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A Qualitative Study of Veteran Students' Perspectives of their Academic Experiences

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A Qualitative Study of Veteran Students’ Perspectives of their Academic Experiences

by

Beatrice L. Smith

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Curriculum and Instruction with an emphasis in Higher Education Administration Department of Leadership, Counseling, Adult, Career and Higher Education College of Education University of South Florida

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March 27, 2017

Keywords: higher education, Post 9/11 G.I. Bill, Tinto, student success

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DEDICATION

To Bruce and Brooke Lynn. Without your unconditional support, love, encouragement, patience, and sacrifice, I would never have completed this journey. You two rock my world! I look forward to our future journeys together.

To Mom. You encouraged me for so long that I could do this; that I should do this. I did not expect to lose you so soon after beginning this journey. I miss you every day.
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throughout my research was invaluable and your support of Veteran students is truly admirable and something I will strive to emulate moving forward.

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Finally, to my family, friends, and colleagues, past and present, who supported me throughout. You know who you are and you have my sincere gratitude. I’m very lucky to have each of you in my life. Why do I do what I do and what gives me purpose professionally? A former administrator I worked with said it best, “It’s the students…”
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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to describe and explain Veteran students’ perspectives on academic success as they enter or reenter the university setting. Recent research applied to Veteran students has focused on social integration and to a lesser extent on academic integration and student success. For this qualitative study grounded in social constructivism, the primary method of data collection was the recording, transcription, and analysis of oral interviews with 11 Veteran students. The findings were aligned to the theoretical framework which was adapted from Tinto’s Conditions for Student Success (2012). The results contribute to the current body of scholarly literature that highlights positive attributes that Veteran students possess including leadership skills, maturity, and acquired skills related to global and cultural awareness, and motivation. Other findings include the effectiveness of having specific programming efforts for Veteran students. As for research implications for practice, the results of this study suggest that Veteran students are not necessarily familiar with support services offered. They prefer face-to-face program delivery and may need assistance with meeting University requirements such as providing immunization records, establishing in-state residency, providing sufficient documentation for receiving support services, and options if benefits eligibility run out prior to graduation. Results also reaffirm that colleges and universities need to continue to develop and improve conditions that are known to promote student success for Veteran students.
CHAPTER ONE:

Introduction

“All agreed something must be done to help Veterans assimilate into civilian life.”
(U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2009)

Introduction and Overview

Over 844,500 military service members, veterans, and dependents enrolled in post-secondary institutions at the undergraduate level during the fall 2012 semester (Queen & Lewis, 2014). The completion rate for baccalaureate-seeking Veteran students, although appearing to make some gains, is typically reported as lower than the four-year graduation rate for their non-veteran peers. Recent research applied to Veteran students has primarily focused on social integration factors associated with acclimating Veteran students to college campus life and to a lesser extent on Veteran students’ academic integration and student success. The purpose of this qualitative study was to describe and explain Veteran students’ perspectives on academic success as they enter or reenter the university setting.
Background

The most recent iteration of the “GI Bill”, the Post-9/11 Veterans Assistance Act of 2008, referred to as the Post 9/11 GI Bill, went into effect on August 1, 2009. Features included enhanced benefits not only providing coverage for educational expenses, but also a living allowance, money for books, and the ability to transfer unused educational benefits to spouses or children (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2013). For Vets who do not yet have a transition plan for returning to civilian life, it is not surprising that the most viable option for many will be to utilize their educational benefits immediately upon separation or retirement from active duty. However, an absence of hard data has fueled speculation that Veteran students who enroll in four-year baccalaureate programs are not completing four-year degrees (Sander, 2012). Although there is a copious amount of research related to post-secondary student success, there is limited research specifically focused on Veteran students and their academic experiences.

Prior research related to persistence and retention by Tinto (1993) focused on social and academic integration factors thought to contribute to student success with a primary emphasis on examining the reasons students were leaving. More recent research by Tinto (2010) suggested that understanding reasons why students leave does not necessarily translate into improved persistence. Instead, the focus should be on establishing conditions on campus that are known to promote student success. What types of actions and policies are institutions already taking or can take to enhance student retention and graduation rates? For the purpose of this research study, a more
recent institutional framework by Tinto (2012) was adapted to focus on the unique needs of Veteran students.

**Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework for this qualitative study was adapted from Tinto’s (2012) *Framework for Institutional Action: The Conditions for Student Success*. According to Tinto, students are more likely to remain in college when four conditions (expectations, support, assessment and feedback, and involvement) exist and that the absence of one undermines the efficacy of the others. The cases in this study were analyzed through the filter of this framework (Figure 1.1).

*Figure 1.1 Adapted from Tinto’s *A Framework for Institutional Action: The Conditions for Student Success* (2012)*
Expectations in this model include those of students as well as those of the institution. The implication is that students’ expectations when entering the university will be molded by the expectations established by the institution regarding student performance and those of the faculty. Classroom expectations will be influenced by a student’s interaction with instructors and to a lesser extent, fellow students.

Tinto described four types of student support: academic, self-efficacy, social, and financial. Academically, what support mechanisms are in place for academically unprepared students? Do students come to the institution with confidence in their own abilities to succeed? What social support programs or services are provided? Also referred to as “mattering”, the level of social support may also influence or make a difference in contributing to a student’s decision to stay or leave. The amount of financial support available to a student will also have possible implications related to persistence and degree completion.

Assessment and feedback pertain to all phases of the student experience. Assessment at the time of entry might include using instruments to assess readiness for college-level work and appropriate course placement, as well as identification of academic support services that might be needed. Faculty might use assessments within the classroom to ascertain that learning is occurring, along with early-warning systems particularly in courses identified as critical benchmarks in progression. Still other assessments might be related to course redesign or input from institutional assessments of students’ experiences focused on student performance.
Tinto suggested that involvement, also known as engagement, is possibly the most important condition for student persistence and retention. Examples of student engagement activities include classroom involvement, student-faculty contact, and interactive learning opportunities. Are there academically-oriented social opportunities for students? Values and norms differ among different campus communities. Students may feel a sense of belonging with one but not with others or with the institution in general. The quality of involvement may depend on whether students deem their involvement as relevant. Opportunities for involvement outside the classroom can enhance student development, learning and retention. Involvement within the classroom is important as well particularly for commuter students who may not spend an extended amount of time on campus outside of class time.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to describe and explain Veteran students’ perspectives on academic success as they enter or reenter the university setting. Understanding students’ experiences, has not been widely explored in educational research related to student success and to an even lesser extent, if at all, as related to the Veteran student population.

**Exploratory Questions**

The overall question that broadly guided this study was: What are Veteran students’ perceptions of their academic experiences? Additional questions to further guide the overall question and aligned with the theoretical framework included:
1. What are Veteran students’ expectations prior to entering or reentering the university and to what extent are these expectations met?

2. Which elements of academic, social and financial support advance or impede Veteran students’ academic progress and persistence?

3. What are Veteran students’ perceptions on the extent to which students, faculty, and staff acknowledge and contribute to the needs of Veteran students related to student success?

4. To what extent do Veteran students feel engaged with faculty and fellow classmates in the classroom and on campus?

It was acknowledged that these questions might be modified as the aim was to thoroughly understand since qualitative researchers do not confine interpretation to the identification of variables and development of instruments prior to data collection.

Additional prompts to accompany the exploratory questions to further elaborate upon the exploratory questions were developed after a feasibility study of the original interview protocol. It was then expanded as it was expected that new questions would arise and be developed as the study progressed.

**Research Design**

Qualitative researchers use case study designs in educational research to focus on providing a detailed account of one or more cases with an interest in both their uniqueness and commonality. Stake (1995) suggested that, “We enter the scene with a sincere interest in learning how they function in their ordinary pursuits and milieus and with a willingness to put aside many presumptions while we learn.” Case study
researchers seek to understand others and want to hear their stories. Yin (2014) further explained that the more the questions seek to explain “how” or “why” a particular social phenomenon works, the more that case study will be relevant.

By grounding this qualitative case study in social constructivism, there was an emphasis on meaning-making and an underlying acknowledgement that to more fully understand the perspectives of Veteran students, reliance on quantitative data and surveys would not be sufficient. According to Paul (2005), one’s mind constructs meaning to events and situations depending upon that individual’s unique perspective. Perspectives are uniquely influenced by culture, identity, upbringing, societal influences, geographical location, exposure to new things and personal assumptions. As a result, a constructivist approach acknowledges that perspectives differ as forms of meaning will vary and inevitably, past meanings may be challenged or questioned and some will change or be revised. Therefore, there can be no one single true and accurate explanation for a common experience.

The emphasis was on interpretation. It is common to make generalizations in educational research. Stake (1995) suggested that by studying even a single or few cases, it is presumed that there will seldom be an entirely new understanding reached, but perhaps refinement of understanding will occur and broad generalizations modified as a result of the findings. Since this study focused on the perspectives of a few individual cases, the use of qualitative interviews was a tool to obtain what was described by Johnson & Christenson (2012) as in-depth information about the participants’ thoughts, beliefs, knowledge, reasoning, motivations, and feelings.
In this qualitative study, the primary method of data collection was the recording, transcription, and analysis of oral interviews. Since this was a qualitative study, standardization in an effort to have comparable results was not the intent. Instead, the guiding questions were a starting point and additional leads that emerged were encouraged and then further developed with subsequent interviews and thought follow-up questions. The literature review examined research published over the past ten years (2005-2015) related to Veteran students to provide a brief historical context.

It was presumed that a purposeful sample would be selected based on parameters developed as the result of the literature review, feasibility study findings, and in consultation with the expert member. Interviews were to be conducted with 10-12 Veteran students currently attending a Southeastern public university. An initial interview with each participant of approximately one hour in length was expected to be accompanied by a second follow-up interview. As suggested by Patton (1987), qualitative interviews allow the researcher to enter into the inner world of another person to gain an understanding of that person’s perspective about a particular phenomenon or experience.

The interview transcripts were coded and analyzed for themes and sub-themes. It was also expected that the use of field notes and follow-up interviews would be used for clarification purposes and further discussion on key themes that emerged from the initial interviews. A researcher-reflective journal contributed to the data by adding the researcher’s personal reflections to refine and enhance interpretations.
In summary, the research data from this project included transcriptions of oral interviews with the participants. The findings of the study resulted in a synthesis of the emergent themes or concepts emerging from the case study interviews and other data. Ethical practices of research were recognized as far as informed consent, confidentiality, and ethical issues addressed as they arose.

**Significance of Study**

This study sought to contribute to the body of scholarly research on the use of qualitative research in the field of higher education administration and research related to improving persistence and graduation rates among Veteran students. As the current body of academic research focused on Veteran students is limited, it was expected that the results would also address potential gaps in the literature. With increased expectations of accountability by students as well as local, state, federal and accrediting agencies, the results may inform future decision-makers in higher education and provide suggestions for program development and implementation of enhanced strategies related to existing efforts focused on student success. Finally, in the future, results may contribute to improving mutual understanding between Veteran students, faculty, and colleges/universities. Such improved understanding may potentially lead to increased student success rates.

**Limitations**

Since a purposeful sample of students from one university was used for this qualitative study, it was not representative of the total population. Another limitation of
this study was acknowledgement that generalizability was not the goal. The study was narrowly focused on the perspectives of the 11 Veteran students who participated.

