Operation Iraqi Freedom, and are enrolled as a full-time freshman student at Stockton University.

Why is this research study being done?
The purpose of this phenomenological study is to understand how student veterans experience transition to Stockton University during the first semester of their freshman year. The knowledge generated by this study is expected to inform senior-level administrators on the best ways to serve and support student veterans and their transition to college.

What will I be asked to do?
If you decide to take part in this study, you will be asked to participate in a one-on-one interview with the researcher. This interview will be audio recorded.  
Your participation in this study is completely voluntary, and you may withdraw at any time.

Where will this take place and how much of my time will it take?
The interview will take place in a private meeting room at Stockton University, and it will last approximately 90 minutes. The interview time and date will be selected based on your availability.

Will there be any risk or discomfort to me?
There are no foreseeable risks or discomforts involved in being a participant in this study.

Will I benefit by being in this research?
There will be no direct benefit to you for taking part in the study. However, the information learned from this study may assist college faculty and administrators in better engaging student veterans and understanding the unique challenges they face.

**Who will see the information about me?**
Your part in the study will be completely confidential. Pseudonyms will be used for all study participants. Only the researcher will be aware of the participants' identities. No reports or publications will use information that can identify you in any way.

As an individual participant, your part in this study will be confidential. Other participants in this study will not hear the information you provide or have access to any notes or recordings. The data collected for this study will be kept by the researcher, including audiotapes, but will not be shared with others. All audiotapes will be destroyed following transcription of the interviews.

In rare instances, authorized people may request to see research information about you and other people in this study. This is done only to be sure that the research is done properly. The researcher would only permit people who are authorized by organizations such as Northeastern University to view the study data.

**If I do not want to take part in the study, what choices do I have?**
At no time will you be required to participate in this study. You may opt out at any time and have your information deleted from the study.

**What will happen if I suffer any harm from this research?**
There are no known risks involved in being a participant in this study.

**Can I stop my participation in this study?**
Participation in this study is completely voluntary, and your participation or non-participation will in no way affect other relationships (e.g., employer, school, etc.). You do not have to participate if you do not want to and you can refuse to answer any question(s). Even if you begin the study, you may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty or costs.

**Who can I contact if I have questions or problems?**
If you have any questions about this study, please feel free to contact Jason Babin, the person mainly responsible for the research:

Jason P. Babin, MS, MEd
Stockton University
101 Vera King Farris Drive
Galloway, NJ 08205
Phone: 609-626-3585
Email: jason.babin@stockton.edu

You may also contact Dr. Joseph McNabb, the Principal Investigator, at Northeastern University:
Who can I contact about my rights as a participant?
If you have any questions about your rights as a participant, you may contact:

Nan C. Regina,  
Director, Human Subject Research Protection  
Northeastern University  
960 Renaissance Park  
Boston, MA 02115  
Phone: 617-373-4588  
Email: nregina@neu.edu.  
You may call anonymously if you wish.

Will I be paid for my participation?
There is no compensation for participation in this study.

Will it cost me anything to participate?
There is no cost to participate in this study.

Is there anything else I need to know?
No.

I agree to take part in this research.
I have read, understood, and had the opportunity to ask questions regarding this consent form. I fully understand the nature and character of my involvement in this research program as a participant. I agree to participate in this study on a voluntary basis, and understand that I can depart from the research study at any time.

________________________________________________________________________
Signature of person giving consent                       Date

________________________________________________________________________
Printed name of person above

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

________________________________________________________________________
Printed name of person above
Appendix D

Online Questionnaire

Thank you for your interest in this research study about student veterans.

Before you are selected for the in-person interview, we need to know a little more about you. Please take a moment to complete this online questionnaire. There are no “wrong” answers, and none of the information you provide will be shared with anyone other than the researcher and committee member chair.

After answering these questions, you may be invited to an in-person interview which will be scheduled at a later date. Please know that your participation in this study is strictly voluntary and you may withdraw at any time.

1. Name (First, Last):
2. Email Address:
3. Phone Number:
4. Gender:
5. Age:
6. Branch of Service:
7. Highest Rank Achieved:
8. MOS:
9. Deployment (OEF/OIF):

Do you know other military veterans who served on active duty and are currently enrolled in their first year at Stockton? If you think they might be interested in knowing about this study, please add their names below. Thank you.

1. Name (First, Last):
2. Email Address:
Appendix E

Participant Interview Protocol

Interviewee: ______________________________________
Interviewer: ______________________________________
Date: __________________________  Time: ____________________
Location of Interview: ____________________________________

Introductory Protocol

I want to thank you in advance for your time and your willingness to participate in this interview. As I mentioned in my previous communication, I am a doctoral student at Northeastern University and this interview is part of a study that will be used in my doctoral thesis. You have been selected to participate in this study because of your experience as a service member and a college student. Through this study, I hope to gain more insight into your experience as you transition from military environment to a college community.

Because your responses are important and I want to make sure to capture everything you say, I would like to audio tape our conversation today. Do I have your permission to record this interview? [if yes, thank the participant and turn on the recording equipment]. I will also be taking written notes during the interview. I can assure you that all responses will remain confidential and only a pseudonym will be used when quoting from the transcripts. My instructor and I will be the only ones privy to the tapes which will be eventually destroyed after they are transcribed. To meet our human subjects requirements at the university, you must sign the form I have with me [provide the form*]. To briefly summarize what is in this document, it states that: (1) all information will be held confidential, (2) your participation is voluntary and you may stop at any time if you feel uncomfortable, and (3) we do not intend to inflict any harm. Do you have any questions about the interview process or this form?

We have planned this interview to last about 90 minutes. During this time, I have several questions that I would like to cover. If, at any time, you’re uncomfortable with a question or need me to re-phrase, please feel free to let me know.

Interview questions:

1. Why did you decide to join the armed forces?
2. Please describe your service in Iraq/Afghanistan?
3. How would you describe your life in the days and weeks after you returned home?
4. How did your military service and experiences affect your life?
5. What led to your decision to enroll in college?

6. How would you describe your first few days of classes?
   - Did you feel that you “fit in” with other students in your classes?

7. Please describe your overall current college experience.
   - Has it changed since you first arrived? If so, how?

8. How has the classroom environment been for you?
   - Do you feel comfortable in that environment? Is there anything that has challenged you?

9. What has been like to interact with students who have not served in the military?
   - Are there any particular experiences that you would like to share?

10. How would you describe the overall climate of the institution toward veterans?

11. How accessible do you feel the student services here are and do they meet your needs?

12. Was there anything that helped you transition from military to student status?

**Closing the Interview:** I am finished with my questions at this point. Is there anything that we did not discuss that you think would be important to add at this time?

*I thank you again for spending this time with me. Your participation in this study has been very helpful.*
References

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