**Definition of Terms**

*Case Study* A study that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and in its real-world context (Yin, 2014).

*Case Study Research* A form of qualitative research that is focused on providing a detailed account of one or more cases (Johnson and Christensen).


*Post-9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Act of 2008* Commonly referred to as the Post 9/11 GI Bill, an education benefit program for individuals who served on active duty after September 10, 2001 (VA Pamphlet 22-09-01, 2012).

*VA* The abbreviation "VA" stands for "Veterans Affairs" which is only part of the Department's full title: U.S. Dept. of Veterans Affairs. "The" is not used before the abbreviation when it is used as a noun. Retrieved from: [https://www.google.com/?q=What+does+VA+stand+for%3F](https://www.google.com/?q=What+does+VA+stand+for%3F)

*Veterans or vets* Veterans are men and women who have served (even for a short time), but are not currently serving, on active duty in the U.S. Army, Navy, Air Force, Marine Corps, or the Coast Guard, or who served in the U.S. Merchant Marine during World War II. People who served in the National Guard or Reserves are classified as Veterans only if they were ever called or ordered to active duty, not counting the 4-6
months for initial training or yearly summer camps (U.S. Census Bureau, 2013). *Veteran student*—For the purposes of this study, a military veteran who is currently enrolled as an undergraduate student in higher education who is currently using or has used Post-9/11 G.I. Bill benefits.

*“Veteran” is capitalized throughout this study in deference to individuals who have honorably served in the U.S. military.

**Chapter Summary**

This chapter introduced the purpose of the study: to describe and explain selected Veteran students’ perspectives on academic success as they enter or reenter the university setting. Reports that suggest Veteran students graduate at a lower rate than their non-military peers (Wood, 20012) served as the original impetus for the proposed study. A brief description was given of the benefits provided to Veterans by the Post-9/11 GI Bill. While many Vets returning to civilian life exercise their option to reenter college, there is a question as to why many do not exercise their full thirty-six months of GI Bill eligibility or complete a degree.

The study’s theoretical framework, which was adapted from Tinto’s *Conditions for Student Success* (2012), was introduced followed by the purpose and exploratory questions that guided the study. The research design was introduced followed by a brief explanation of the choice of a case study design grounded in social constructivism and a brief discussion of the proposed methodology. Finally, there was a brief summary of the significance of the study, limitations, and definition of terms.
The following chapter provides a critical review of current and historically significant literature as related to higher education, Veteran students, and student success. It includes a brief overview of the historical context of the GI Bill and recent developments and a description of the theoretical framework (Tinto’s Four Conditions). An overview of major themes in the literature (foci of the literature) is next, followed by a discussion of the prevalence of literature focused on barriers along with a section related to success markers attributed to Veteran students. The chapter concludes with a summary of potential gaps in the current literature and recommendations for further research which contributed to this study.

Chapter 3 outlines the study's research design. First, the specific methodological approaches used in a qualitative case study grounded in social constructivism are described. Second, sections discussing the role of the researcher and site location and participant selection follow. Then, data collection methods are described including the feasibility study, interview protocol, field notes and the researcher’s reflective journal. Finally, data analysis techniques used are briefly summarized including coding and triangulation followed by ethical considerations and limitations. The last section of the chapter includes the timeline for completing the study.

Chapter 4 will include the results followed by Chapter 5, which will include a discussion of the findings including suggestions for improved practices and opportunities for future research.
CHAPTER TWO:
Review of Literature

Introduction

This chapter examines literature primarily peer-reviewed and published over the past ten years (2005-2015) related to higher education and Veteran students, and student success to provide a brief historical context and to connect back to the exploratory questions and theoretical framework that will be utilized as the study progresses. Since the study is qualitative in nature, it was expected that the literature review would be integrated throughout the research.

This chapter includes the following:

• a brief overview of the historical context of the GI Bill and recent developments,
• a description of the theoretical framework (Tinto’s Four Conditions),
• an overview of major themes in the literature (foci of the literature),
• a discussion of the prevalence of literature focused on barriers,
• a section related to success markers attributed to Veteran students,
• the potential gaps in the current literature, and
• recommendations for further research.

Historical Context of the GI Bill

Since the history of the GI Bill has already been widely referenced and summarized in the literature on Veteran students (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011; McGrevey & Kehrer, 2009; Naphan & Elliott, 2015), only a brief synopsis is included here on the
origins of the GI Bill, followed by a more detailed summary highlighting developments after implementation of the Post-9/11 GI Bill.

The Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944 (Public Law 78-346), the original GI Bill of Rights, was signed into law by President Franklin D. Roosevelt on June 22, 1944, near the end of World War II. It has been heralded as one of the most significant pieces of legislation ever produced by the federal government — one that impacted the United States socially, economically, and politically (U.S. Dept. of Veterans Affairs, 2009). The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) was responsible for carrying out the law's key provisions: education and training; loan guaranty for homes, farms or businesses; and unemployment pay. By the time the original GI Bill ended on July 25, 1956, 7.8 million of 16 million World War II Veterans had participated in either education or training programs.

Over the past seven decades, components of the original bill have undergone minor revisions and major changes. Two changes, in particular, addressed the continuance and/or expansion of the Bill’s educational programs. The "Montgomery GI Bill" (MGI B, 1985) ensured that the educational programs would continue to work for successive generations of combat Veterans. In 2008, the current Post-9/11 GI Bill (Pub. L. 110-252, H.R. 2642, 2008) called for improved educational benefits for Veterans with active duty service on, or after, September 11, 2001. The law included provisions for covering more educational expenses, providing a living allowance and money for books, and the ability to transfer unused educational benefits to spouses or children.
**All Volunteer Force.** Today’s All Volunteer Force (AVF) Veterans differ in some respects from Veterans who served in previous conflicts including the Korean War and Vietnam War. Many are now recruited with the expectation of a better life including the benefit of a college education. Today’s AVF Veterans differ from Veterans from other eras, most noticeably by socioeconomic status (Teachman, 2007). Veterans Affairs Undersecretary and former Army brigadier general Allison Hickey, head of the Veterans Benefits Administration 2011-2015, noted that 73% of all separating service members planned to use their education benefit. Further, more than 10 million tuition claims were processed and upwards of $30 billion in tuition and benefits paid out since the bill went into effect on August 1, 2009 (Student Veterans of America, 2013).

As a result, college recruitment of Veterans equates to a mutually beneficial relationship between the military and higher education. This relationship is likely to endure as U.S. military involvement abroad continues (Livingston, Havice, Cawthon, & Fleming, 2011). However, with this comes the call for increased accountability as questions have arisen as to the motives of some institutions in recruiting Veteran students. Eight of the top 10 colleges enrolling the most students receiving Veterans’ benefits in 2009 were for-profits (Golden, 2010).

According to Golden (2010), federal lawmakers and constituents began to express concern over accusations that Veterans often do not complete degrees or are enticed by deceptive recruiting practices by for-profit schools of their increased marketability in the workforce and landing lucrative jobs after graduation. As a result, all higher education institutions, private, public, and non-profit, have recently been
mandated to demonstrate how they are utilizing best practices when serving their
Veteran student populations who are funding, or have funded their educations reliant
solely, or in part, on their Post-9/11 GI benefits.

Executive Order No. 13607. Reports of aggressive and deceptive targeting of
service members, Veterans, and their families by some educational institutions after the
Post-9/11 GI Bill became law resulted in executive action to strengthen oversight,
enforcement, and accountability. Executive Order No. 13607 (2012), known as
“Establishing Principles of Excellence for Educational Institutions Serving Service
Members, Veterans, Spouses, and Other Family Members” (‘Principles of Excellence’),
was issued by President Barack Obama on April 27, 2012. The order was designed to
help Veterans make informed decisions about where to take their benefits, prevent
them from entering schools that only want their money, and help them navigate
available support services (Griffin & Gilbert, 2015). The Executive Order ensures that
federal military and education benefit programs provide service members, Veterans,
spouses, and their families appropriate information, support, and protections.

The ‘Principles of Excellence’ identify a number of provisions for academic
institutions who serve Veteran students to follow. A summary of the highlights include
colleges/universities being charged with:

- providing prospective students disclosure with regard to the total cost of the
  educational program and potential eligibility for financial aid;
- ending fraudulent and unduly aggressive recruiting techniques on and off military
  installations;
• obtaining the approval of the institution's accrediting agency for new course or
program offerings before enrolling students in such courses or programs;
• allowing service members and reservists to be readmitted to a program if they are temporarily unable to attend class or have to suspend their studies due to service requirements;
• agreeing to an institutional refund policy that is aligned with the refund of unearned student aid rules applicable to Federal student aid provided through the Department of Education under Title IV of the Higher Education Act of 1965;
• providing educational plans for all individuals using Federal military and veterans educational benefits that detail how they will fulfill all the requirements necessary to graduate and the expected timeline of completion; and
• designating a point of contact for academic and financial advising (including access to disability counseling) to assist service member and Veteran students and their families with the successful completion of their studies and with their job searches.

President Obama also called for the Secretaries of Defense, Veterans Affairs, and Education to develop a comprehensive strategy for developing service member and veteran student outcome measures which, to the extent practicable, should rely on existing administrative data to minimize the reporting burden on institutions participating in these benefit programs. A complete transcript of Executive Order No. 13607 is provided in Appendix B. As this federal mandate is relatively recent, higher
education institutions are at various stages of implementing or revising current processes to ensure compliance or possibly risk sanctions.

**Emphasis on Student Success.** Accountability is a buzzword that has been commonly associated with higher education over the past two-plus decades across the United States and applies to all higher education institutions both in the public and private, and non-profit/for-profit sectors. Federal and state governments and an array of organizations suggest that they have done their part by providing funding and implementing programs and monetary incentives to increase higher access to higher education. As a result, it is not surprising that the expectation is a return on that investment e.g. increased college completion rates, career placement after graduation, and supporting student success in general (Ford, Northrup, & Wiley, 2009). In line with this, the same expectations of accountability are being applied to the Post-9/11 GI Benefits Program, as evidenced by President Obama’s Executive Order No. 13607.

As Tinto (2012) simply but powerfully stated, “What matters is not simply attending college but completing a degree, especially a four-year degree. Starting college but not finishing college yields little earnings benefit in relation to those who do not.” Tinto’s more recent work suggested that previous research related to retention and completion should not have solely focused on a premise that “why students leave” is the same reasoning as to “why students stay” (Tinto, 2012). He suggested that student services need to be more proactive rather than reactive in assisting students in assessing likely obstacles, and encouraging them to take ownership of and hold themselves accountable for their learning.
For the purpose of this research study, a more recent institutional framework by Tinto (2012) can be adapted to focus on the unique needs of Veteran students. The cases in this study will be analyzed through the filter of this framework.

**Tinto’s Framework: ‘Conditions for Student Success’**

Each of the following Four Conditions for Student Success, as viewed through the Lens of Tinto’s *Framework for Institutional Action: The Conditions for Student Success* (2012), will connect to the proposed research question(s) for this study. A brief description of the conditions is provided as well as references to prior research related to Veteran students as applicable to these conditions.

**Expectations.** Expectations refer to those of students as well as those of the institution. What students expect of themselves is shaped by a variety of institutional actions. Examples of expectations include those related to student performance, faculty expectations, and classroom expectations. These are communicated not only by instructors but also by students’ interactions with fellow students and other campus constituents. Student support services such as academic advising and career counseling also knowingly, or perhaps unknowingly, reflect a particular campus’s perspective and level of commitment to meeting the needs of both traditional and non-traditional student populations. Tinto (2012) cautioned that high expectations = student success; low expectations = forewarning of failure. Knowing what to do to succeed will be crucial and applies to success at the institution, in a program of study, and in an individual course.
Pre-entry factors for Veteran students typically applied to students entering directly from high school will affect expectations: family background, socioeconomic status, and academic preparedness including prior schooling and skills and abilities. New student orientation plays an important role as it serves to introduce students to those whom they can turn to and must establish a setting where students will feel comfortable doing so. It is not surprising that research on meeting Veteran students’ needs often recommends a new student orientation specifically for Veteran students as preferable (Ackerman, DiRamio, & Garza, 2009, Lackaye, 2011).

Tinto (2012) further explained that expectations in the classroom begin with the behavior of the faculty member or instructor. Faculty expectations are critical and will be reflected in their grading standards, feedback on assignments and examinations, modeling of exemplary effort, and the use of pedagogic methods that require higher levels of effort. Students will often adapt their preconceived expectations to those of the faculty member’s which may or may not result in a favorable outcome. Expectations for effort, particularly during the first year of study, run the gamut of students not expending enough effort in their studies to some faculty expecting too little of their students and not requiring them to push harder academically.

For Veteran students, Callahan and Jarrat (2014) suggested that mismatches in expectations, both on the Veteran student’s and the institution’s side, are common. Furthermore, Callahan and Jarrat also implied that non-military students, faculty, and administrators lack understanding as to the depth and breadth of military training and experience. This may also lead to underestimating the leadership potential of student
service members and Veterans. They may also have misassumptions that Veterans will inevitably have certain conditions, such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or other maladies often associated with military Vets. Mismatches may potentially result in a disconnect between Veteran students and the institution, which is not conducive to success.

**Support.** Tinto emphasized the necessity of promoting the self-efficacy of students particularly during their first semester. Types of support conducive to student success encompass a student's academic, social and financial needs. Academic support may refer to programs in place for underprepared or new students including: summer bridge programs, first-year seminars, supplemental instruction, learning communities, and basic-skills courses. If support programs contribute to student success early on, students will enhance their self-efficacy, reduce their stress, and have a greater likelihood of subsequent success.

Regarding self-efficacy, Callahan & Jarrat (2014) discussed the inevitability that many prior-military students will experience an initial stage of doubt as to whether or not they are college material. This is particularly true for those students whose primary reason for entering the military was because they did not feel they were “cut out” to be in college. The vast majority of these students are capable. However, they may only have the self-confidence to accomplish coursework with early, proactive support by the institution. As with all new students, it is crucial that these students experience success during their first semester at the institution. Programming efforts specifically geared toward Veteran students that have contributed to success include peer support groups
(DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011; Baechtold & De Sawal, 2009), cultural support (Griffin & Gilbert, 2015) and campus-based Student Veteran Organizations (Griffin & Gilbert, 2015; Kirchner, 2015; Whikehart, 2010).

Social support focuses on students’ feelings of a sense of belonging or “mattering” and may be reflected in campus programming related to areas such as academic advising, mentoring opportunities, residential life, and counseling programs. Adjustments will be made to existing social relationships including family and friends as well as new relationships formed on campus. Tinto emphasizes that “Mattering” can mean the difference between staying and leaving.

Since Veteran students commonly do not self-identify or seek help (Griffin & Gilbert, 2015; Livingston, Havice, Cawthon, & Fleming, 2011) mandatory academic advising is recommended to assist these students in making a campus connection as well as to better track these students and their needs and as an attempt to make it less intimidating for these students to seek support later, if necessary.

Financial support may also impact student retention. Studies have suggested that greater amounts of aid, particularly aid that will not have to be repaid, will have an impact on student retention. As with all student populations, it is not surprising that financial difficulties may have serious ramifications for student Veterans. This is particularly important with the assumption by some, including the Veterans themselves, that their Post-9/11 GI benefits will fully meet their financial needs while in college.

**Assessment and Feedback.** Assessment as related to student success begins at the time of a student’s admission or entry to the institution. Tinto (2012) referred to
instruments such as College Board (Accuplacer), Asset, Compass, and institution-designed instruments to assess readiness for college-level work and to determine appropriate placement. This type of assessment at the time of admission may assist with identifying students who may need remediation or additional academic support. However, as Tinto cautioned, cut-off scores may result in incorrect placement, particularly for those with scores just above or below the established threshold.

Classroom assessment is also important and should be often and ongoing to ascertain if students are meeting intended learning outcomes. This may include early-warning systems and assessment of the classroom experience (e.g. one-minute papers), immediate feedback checkers, learning portfolios, etc. In some cases, this feedback may convey consideration of course redesign. Early-alert systems are particularly crucial in foundational courses since low performance in those courses may undermine potential success in courses that follow.

Assessment should also include an institutional assessment of the “Student Experience”. For Veteran students, this may include curriculum adaptations, intentional programming efforts, and early alert systems specifically targeting the Veteran student population. Research is beginning to reflect proposed curriculum adaptations and intentional programming efforts geared toward Veteran students (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011) and the importance of universal design (both physical space and academic content) to address the diverse learning needs of this population (Branker, 2009; Church, 2009).
Burnett and Segoria (2009) suggested intra-institutional collaboration through committees, student groups, trainings for faculty and staff, and mentoring programs as potential ways to support veterans academically, providing information and resources. Researchers continue to note the need for faculty workshops/training/development on common issues of Veterans as needed on college campuses (Kirchner, 2015; Osborne, 2014).

Recent research has also provided specific examples of how faculty can better assist Veteran students in their higher education classrooms. Lighthall (2012) provided recommendations that not only assist Veteran students but all students. Examples include:

- Making and sharing recordings of classroom lectures and discussions.
- Allowing note taking on laptops so that students can review and process classroom material in a less sensory-stimulating environment.
- Wearing a microphone to enhance auditory clarity, and ensuring that class videos are captioned.
- Attempting to use texts that can be obtained electronically, in case the student needs the text to be read aloud.
- Posting notes ahead of time to assist the student veteran with better preparing.
- Allowing students to use a ruler during exams to help them keep their place.
- Providing options if Veteran students are highly anxious during exams, such as giving them a different time and place.
- Providing access and availability options such as out-of-class office hours.
• Leaving faculty opinions about the military or recent wars out of the classroom unless content-relevant as well as modeling awareness of other viewpoints that might be upsetting or hurtful to a Veteran student.

Any focus on student performance in the classroom should include dialogue about the unique attributes of non-traditional student populations’ needs including Veteran students.

Involvement. Also commonly referred to as student engagement, Tinto (2012) suggested that involvement is perhaps the most important condition for retention. Classroom involvement includes the extent of student-faculty contact and classroom engagement, e.g., active learning or cooperative group work. Engagement also refers to a student’s sense of belonging or mattering which may entail promoting learning communities, service learning, or participation in a student organization.

As alluded to previously, the research is content-heavy with regard to emphasizing the need for higher education institutions to focus on efforts to address transition issues for student Veterans (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011; Naphan & Elliott, 2015) including coming to terms with a new sense of identity (Morreale, 2011) as the result of leaving military life and re-entering civilian life. In Lackaye’s study (2011), combat Veterans highlighted the need to identify and connect with other Veterans over their previous experiences in the military and their current experiences as college students.

Community-based initiatives can more fully engage Veteran students as well as to bring about awareness through special events, particularly on Veterans Day and Memorial Day, incorporating community groups and speakers (Burnett & Segoria,
2009). Out-of-class involvement can play an important role in student development, learning, and retention. If involvement does not occur in the classroom, it may not occur at all (Tinto, 2012).

The Student Veterans of America (SVA) http://studentveterans.org/ is a nationwide organization providing support for military students through university chapters and is working to develop new student groups in addition to coordinating existing student groups from college campuses across the U.S. (Burnett & Segoria, 2009). SVA leads advocacy efforts, develops partnerships and is working on a networking program to connect alumni and provide professional opportunities, and invests in research that showcases Veteran student success.

**Demographics of Veteran Students**

Noticeable in the research related to demographics of “military undergraduates” is that there is not typically a differentiation among Veterans, military service members on active duty, or military service members in the reserves (Queen & Lewis, 2014). It is also often the case that military dependents who are also using GI benefits are also included in the data on Veteran students.

Veterans, who are part of today’s “All Volunteer Force,” provide a number of reasons as to why they opted to join the military. Their reasons include joining to escape or for college benefits (Branker, 2009; DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011; Lighthall, 2012); feeling not academically prepared for college so joining the military as a viable alternative to a minimum wage job (Branker, 2009); bleak employment prospects (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011); and a sense of duty or adventure (Ackerman, DiRamio, &
Garza Mitchell, 2009). This last reason may be significant in that there may be implications for those Veteran students who chose a more non-traditional career path in a highly regimented, ordered, and potentially dangerous occupation before embarking on a college education.

The reasons for joining the military also result in key demographic and enrollment characteristics in which military and nonmilitary students often differ from each other (Radford & Wun, 2009). Radford (2011) reported his findings on a 2007-08 cohort profile of military service members and veterans enrolled in college compared to non-military students. At the undergraduate level, the percentage of military and nonmilitary independent students in any race/ethnicity category differed by 3 percentage points or less; the percentage of military and nonmilitary independent students by age differed by 6 percentage points (within the age 24-29 category) or less (18-23, 30-39, and 40 or older). As to choice of institution, military and nonmilitary independent students similarly based their decisions on location, affordability, and intended program of study. However, nonmilitary students, were more likely to indicate an institution’s reputation as influential in their decision-making process (Radford, 2011). Other differences related to the decision making process between military and non-military students included gender, marital status, types of institution, programs offered, and delivery format.

Other significant findings reported by Radford (2011) included the following:

- The majority of students were male and more likely to be married than nonmilitary peers;
• Both military and nonmilitary independent undergraduates were most often enrolled in public-2-year institutions;
• More military students were enrolled in private nonprofit 4-year institutions than their nonmilitary peers (13 percent vs. 9 percent);
• More military students were enrolled in bachelor’s degree programs (42 percent vs. 32 percent);
• Military undergraduates took distance education courses more often than their nonmilitary peers (31 percent vs. 27 percent);
• Military undergraduates pursued computer and information sciences, engineering and engineering technology programs more often than nonmilitary students, and education and healthcare degree paths at a lower rate.

Quantitative Data on Veteran Students

Accurate data on the postsecondary academic outcomes of today’s generation of Veteran students, however, have been difficult to find (Cate, 2014). National databases, such as NCES (National Center for Education Statistics), do not always properly identify and track Veteran students for a variety of reasons. As mentioned previously, many databases, such as NCES, do not differentiate between Veterans, active duty service members, and those in the Reserves. In addition to response bias and sampling error, the use of certain data, such as IPEDS data, which primarily tracks first-time, full-time students entering in the fall term, may help to make student Veterans invisible (Cate, 2014). For these reasons, efforts have begun to address this gap in the lack of data on Veteran students such as the Million Records Project.
**Million Records Project.** The Million Records Project (Cate, 2014) was a grant-funded public-private partnership between the Student Veterans of America, the National Student Clearinghouse, and the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs’ Veterans Benefits Administration. The intent of the Project was to address gaps in knowledge and, with additional research, determine best practices and policies that promote Veteran student success. The Project reviewed nearly 1 million Veteran students who initially used Montgomery and Post-9/11 GI benefits between 2002 and 2010 in terms of academic outcomes, including completion rates, time-to-completion, level of education, and degree fields.

Initial results suggested strong postsecondary outcomes for the current generation of student veterans, with 57.1% earning a postsecondary degree or certificate. At both two- and four-year degree institutions, the majority of Veteran students graduated within four or five years, a pattern that is similar to the traditional student population. Results also indicated that a high percentage of Veteran students pursue degrees in business, public service, health, science and engineering. This information may be useful for institutions with regard to curriculum reviews as well as with major and/or career planning efforts for these students.

Clearly, the GI Bill is meeting its original intent: Veterans are earning college degrees, entering the workforce armed with the skills and knowledge they need to succeed, and are contributing to society (Cate, 2014). However, what we do not know much about are the drivers of academic success for Veteran students. To understand
the drivers of academic success for Veteran students requires a review of the literature identifying challenges, issues, and barriers unique to Veterans and Veteran students.

**Primary Foci in the Literature**

**Theoretical Frameworks.** Throughout the ASHE Report (2011) iconic names including Astin, Baxter Magolda, Braxton, Chickering, Schlossberg, Tinto, and others, provided a “comfortable starting point”, as suggested by DiRamio & Jarvis, “from which to investigate the phenomenon of Veteran students in college”. Less common in the literature on Veteran students is a focus on education (Wheeler, 2012).

Prevalent in the current research on Veteran students is discussion on transition issues related acclimation from military to civilian life and the university setting (Arzola, 2012). Consistently, Schlossberg’s transition theory (1995), which provides a framework surrounding adults in transition, and adult learners, is referenced in the research on Veteran students (Griffin & Gilbert, 2015; Livingston, 2009; Lackaye, 2012; Lopez, 2012; Cole-Morton, 2013.) The Moving In, Moving Through, Moving Out model, another transition and identity model (Schlossberg, Lynch, & Chickering, 1989) is also applied to Veteran students. In this model, a person evaluates a transition over time while reflecting on the likely positive or negative effects as well as the resources available for managing change.

Identity crisis is also commonly discussed. Women Vets form a distinct identity in the military and when they face a new identity as a college student, they need to socially construct a new identity (Josselson, 1987) as well as new social support mechanisms (Whiteman, et al., 2013). Each of these frameworks has an emphasis on
social integration much more so than academic integration. A list of recent
dissertations, many of which primarily focus on social acclimation issues and exploration
of ways in which colleges/universities can best support Veteran students’ needs is
available in Appendix A. The two most common topics in the literature pertaining to
Veteran students over the past decade are 1) the unique physical and mental
challenges commonly experienced by Veterans and 2) transition/readjustment issues
(DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011; Baechtold & De Sawal, 2009; Wheeler, 2012; Rumann &

**Physical and Mental Challenges.** Physical and mental challenges associated
with Veterans, typically combat Veterans, include a range of acute to chronic, long-term
disorders with accompanying sequelae, including a broad range of functional activities
of daily life. Challenges commonly associated with combat Veterans include:

- **Post-traumatic stress disorder [PTSD]** (Barnard-Brak, Bagby, Jones & Sulak,
  2011; Burnett & Segoria, 2009; Church, 2009; Shackelford, 2009; Madaus, Miller,
  & Vance, 2009),

- **Traumatic Brain Injury [TBI]** (French & Parkinson, 2008; Burnett & Segoria,
  2009; Church, 2009; Shackelford, 2009), and

- **Military Sexual Trauma [MST]** (Baechtold & De Sawal, 2009; Burnett & Segoria,
  2009).

Other functional limitations, which may also have implications related to a combat
Veteran student’s ability to perform well in an academic environment include:
• difficulties with memory, concentration and orthopedic injuries (Burnett & Segoria, 2009 Church, 2008, 2009),
• hearing loss (Shackelford, 2009; Lighthall, 2012), and
• mental health issues such as anxiety, substance abuse, depression, anger and reactions during readjustment (Baechtold & De Sawal, 2009; Wheeler, 2012; Madaus et al., 2009).

In addition to actual physical or mental limitations Veteran students may face, they may also encounter an even larger obstacle in the stigma, misinformation, and prejudices that accompany public and institutional perceptions of all ‘Veterans’, regardless of whether or not they have experienced combat personally. These perceptual barriers may affect a Veteran’s ability to transition successfully into social and academic communities.

**Transition/ Readjustment Issues.** Veterans also face numerous social challenges in their transition or readjustment to civilian life. The importance of social support and the need to share like experiences, such as homecoming and post-deployment issues, have been identified as key components of a successful transition (Baechtold & De Sawal, 2009; DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011; Livingston, Havice, Cawthon, & Fleming, 2011; Whiteman, Mroczek, & MacDermid Wadsworth, 2013). It is also reiterated often in the research that Veteran students are typically less likely to ask for help (Baechtold & De Sawal, 2009; Shackelford, 2009; Lighthall, 2012).

In addition, the transition from a military to non-military educational environment also poses some difficulties and obstacles for Veteran students. To examine these
challenges, new theoretical models, such as identity development of students with military experience and Schlossberg’s adult transition to higher education theory, are emerging in the literature. Arzola (2012) suggested from an academic library perspective that the transition from a military to non-military educational environment poses some difficulties and obstacles for student Veterans. Her annotated bibliography examined resources that discuss issues faced by Veteran students including: the needs of disabled student veterans, adult education, transitioning theories like identity development of students with military experience, Schlossberg’s adult transition to higher education, trauma, post-deployment issues, traumatic brain injury (TBI), post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), loss, homecoming experiences, homeless veterans, women veterans and transition, administrative processing issues of veteran education benefits, and stopgap measures of veterans with financial entitlements for school payments and concerns with self-identifying as a student veteran at a university.

**Barriers**

An obvious over-emphasis on barriers is prevalent in recent research focused on Veteran students as they enter or reenter college (Arzola, 2012). Hassan, et. al, 2010, pointed out that, there has been an emphasis on Veteran students’ special needs and challenges in areas such as college and VA administrative procedures, educational requirements, academic preparedness, denial of academic credit for military training, and physical and mental illnesses. This has resulted in an imbalance in which Veteran students’ shortcomings or deficits are highlighted with very little discussion related to their positive qualities. The idea that Veteran students have unique or additional
issues associated with being prior-military that traditional students do not perpetuates the assumption that they will face barriers their non-military peers will not.

Veteran students are portrayed more often than not as having unique extenuating circumstances that may contribute to the assumption purported by some that Veteran students are graduating at lower rates than their non-military peers. Some of these potential barriers were alluded to in the previous section including the prevalence of research related to transition/readjustment and physical and mental health issues.

Some of the “barriers” to student success are in line with those commonly associated with non-traditional students such as familial obligations (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011; Callahan & Jarrat, 2014; Lighthall, 2012); achieving a balance between work, family and academic commitments (Osborne, 2014); and other risk factors typically associated with adult students (Wheeler, 2012). Like other non-traditional student populations, Vets may feel a loss of connectedness or isolation (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011; Naphan & Elliott, 2015), and may be hypersensitive to what they might perceive as a lack of sensitivity on the part of faculty and staff and non-military students (Barnard-Brak, Bagby, Jones, & Sulak, 2011; Glasser, Powers, & Zywiak, 2009) with regard to their military past and experiences.

Still other researchers suggest challenges unique to Veteran students including adjusting to experiences engrained from living predominantly according to a military code and then reentering civilian life. In particular, some Vets may have difficulty adapting to campus culture as this entails making a sometimes abrupt shift from their
military experiences where “authority is absolute” (Wheeler, 2012; Griffin & Gilbert, 2015; Callahan & Jarrat, 2014). Others find the transition from the male-dominated world of the military (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011; Osborne, 2014) to one with a lack of accountability; no clear “chain of command” (Glasser et al., 2009; Lighthall, 2012; Osborne, 2014); and a lack of structure (Vacchi, 2012; Livingston, Havice, Cawthon, & Fleming, 2011), daunting and overwhelming.

In addition to being reluctant to ask for help (Burnett, 2009; Callahan & Jarrat, 2014; Lighthall, 2012), Veteran students will not necessarily disclose possible limitations (Church, 2008, 2009) due to the pride aspect of military influence which contributes to Veteran student invisibility (Livingston et al., 2011). Some may also have diminished academic skills, particularly in mathematics and study skills, brought on potentially by years of military service and/or experiencing a significant gap in time since high school or previous college attendance (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011; Ackerman, DiRamio, & Garza Mitchell, 2009).

Veteran students consistently report disappointment at the transfer credit evaluation process and challenges related to getting course credit for military experiences or previous coursework brought in from other institutions (Burnett & Segoria, 2009; CAEL Forum 2010; Griffin & Gilbert, 2015; Naphan & Elliott, 2015). In one study (Griffin & Gilbert, 2015), students interviewed “noticed clear differences between what they received on an institution-by-institution basis and expressed frustration when they did not receive credit for their past experience.”
Finally, financial concerns are also a prevalent theme for Veteran students (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011; Callahan & Jarrat, 2014), which is also a common concern or potential barrier for many college students. Benefit bureaucracy (Wheeler, 2012; Glasser et al., 2009; Griffin & Gilbert, 2015; Lighthall, 2012; Vacchi, 2012) is another consistent area of concern. With the first disbursement of their Post 9/11 GI benefits sometimes taking up to three months to disburse, Vets have difficulty finding temporary funding (Lopez, 2011). As a result, some Veteran students may make hasty decisions and take unintended actions (Branker, 2009) such as withdrawing from a class prematurely not knowing fee liability may be incurred as a result.

Unfortunately, according to Vacchi (2012), one of the greatest mischaracterizations, both by popular media and some higher education scholars, is about posttraumatic stress disorder and other disabilities. Vacchi points out that the implication is that as many as 40 percent of Veteran students have visible or invisible injuries. This is just one example of an improper inference about student Vets based on larger veteran population stereotypes.

**Academic Barriers.** A recent shift in the literature focuses on discussions surrounding Veteran students’ academic needs and challenges in areas such as college and VA administrative procedures, educational requirements, academic preparedness, denial of academic credit for military training, and physical and mental illnesses (Hassan, Jackson, Lindsay, McCabe, & Sanders, 2010). Osborne (2014) also suggested that institutions are deficient in training faculty and staff about Veterans’ issues,
consequently leaving Veteran students susceptible to inaccurate perceptions about their military service and wellbeing.

Other common threads in the current literature are related to involvement/engagement including the need for Veteran students to be able to share like experiences (Baechtold & De Sawal, 2009; DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011; Livingston, Havice, Cawthon, & Fleming, 2011); acknowledgement that Vets are typically less likely to ask for help (Baechtold & De Sawal, 2009; Shackelford, 2009; Lighthall, 2012); and the importance of social support (Whiteman, Mroczek, & MacDermid Wadsworth, 2013).

It is not surprising that these themes interrelate to the conceptual framework for this study: Expectations, Support, Assessment and Feedback, and Involvement. Some Veteran students will face challenges typical of first-generation students such as not knowing where to go for help, what questions to ask, and how to advocate for themselves as college campuses will be unfamiliar territory and complicated (Callahan & Jarrat, 2014).

**2015 Vet Programs Summit Report.** The primary purpose of the American Council on Education (ACE)’s 2015 Service Member and Veteran Academic Advising Summit Report was to educate service members and Veterans about college admissions and higher education and to facilitate increased connections between the military, higher education, and employers. The primary themes and recommendations that emerged from that summit are congruent with Tinto’s Conditions and themes prevalent in prior research on meeting the needs of Veteran students.
The first theme reflected the importance of increased support services including one-on-one services as well as training advisors on military culture and language and the importance of peer-to-peer mentoring and more effectively using tools to educate service members and veterans about the admissions process. Prospective students also need support when considering their career goals and needed education or training to attain those goals.

The second theme related to the importance of self-advocacy including better educating these students about college admissions and higher education and assisting with developing peer networks and increased connections between military, higher education, and employers.

Two additional themes were 1) the need for stronger communication and consolidated efforts, and 2) the importance of ensuring that all aspects are covered from the transition from the military to college and then to the workplace. Higher education institutions need to focus on “educating to employ, strengthen how student Veterans are tracked, and how their pre- and post-college outcomes assessed. The Report recognized the difficulties Veterans have choosing appropriate certificate or degree programs that will later translate to successful transition to the workforce.

Finally, the Report acknowledged the importance of building awareness by providing training for staff/faculty working with service members and veterans and creating opportunities for dialogue between civilians and military-connected individuals. The individual recommendations provided in the report affirm Tinto’s recommended
framework to facilitate student success: focusing on expectations, support, assessment and feedback, and involvement.

Institutional Support

The use of new institutional language by higher education institutions to describe how they serve this ever-growing non-traditional student population is also common. Terms such as vet-, veteran-, or military-friendly are on the rise presumably to show institutional commitment to Veteran students (Kirchner, 2015; Osborne, 2014; Callahan & Jarrat, 2014; McGovern, 2012; Whikehart, 2010). Interesting to note, surveys conducted with Veteran students reveal that many do not like the term “veteran-friendly” because of the implication that colleges might go easy on them (Vacchi, 2012).

Recent literature also acknowledges efforts by colleges and universities to enhance support for Veteran students including offering tuition discounts or in-state tuition prices without residency requirements, waived application fees, reenrollment without penalty, and flexible schedules that include evening, weekend, and online course options (McGovern, 2012; Moon & Schma, 2011).

Success Markers

Indicators of the positive attributes that Veterans bring with them when they enter or reenter the collegiate setting has begun to emerge in the more recent literature on Veteran students. This reflects a shift in the seeming over-emphasis on the barriers and negative aspects of what a Veteran student might encounter as they transition from military to civilian and college life.
Veteran students will inevitably employ leadership skills developed in the military (Ackerman, DiRamio, & Garza Mitchell, 2009; Lopez, 2011) along with maturity and acquired skills related to global and cultural awareness (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011). When asked, Veterans are vocal and will express themselves, which is an important component for classroom and campus engagement.

Other common positive traits attributed to Veteran students include strong skills of self efficacy, organization, and motivation (Wheeler, 2012; Glasser, Powers, & Zywiak, 2009), the ability to self-regulate, acknowledgement that postsecondary education is a necessary step in improving their lives, being mission driven and goal-oriented, and recognition of the importance of teamwork, persistence, and resiliency (Hassan, Jackson, Lindsay, McCabe, & Sanders, 2010).

Each of these traits interrelate in various ways to Tinto’s *Conditions for Student Success*: expectations, support, assessment and feedback, and involvement. Veteran students are capable of and prepared for success, as long as colleges proactively offer them the support they need. Callahan & Jarrat (2014) emphasized that once a Veteran feels validated in a class, degree program, college context, or as a member of a community, the natural talents of any Veteran may sustain them through to degree completion. Their leadership potential should not be underestimated. Failure is not an option.

Perhaps, as Vacchi (2012) alluded, the evidence offered by the few scholars who have undertaken qualitative inquiries that suggest that student Veterans do not experience any more transition difficulty than other student populations is worth notice.
This suggestion by Vacchi also contributes to the focus of this current study of Veteran students’ perspectives of their academic experiences.

**Gaps/ Limitations in Current Literature**

As this study is on Post-9/11 GI Bill recipients primarily, the literature review focused on research primarily published from 2005-2015. It is clear that the literature on Veteran students is limited and dated and there is an urgent need for updated literature focused on the current cohort of Vets, those having served in the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan (DiRamio, Ackerman, and Mitchell, 2008, Lackaye, 2011). The longevity of U.S. involvement abroad coupled with minimal studies of the student veteran experience equate to a literature gap (Livingston et al., 2011). Lackaye (2011) also pointed out that not much about Veteran students has been published in peer-reviewed journals. Potential gaps reported in the current literature on student Veterans included:

- the importance of peer groups to the student Veteran population (DiRamio, et al., 2008);
- possible effects of gender, race, socio-economic status (including enlisted vs. officer) due to prior exposure in the military (Lackaye, 2011);
- lack of quantitative research, particularly in terms of scale and sample size, on student Veterans (DiRamio, et al., 2008);
- studies on women Veterans (Baechtold & De Sawal, 2009; Morreale, 2011);
- strengths and assets of Veteran students (Morreale, 2011);
• factors contributing to persistence among veterans at the postsecondary level (Lopez, 2013); and

• measures related to the impact of the Post-9/11 GI Bill (Lackaye, 2012).

Potential gaps may also be suggested by an absence in the current literature related to Veteran students. Based on this researcher’s review of the literature, there needs to be more extensive research as older research/data that may not apply directly to today’s All Volunteer Force needs to be updated on subjects such as:

• the effect of academic preparedness,

• classroom barriers,

• potential impact of time limit to use benefits,

• major selection to match career goals,

• unrealistic expectations,

• career development and job placement assistance prior to graduation,

• perceptions on interaction with faculty and non-military peers, and

• acceptance and use of prior college credit for military service/training.

A recurrent theme of the research has been that the transition from a military to non-military educational environment poses some difficulties and obstacles for Veteran students. Only very recently has the literature begun to highlight the positive attributes of student Veterans (Hassan, et al., 2010).

**Recommendations for Future Research.** The effectiveness of student veteran organizations, veteran resource centers, veteran-specific orientations, which are among the relatively new approaches by universities to reflect a Vet-friendly or military-
friendly campus, have not yet been well-researched or reported and what is out there is conceptual and difficult to assess (Kirchner, 2015).

The Million Records Project (Cate, 2014) recommended that the next phase of analysis focus on the drivers of academic success for student veterans so that effective programs are both scalable and replicable, thus increasing the likelihood that all student Veterans achieve their academic goals and earn a postsecondary degree or credential. Lackaye (2011) suggested adding qualitative research designs, such as focus groups and interviews, would gain more detailed and rich data regarding the individual stories of military veteran students. The recommendations of the Million Records Project and Lackaye should help to explain further the data and findings on the success of student Veterans. These recommendations were the catalysts for this qualitative case study on student Veterans’ perspectives related, in particular, to their academic experiences.

**Chapter Summary**

This chapter provided a critical review of current and historically significant literature as related to higher education, Veteran students, and student success. It included a brief overview of the historical context of the GI Bill and recent developments and a description of the theoretical framework (Tinto’s *Four Conditions*). An overview of major themes in the literature (foci of the literature) was next, followed by a discussion of the prevalence of literature focused on barriers along with a section related to success markers attributed to Veteran students. The chapter concluded with a summary of potential gaps in the current literature and recommendations for further research, which contribute to this study.
The next chapter of this dissertation outlines the study’s research design. First, the specific methodological approaches used in a qualitative case study grounded in social constructivism are described. Second, sections discussing the role of the researcher and site and participants follow. Next, data collection methods are described including feasibility study, interview protocol, field notes and the researcher’s reflective journal. Finally, data analysis techniques are briefly summarized including coding and triangulation followed by ethical considerations and limitations. The last section of the chapter includes the timeline for completing the study.

Chapter 4 will include the results followed by Chapter 5, which will discuss the findings and suggested opportunities for future research.
CHAPTER THREE: Methods

“The qualitative researcher emphasizes episodes of nuance, the sequentiaity of happenings in context, the wholeness of the individual.” (Stake, 1995)

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative study was to describe and explain Veteran students’ perspectives on academic success as they enter or reenter the university setting. The overall question that broadly guided this study was: What are Veteran students’ perceptions of their academic experiences?

Additional questions to further guide the overall question and aligned with the theoretical framework included:

1. What are Veteran students’ expectations prior to entering or reentering the university and to what extent are these expectations met?
2. Which elements of academic, social and financial support advance or impede Veteran students’ academic progress and persistence?
3. What are Veteran students’ perceptions on the extent to which students, faculty, and staff acknowledge and contribute to the needs of Veteran students related to student success?
4. To what extent do Veteran students feel engaged with faculty and fellow classmates in the classroom and on campus?

This chapter outlines the study’s research design. First, the specific
method designs used in a qualitative case study grounded in social constructivism are
described. Second, sections discussing the role of the researcher and site location and
participant selection follow. Then, data collection methods are described including
feasibility study, interview protocol, field notes and the researcher’s reflective journal.
Finally, data analysis techniques are summarized including coding and triangulation
followed by ethical considerations and limitations. The last section of this chapter
includes the timeline for completing the study.

Research Design

Qualitative Research. One rationale for adopting a qualitative research
approach is when little is known about a topic or phenomenon and one wants to
discover or learn more about it (Johnson & Christensen, 2012). The purpose of this
study was to understand individual experiences of a similar phenomenon and to express
their perspectives. A qualitative research design allows for the Veteran student
perspective, based on individual Veteran students’ perceptions of their higher education
academic experiences, to emerge through their personal stories and from their distinct
vantage points; in other words, “their” voice.

Some assumptions as to why Veteran students may not be persisting to
graduation may be obvious based on the researcher’s personal and professional
experiences. But until different vantage points are explored, such as the views of
Veteran students themselves, it is acknowledged that care needs to be taken to not
make assumptions or presume preconceived notions are accurate.
According to Stake (2010), qualitative research has moved social research away from an emphasis on cause-and-effect explanation and toward personal interpretation. Stake further suggested that the purpose of qualitative research is usually not to reach general social science understandings but understandings about a particular situation. By doing so, qualitative researchers should contribute to setting policy and professional practice.

A qualitative researcher with a social constructivist vantage point acknowledges that individuals interpret events differently and that often multiple interpretations provide a depth of understanding that the most authoritative or popular interpretation may not. This viewpoint acknowledges that there can be no one single true and accurate explanation for a common experience. The researcher also recognizes that the initial research questions may change or evolve as the study progresses. The primary intent of selection of a qualitative research approach rather than quantitative was to more fully and accurately depict and describe Veteran students’ experiences as related to academic success.

**Social Constructivism.** In its simplest form, constructivism is about how individuals make meaning. According to Paul (2005), individuals construct meaning to events and concrete situations based on their unique perspectives. Since perspectives differ, forms of meaning will vary and inevitably, past meanings may be challenged or questioned and some will change or be revised. Constructivists question the “why’s”; there can be no one single “controlled variable” that is the only true and accurate explanation.
According to Savin-Baden and Howell-Major (2013), researchers who choose this approach believe that research involves an attempt to understand the way in which individuals construct meaning, since knowledge, truth, and reality are created rather than constructed. Knowledge may be uncovered by unpacking individual experiences. Data collection methods may include interviews, narratives and new or existing artifacts that express individuals’ ideas and experiences. A constructivist view emphasizes “thick description” (Geertz, 1973) based on interpretations of those most knowledgeable about the case in a way to convey to the reader what experience itself would convey. This allows for the use of narrative description in the final report. In social constructivism, there is acknowledgement that both the interviewer and interviewee influence meaning. Therefore, Paul (2005) cautioned researchers to be aware of their own values as well as the underlying values of their research participants.

**Case Study.** A case study method was chosen for this study as the intent was to explain a phenomena, in this case, Veteran students’ perspectives on their academic experiences as they enter or reenter college. As described by Yin (2014), a case study allows investigators to focus on a “case” and retain a holistic and real-world perspective. Yin further suggested that the case study is preferred when examining contemporary events and adds two sources of evidence: direct observation of the events being studied and interviews of the persons involved in the events. The goal is to expand and generalize theories (analytic generalizations) and not to extrapolate probabilities (statistical generalizations).
Although it is recognized that case studies rarely end exactly as planned, a conscious attempt was made to conduct the research for this study adhering to basic elements for a good case study (Yin, 2014) which included: asking good questions, being a good and open listener, being adaptable, being knowledgeable about the issues being studied, avoiding biases, and conducting research ethically.

By choosing a case study as the primary research method, the intent was not to substantiate any preconceived positions but to be cognizant of and to acknowledge and embrace possible contrary findings. Since a qualitative case study is heuristic, it was anticipated that new meaning and understanding would emerge that would potentially inform future best practices for working with Veteran students.

**Role of the Researcher**

Standard qualitative designs call for the persons most responsible for interpretations to be in the field, making observations, exercising subjective judgment, analyzing and synthesizing, all while realizing their own consciousness (Stake, 2009). The role of the researcher in qualitative research is crucial as the researcher is the primary data collection instrument.

It is necessary to acknowledge any bias before undertaking a study. For this study, it was important to address the role of this researcher as a previous administrator at the institution in which the study will be undertaken. The personal and professional relationships of the researcher as an administrator at the institution for sixteen years was a factor in gaining access to the participants and support services on campus. This previous role did include working with Veteran students directly, as well,
although none of the participants who participated in this study was known to the researcher prior to the study. In this section on the researcher’s role, the attempt is made to disclose any potential research biases on a personal level by providing the following brief autobiographical synopsis from this researcher’s vantage point.

It was during my two years serving as a graduate assistant in an academic advising center at a university in the Midwestern United States in the early 1990s that I began working with military students. Many were active duty stationed at a local military base either working on an initial undergraduate degree or on an additional credential at the graduate level. I was also a military spouse at the time.

After relocating to the Washington DC area, I was subsequently hired as an academic advisor at a university that primarily served military students both statewide and overseas. The students I worked with were primarily active duty enlisted service members stationed at various military installations in the VA/MD/DC area, including the Pentagon. Most were working on their initial bachelor’s degrees in an effort to be more competitive in the job market upon separation from active duty.

These early experiences working with military students were before the World Trade Center and Pentagon attacks on 9/11/2001, and therefore, prior to the enhanced Post-9/11 GI Bill. In the twenty-five years since my first positions as an academic advisor and later as a university administrator, I continue to have an affinity for this non-traditional population of students perhaps due in part to my ten years of lived experiences as a former military spouse/dependent during that same timeframe. I have
also experienced “extremes” in both the number and quality of support services offered by universities specifically geared toward military and Veteran students.

There is nothing quite like being part of a United States military service member’s family and community. When you separate from the military and re-enter civilian life, your perspectives will have changed, possibly on several fronts. I have carried with me remnants of this unique perspective as I have subsequently worked with Veteran students over the years as a Student Services administrator on five university campuses. I usually recognize instantly when conversing with a new or current student if I am speaking to a Vet. We have something in common. We have both lived a version of “the life” which typically leads to some unspoken common ground from that point forward.

As the researcher, to limit bias associated with my past experiences, I worked closely with the research methods specialist on my dissertation committee as well as my expert member (director of Veteran services on campus and also a prior military service member). It was the intent that by doing this along with using other triangulation methods for data collection and data analysis processes, an accurate representation of data and results would be ensured.

Site and Participants

Location. The location chosen for this study is the largest of three campuses of a public university system located in a large urban area in the southeastern United States with an approximate enrollment of 30,000 undergraduate students in 2015/16 and a Veteran student population of approximately 1,400 in 2015. Initially, it was the
researcher’s institution of employment which lent itself to ease of access since the researcher served as an academic administrator in one of the academic colleges in the area of academic and student support services. As such, it was anticipated that there would be ease of access to a student-veteran population as well as institutional resources to aid in the data collection. Although not a factor in choice as to the location for the study, it may also be noteworthy to mention that this particular university campus is considered to be a Veteran-friendly campus (Altman, 2015). However, that designation was not intended to be a primary focus of attention for this study but may possibly have contributed supplemental information for triangulation purposes and discussion of the findings. The perspectives of Veteran students on academic success, who happen to attend this university, was intended to be the primary focus of this study.

**Campus Demographics.** In fall 2014, the university chosen for this study had a minority population of nearly half (47.6%), with Hispanic/Latino (20.1%) and African American (10.9%) as the top two racial/ethnic minorities (NCES, 2014). Total undergraduate enrollment was 31,067. Seventy-seven percent of the undergraduates were enrolled full-time, with more females (55%) reported than males (45%). Seventy-nine percent were age 24 or younger and just about half (49%) enrolled in at least some distance education courses. The six-year graduation rate of the fall 2008 cohort was 67% with more females (72%) than males (62%) receiving a degree. Of the students take 6 years to earn a bachelor’s degree. 932 students were reported as
receiving Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits. The Carnegie classification for this university is Research University (very high research activity).

Participants. The overall criterion for participant selection is to maximize what we can learn from the study (Stake, 2009). There has been much debate as to how many interviews are enough in a qualitative study. In one study involving data from sixty in-depth interviews, Guest, Bunce, & Johnson (2006) posited that data saturation had occurred by the time twelve interviews were analyzed with basic elements for metathemes present in as early as six interviews. After that, new themes emerged infrequently. The targeted number of participants for this study was 10-12.

Purposive sampling is defined as specifying the characteristics of the population of interest and locating individuals with those characteristics (Johnson & Christensen, 2012). Keeping the purpose of the study in mind, balance and variety was deemed as important. For this study, purposeful sampling was the intent with criteria as follows:

- Veterans or service members who have served post-9/11;
- Undergraduate Veteran students who are currently or were recently enrolled;
- Undergraduate Veteran students who are presently or have previously used Post-9/11 GI benefits;
- Demographic representation will vary by gender, ethnicity, age and classification in college (first-year, second-year, junior, senior, Post-Bac);
- Representation will vary by academic standing, cumulative GPA, and academic program/area of study.
After study approval was granted by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the site location where the study was to be conducted, it was expected that active recruitment of participants would begin immediately. The director of the university’s Office of Veterans Success, who also agreed to serve as an expert member check for this study, had previously agreed to have his office assist with the identification of a sample of Veteran students using the criteria previously identified (see Appendix C). It was initially presumed that a pool of potential participants willing to learn more about the study would be identified by the director, personally, but as discussed in Chapter 4, a slight adjustment was made due to the protocol based on an IRB-requested modification. After being provided with a list of names and university-assigned email addresses, an email invitation (see Appendix D) was sent out by the researcher to those students describing the study and inviting them to participate in the study with an assurance that pseudonyms would be used to ensure confidentiality and anonymity.

Those who were receptive to volunteering for the study were sent a follow-up acknowledgement email as well as a participant questionnaire (see Appendix E) to gather general demographic information. At this same time, a date/time/location was confirmed based on the participant’s availability for the initial interview. The demographic information from the participants was collected as a supplemental data source collected preferably before, but no later than just prior to the start of each interview. After the results of these surveys was compiled, each was redacted and were secured to ensure confidentiality. Eleven students volunteered to participate in the study.
Data Collection Methods

“There is no particular moment when data gathering begins. It begins before there is commitment to do the study: backgrounding, acquaintance with other cases, first impressions.” (Stake, 2009)

Data collection for this study primarily consisted of oral interviews, with the intent being to preferably conduct two interviews with each participant: an initial interview and then a follow-up. Johnson and Christensen (2012) referred to qualitative interviews as “depth” interviews in that in-depth information can be gleaned about a participant’s thoughts, beliefs, knowledge, reasoning, motivation, and feelings about a topic. Additional data collection methods included participant questionnaires for basic demographic information, field notes, the researcher’s reflective journal, and, as applicable, other visual or text-based documents.

Good record-keeping was acknowledged as essential in order to provide a relatively incontestable description for further analysis and ultimate reporting (Stake, 2009). These records included the interview transcripts and participant questionnaires as well as the researcher’s reflective journal, which served in part as a backup to data storage, along with paper and electronic files gathered and compiled throughout the study. The anticipated general timeframe and a summary of the data collection methods from start to finish is presented in Table 1.


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Data Collection Method</th>
<th>Type/ Descriptor</th>
<th>Purpose</th>
<th>Timeframe</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Feasibility Study for interview protocol</td>
<td>Interview with non-participant</td>
<td>To modify questions and/or provide enhancements based on feedback.</td>
<td>1 hour in-person/on adjacent campus. July 28, 2016 (prior to Proposal Defense)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Expert member check</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre-Interview Survey</td>
<td>Questionnaire</td>
<td>Gather demographic information on participants.</td>
<td>2 minutes to complete; submission prior to each interview Mid-October–early-December 2016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Initial Interview Guide for Participants</td>
<td>Email to participants with a short list of exploratory questions.</td>
<td>Guide to set agenda for participants in what to expect from the interview structure.</td>
<td>Sent once date established for initial interview. Mid-October-early December 2016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Initial Interview with Veteran Student participants</td>
<td>Interview Protocol</td>
<td>Describe detailed perspectives on the case study.</td>
<td>1 hour In-person/on-site Mid-October-early December 2016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Member check of interview transcription and initial findings</td>
<td>Word document sent via e-mail</td>
<td>Obtain useful information and identify inaccuracies. Validity and reliability.</td>
<td>Early November – mid-December 2016</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 1 (Continued)

**Data Collection Methods and Timeline**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Data Collection Method</th>
<th>Type/ Descriptor</th>
<th>Purpose</th>
<th>Timeframe</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>*Follow-up interviews with each participant</td>
<td>Semi-structured Open-ended</td>
<td>Leads on emergent themes; clarification and follow-up.</td>
<td>1 hour In-person/phone/email *Follow-up interviews were not necessary due to data saturation from initial interviews. Instead, follow-up emails were sent to individual participants as clarification needed during data analysis.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Field Notes/Observations</td>
<td>On-site for each interview and follow-ups</td>
<td>Contextual details; Data Triangulation</td>
<td>On-going</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Researcher’s Reflective Journal</td>
<td>Personal journal Penzu.com</td>
<td>Data Triangulation</td>
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</tr>
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<td>Supplemental Data Sources</td>
<td>University website including Office of Veterans Success webpage.</td>
<td>Additional detail; corroboration as applicable. Data Triangulation</td>
<td>On-going</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expert Check-in</td>
<td>Conversations/Questions (Director, Veteran Services)</td>
<td>Validity and reliability; bias check.</td>
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</table>
Feasibility Study. A feasibility study of the proposed interview protocol was conducted with one Veteran student on the campus of a private, liberal arts university located nearby. Since the pilot is analogous to a dress rehearsal (Yin, 2014), it was conducted prior to the dissertation proposal defense and before seeking IRB approval. Yin (2014) encouraged a pilot as formative assisting the researcher to develop relevant lines of questions to assist the researcher in refining data collection plans with respect to both the content of the data and the procedures to be followed. It was affirmed that after the pilot interview was conducted, that some questions would be revised or modified for clarity or enhanced with edits made if any perceived bias came to light. This feasibility study also provided an opportunity for a mental rehearsal of the process by the researcher.

Some of the takeaways from the feasibility study included:

- the need to revise the wording of some of the questions as the participant for the pilot did not quite grasp what was being asked in some instances, and would ask for the question(s) to be repeated or clarified;
- a reminder to stay away from asking close-ended questions as reflected by answers of Yes or No to some questions by the interviewee rather than his providing more open-ended in-depth responses;
- rethinking the way prompts to the main questions would be presented to the participant. (In the case of the pilot interview, the participant appeared to be overwhelmed by the researcher asking each main question along with all the prompts at the same time resulting in him not being sure as to how to respond.)
It was also presumed that the interview protocol would take a minimum of one hour but in this case, the Vet who participated in this feasibility study appeared to be cautious and possibly introverted. The interview took about half the projected time allotted and additional probing and prompts were necessary to get more elaborative responses to the questions. The researcher kept this in mind when preparing for future interviews once the study commenced.

An analysis of the interview data also confirmed to the researcher, and subsequently her committee members, when discussed at the proposal defense, that Post-Bac students who had prior experience with earning a baccalaureate degree should probably be excluded from the participant selection parameters, if possible. The pilot interview results suggested a comfort level that would not necessarily be reflective of Veteran students who had not yet completed a baccalaureate degree. This Post-Bac student had already “been there/done that” as was evidenced by responses to several of the questions in which there was more of a comfort level and familiarity when answering the questions. This might have been due to having previously completed a college degree, therefore having more familiarity with navigating the system. As a result, it was agreed that the researcher should attempt to solicit the desired minimum number of undergraduates to participate without including Post-Bac students.

**Data Collection.** The researcher met with each participant one-on-one and in-person at a date/time/location determined by participants’ availability for approximately one hour each. All interviews were conducted face-to-face. With the exception of one Vet, all participants opted to meet within the immediate vicinity of the Office of
Veterans Success on campus; some opted to meet inside while others preferred to meet outside. The researcher communicated with each participant by email prior to the interview to discuss the aims of the research and to attempt to establish a level of comfort and trust. At the beginning of each interview, permission was requested when informed consent guidelines were read to and reviewed with each participant to audiotape each interview. An interview guide (see Appendix F) was provided to the participants in advance of each interview appointment electronically.

By providing the participants with a general idea of the interview questions in advance, the desired outcome was that rapport would more quickly be established and any reservations put to rest and comfort levels possibly eased as there would be the assurance of no surprises. Knowing the questions in advance also provided the expectation of completing an agenda (Stake, 1995) as the interview progressed.

The interview protocol (see Appendix G) was formulated using the theoretical framework of Tinto’s (2012) *Four Conditions* as a guide and organized in a sequential fashion. A breakdown of the initial interview questions as aligned to the framework and guiding and exploratory questions along with the codes that were assigned for use in ATLAS.ti for data analysis is shown in Appendix H. It was also acknowledged that questions would possibly later be adapted or added to subsequent interview questions according to emerging discoveries based on the responses of the participants during the initial interviews. A sample of the interview script that the researcher followed is provided in Appendix I.
At the start of each interview, the researcher read the informed consent form in its entirety (see Appendix J) to each participant. Once the participant agreed to participate, the participant was asked to sign two copies, as did the researcher, and one of the copies was provided to the participant to keep. All 11 participants agreed to the interview(s) being digitally recorded. The researcher used an Olympus WS-500M digital voice recorder for the interviews and kept spare batteries with her as well as her iPhone fully charged as a back-up in case it was needed. The attempt was also made to conduct interviews in settings that would optimize sound quality. It was noted later by the researcher and transcribers that interviews that were held outside or interviews that were held inside with other people close enough to be picked up by the recorder did not have the same audible quality as those conducted inside in a one-on-one closed door setting. When possible, the researcher attempted to build in sufficient time immediately before and following each interview to record impressions and reflections (field notes) which later contributed to the analysis after transcriptions were available for review. That way, important details were not forgotten and field notes could be translated as accurately as possible.

The original protocol called for a second interview to occur after each participant was provided the opportunity to review the transcription and initial findings from the first interview to verify the accuracy of the information. For expediency, each interview was uploaded and professionally transcribed by an on-line professional transcription service (Production Transcripts, Inc.). Each interview transcript was then reviewed in its entirety by the researcher, and in some cases, minor edits made, prior to submission
to the participants for review. When ready, each interview transcript and initial findings were sent to each participant by email with an invitation to make additions or deletions or to provide clarification or elaboration to their responses. None of the participants replied back with any requests for additions or deletions or to provide elaboration or clarification to their original responses in the initial interviews. A second interview with each participant was expected to be conducted based on the initial review and analysis of the first interview. The purpose of the second interview was to further explore emergent themes and for clarification, if necessary. The researcher opted to forego a second round of interviews. However, it should also be noted that the researcher was reassured after the coding process that saturation had been achieved with the eleven initial interviews in that, as suggested by Strauss & Corbin (1998), saturation occurs during coding when “no new properties, dimensions, conditions, actions/interactions, or consequences are seen in the data.”

**Field notes.** Field notes were gathered throughout the research process and for each interview. It is important in qualitative observations to take extensive field notes without specifying in advance exactly what is to be observed, primarily for exploratory purposes (Johnson & Christensen, 2012). The intent was to look for anything that might be relevant to the research questions during and after interviews and observations. The goal was to summarize field notes immediately following each interview and then to keep secure for analysis later. Since some of the interviews were booked back-to-back to each other, and/or the researcher had to commute back to her office across town immediately after some of the interviews ended, this goal was not
met with all 11 interviews but an effort was made to ensure the field notes were compiled at least within 24 hours of the interview being conducted.

The field notes were then transcribed to the researcher’s reflective journal, which was kept in an online journal via Penzu.com. A reflective journal entry was made for each individual interview and additional observations and reflections along with participants’ demographic information and pseudonyms added. The field notes contributed to developing follow-up questions for use in subsequent interviews and also served as a data source that contributed to the data analysis process. The field notes were also incorporated as part of the coding process in ATLAS.ti. Notes included physical descriptions of the interview setting, the participants, along with impressions, concerns, or other thoughts considered noteworthy.

**Researcher’s Reflective Journal.** The researcher’s reflective journal was an invaluable tool in the qualitative research process. It was incorporated into the research process to provide a data set of the researcher’s reflection on the research act as well as to offer another opportunity for triangulation of data sets at multiple levels (Janesick, 2011). By starting a journal at the onset of the study and then throughout the process, the researcher’s voice was ever-present and documented the process as it unfolded including acknowledging and examining possible biases and challenges. Journal entries also included first impressions, referring back to the theoretical framework and literature as well as denoted ideas for further research or study which also contributed credibility to the research findings. Reflecting on each participant’s experience also allowed the researcher to consciously remove herself from the
expressed experience of the participant’s (Maxwell, 1996) potentially reducing bias.

As previously mentioned, reflections on field notes were included in the reflective journal and referred back to throughout the data collection/analysis process as supplemental information and for triangulation purposes. The researcher’s reflective journal served as a tool to document the progress of the study as well as the dissertation including a reflection on how the researcher has been impacted both personally and professionally as a result. Reflective journal entries also included documentation of email exchanges and follow-up responses from participants and feedback from committee chair and members after the pre-proposal and pre-defense committee meetings. By opting to use Penzu.com, a secure on-line journal, the researcher’s reflections were password-protected and better secured than a hand-written journal might have been. Hand-written field notes and observations and relevant email correspondence could be transcribed or cut-and-pasted into a reflective journal entry and then shredded or deleted.

**Data Analysis**

“There is no particular moment when data analysis begins. Analysis is a matter of giving meaning to first impressions, as well as to final compilations.” (Stake, 1995)

By providing a detailed account of 11 cases, cross-case comparisons were used to search for similarities and differences. It was important to begin with an analytic strategy (Yin, 2014). Coding was the primary tool used for this analysis. The focus of data collection and subsequent analysis was organized through the lens of Tinto’s (2012) *Conditions for Student Success*, the study’s theoretical framework. Each
interview was transcribed by a professional online transcription service, Production
Transcripts, Inc., and then each was categorized and sub-grouped according to themes
manually and then assisted by ATLAS.ti, a data analysis tool.

Stake (1995) described two methods to find meaning: direct interpretation of an
individual’s experience and through aggregation of instances of all participants until
something can be said about the individuals as a group. In Chapter 4, the results are
organized sequentially and in alignment with the research questions. The initial
analysis of patterns and themes for each individual case was then synthesized to
highlight similarities and differences in themes and patterns across all the cases (Yin,
2014).

Coding. Coding is commonly associated with qualitative data analysis. Saldaña
(2009) defined a code as a researcher-generated word or short phrase that symbolically
assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a
portion of language-based or visual data. Saldaña referred to coding as the transitional
process between data collection and more extensive data analysis. Since coding is
heuristic (from the Greek, meaning “to discover”), it is the initial step toward an even
more rigorous and evocative analysis and interpretation for a report.

Case (1995) further described coding as a way to classify entire or parts of
episodes, interviews, or documents, making them more retrievable at a later time. It is
also recognized that for new researchers, coding can provide challenges. Therefore,
Case suggested making decisions as to what to look for in the way of coding categories
and potential relationships before data are collected. As previously mentioned, for this
study initial codes were formulated from the theoretical framework of Tinto’s (2012) conditions related to student success: expectations, support, assessment and feedback, and engagement. The rationale behind doing this was that initial coding is particularly appropriate for beginning qualitative researchers learning how to code data. That data entailed a variety of data forms including interview transcripts, field notes, reflective journals, and other relevant documents (Saldaña, 2013).

A supplemental strategy to assist with coding was to look for patterns. Hatch (2002) suggested the following pattern characteristics (see Figure 3.1) to keep in mind when coding: similarity (things happen in the same way), difference (they happen in predictably different ways), frequency (they happen often or seldom), sequence (they happen in a certain order), correspondence (they happen in relation to other activities or events), and causation (one appears to cause another).

As recommended by Auerbach and Silverstein (2003), a copy of the purpose of the research, the overall and guiding questions, theoretical framework, and other major issues was kept close at hand during coding process. This, in addition to the initial codes formulated in advance served to guide the researcher in remaining focused during the process particularly when making coding decisions such as identifying new codes that emerged.

At the suggestion of the outside committee member, who was the researcher’s Methods expert member, one of the initial interviews coded by the researcher was randomly selected and provided, along with a list of codes formulated in Atlas.ti to the committee member to blind-code. A meeting was then scheduled to cross-compare the
coding of the interview by the researcher and the committee member for the purpose of establishing inter-rater reliability.

Figure 3.1 Pattern Characteristics in Coding (Hatch, 2002)

It was then suggested at the onset of the meeting that if the desired inter-rater reliability ratio was not achieved, more than one interview would be blind-coded.

The process to compare how each of us coded the interview took approximately two hours and the end result was an inter-reliability rating of 67% meaning there was agreement in codes identified 2 out of 3 times overall. This was considered to be a sufficient number, particularly for a novice researcher, to confirm the researcher was coding accurately and could proceed with data analysis. The blind-coding exercise also allowed for an expert member check as discussion about some of the rationale
surrounding coding differences and suggestions for coding revisions were incorporated as a result before further data analysis continued.

**Triangulation.** Triangulation is the term given to seeking convergence and corroboration of results from different methods studying the same phenomenon (Johnson & Christensen, 2012). Triangulation is used to increase the credibility or trustworthiness of a research finding. As qualitative researchers, triangulation may confirm that we have the meaning right or perhaps that we need to examine differences for possible multiple meanings.

The use of other data sources assisted with data triangulation. A major strength of case study data collection is the opportunity to use many different sources of evidence (Yin, 2014). A case study finding or conclusion is likely to be more convincing and accurate if it is based on several different sources of information. For this study, triangulation data sources included field notes, member checks, and the researcher’s reflective journal.

Supplemental sources for triangulation purposes also included observations of Veteran students on an informal basis on campus, a tour of the Office of Veterans Success on campus, introductions to staff members in the Office of Veterans Success, a review of the university’s Veterans Services website and other on-line or text documents that were available during the research study. It was important to cite all relevant sources used to arrive at specific findings by referring to specific documents, interviews or observations.
Member checking. Another form of triangulation is member checking (Saldaña, 2013). For this study, participants were provided the opportunity to review the interview transcriptions and initial findings as a way of validating the findings and to provide input. The assumption was that member checking would serve to verify accuracy, provide clarification or elaboration on interview conversations, and finally, to provide possible suggestions for consideration by the researcher of other sources of data that might be relevant to the study. Once the interview transcript and initial findings were available, the participant were sent an email request (see Appendix K for Member Check Request) along with a transcript of the interview, with pseudonym used in place of the participant’s name, to review the information and to respond, preferably within two weeks back to the researcher. None of the participants opted to respond back to the member check request possibly due to it being close to final exams or the end of the semester. Or, it may have been that all were satisfied with the content of the interview transcripts and had no suggested additions or deletions. On occasion, the researcher also solicited clarification via email on certain direct quotes from individual participants and those requests for clarification were answered promptly.

The Veteran Services director also served as a resource and expert member check for the researcher intermittently throughout the research study, another valuable resource for triangulation purposes. The expert member agreed to be available to discuss questions from the researcher that may have arisen as a result of the interviews and subsequent coding and analysis of the data, which also contributed to inter-rater
reliability. Another purpose for soliciting this input throughout the study was to attempt to limit potential researcher’s bias.

**Ethical Considerations**

Anonymity was important because participants shared personal and sometimes sensitive information during the study. Steps were taken to ensure anonymity including the use of pseudonyms to identify participants in data collection and analysis and storing documents that identify participants in a secure location with restricted access.

Heeding Yin’s (2014) depiction of what constitutes a good case study researcher, this researcher attempted to:

- strive for the highest ethical standards while doing research;
- acknowledged having a responsibility to scholarship, such as neither plagiarizing nor falsifying information;
- maintain a strong professional competence that included keeping up with related research; and
- understand and divulge the needed methodological qualifiers and limitations to my work.

It was important to acknowledge that the experiences described by Veteran students who participated in this study may potentially raise ethical questions. Careful consideration was given to avoid inadvertently asking participants to recall memories or experiences that may have been traumatic for them. If deemed necessary during the course of an interview, the participants would have been provided with a list of counseling resources if any had communicated needing to seek further assistance at the
conclusion of the interview. If any participants appeared to be uncomfortable during questioning, they were reminded of the voluntary nature of their participation and that the interview could stop at any time. In one case, this offer was made to a participant who communicated feeling under the weather at the beginning of and throughout the interview but the participant opted to continue.

As participants would be asked to share their experiences which may have related both to their military experiences as well as their experiences as students, it was expected that their willingness to share candid views on this topic will be contingent upon an assurance of confidentiality along with perceived rapport between the researcher and the participant. Any identifiable links to personal information were removed from interview transcripts and subsequent presentation of the data analysis. Upon completion of the data collection phase of this research, audio recordings of each interview have been securely stored and will be kept for five years, as required by the University's IRB guidelines, and then destroyed. While the pseudonyms will remain with the typed transcripts and participant questionnaires, all other connecting identifiers will be removed when research is completed. Confirmation that the researcher has completed current IRB training requirements to conduct research with human subjects is provided in Appendix L. The research plans for this study were approved by the University’s Institutional Review Board (IRB) on September 15, 2016 (see Appendix M).

**Limitations**

The inexperience or experience of the researcher may possibly be a limitation or delimitation for the study. The sample size is a limitation and may not be
representative of gender and ethnicity (although demographic characteristics differ between military populations and the characteristics of the university’s population in which the study was undertaken). Due to the reliance on self-reported data, consideration must be given as to the participants’ motivations and biases and the overall subjective nature of self-reported data. The researcher’s role as the primary data collection instrument may also be a limitation.

**PhD Dissertation Timeline**

The timeline for this dissertation is reflected in Table 2. This information is not only provided to outline the targeted and actual timeline for the research to be conducted and completed but also provides a timetable that might assist future researchers who may wish to replicate the current study. The researcher acknowledges that unforeseen, sometimes unanticipated events and circumstances led to adjustments in the timeline.
<table>
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<tr>
<th>To-Do List</th>
<th>Projected Start Date</th>
<th>Targeted Completion Date</th>
<th>Actual Completion Date</th>
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<tr>
<td>Doctoral Coursework</td>
<td>Summer (May) 2012</td>
<td>Fall (Dec.) 2014</td>
<td>Spring (May) 2015</td>
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<td>Fall 2012</td>
<td>Fall 2012</td>
<td>Fall 2012; renewed April 2016.</td>
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<td>Spring (Feb.) 2015</td>
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<td>Qualifying Exams</td>
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<td>Enter Candidacy</td>
<td>Spring 2015</td>
<td>Spring 2015</td>
<td>Spring 2015 (March)</td>
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<td>Start Dissertation Hours</td>
<td>Summer 2015</td>
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<td>Committee member change due to retirement.</td>
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<td>Begin Researcher Reflective Journal</td>
<td>Fall 2014</td>
<td>Summer 2015</td>
<td>Spring 2015</td>
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<td>Proposal “Draft” Meeting w/Chair(s)</td>
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<td>Pre-Proposal Defense Meeting w/Chair(s)</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Mid-Fall 2015</td>
<td>May 2016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prepare IRB application</td>
<td>November 2015</td>
<td>Complete by Proposal Defense date</td>
<td>August 2016</td>
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<td>Fall 2015</td>
<td>August 3, 2016</td>
</tr>
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<td>*2 copies of approved dissertation proposal and Request for Proposal Defense Form with signatures with date/time/place three weeks before proposal defense to COE and copies to committee members.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Committee change as Chair retired; Co-Chair assumed role as Chair</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Submit IRB Application</td>
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<td>End of Fall 2015</td>
<td>August 6, 2016</td>
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<td>Data-collection (upon IRB approval)</td>
<td>Pending IRB approval</td>
<td>Early Spring 2016</td>
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<td>Data analysis</td>
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<td>Late Fall 2015-early Spring 2016</td>
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<td>Actual Completion Date</td>
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<tr>
<td>Write Chapters 4-5</td>
<td>January 2016</td>
<td>Feb./March 2016</td>
<td>December 26, 2016 – February 12, 2017</td>
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<tr>
<td>Submission of complete manuscript to Chair</td>
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<td>Late Apr/early May 2016</td>
<td>February 12, 2017</td>
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<tr>
<td>Submission, upon Chair’s Pre-Defense approval, of the complete manuscript to the committee</td>
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<td>mid-May 2016</td>
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<td>early May 2016</td>
<td>mid-May 2016</td>
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<td>Prep for Final Defense</td>
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<td>early Jun 2016</td>
<td>March 7-26, 2017</td>
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<td>***Final Defense</td>
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<td>June 2016</td>
<td>March 27, 2017</td>
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<tr>
<td>***Final Oral Defense must be held at least 3 weeks prior to end of term. Request for Final Oral Exam form and Successful Defense Form and Certificate of Approval (completed, not signed) due at least two weeks before scheduled defense date. Complete final revisions/submit following required edits and final preparation for ETD.</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>July 2016</td>
<td>March 28, 2017</td>
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<tr>
<td>****Graduation</td>
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<td>August 2016</td>
<td>May 6, 2017</td>
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<tr>
<td>****Graduation application due by 4th week of semester dissertation will be defended.</td>
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Chapter Summary

This chapter outlined the study's proposed research design. First, the specific methodological approaches used in a qualitative case study grounded in social constructivism were described. Second, sections discussing the role of the researcher and site and participants followed. Data collection methods were described including a feasibility study, interview protocol, field notes, observations and the researcher's reflective journal. Finally, data analysis techniques were described including coding and triangulation followed by ethical considerations and limitations. The last section of this chapter included the timeline for completing the study.

Chapter 4 will present the findings and results of the data collection and analysis followed by Chapter 5, which will include a discussion of the findings and implications and opportunities for future research.
CHAPTER FOUR:  
Findings

Introduction

The findings of this qualitative study of 11 Veteran students’ perceptions of their academic experiences as they entered or reentered the university setting are presented in this chapter. The intent is to improve mutual understanding between Veteran students, faculty, staff and students, and colleges/universities. Understanding students’ experiences, in this case, as related to the Veteran student population, has not been widely explored in educational research related to student success.

The overall question that broadly guided this study was: What are Veteran students’ perceptions of their academic experiences?

Additional questions to further guide the overall question and aligned with the theoretical framework included:

1. What are Veteran students’ expectations prior to entering or reentering the university and to what extent are these expectations met?

2. Which elements of academic, social and financial support advance or impede Veteran students’ academic progress and persistence?

3. What are Veteran students’ perceptions on the extent to which students, faculty, and staff acknowledge and contribute to the needs of Veteran students related to student success?
4. To what extent do Veteran students feel engaged with faculty and fellow classmates in the classroom and on campus?

This chapter begins with a description of the selection/recruitment process of participants and basic demographic information. A more detailed summary of background information on the Veteran students who participated in the study follows. The findings are then organized and discussed in terms of the four research questions. Concluding thoughts and a brief chapter summary follow.

Participants

Selection/Recruitment

For this study, purposeful sampling was the intent with criteria as follows:

- Veterans or service members who have served post-9/11;
- Undergraduate Veteran students who are currently or were recently enrolled;
- Undergraduate Veteran students who are presently or have previously used Post-9/11 GI benefits;
- Demographic representation will vary by gender, ethnicity, age and classification in college (first-year, second-year, junior, senior);
- Representation will vary by academic standing, cumulative GPA, and academic program/area of study.

One modification was made as a result of the IRB approval process in that it was clarified that the Director of Veteran Success could not directly solicit participants for the study on behalf of the researcher. This change may have indirectly affected the intended representativeness of the sample. Instead, a short list of potential participants
(currently enrolled undergraduate Veteran students) along with their University- assigned email addresses was provided to the researcher to contact. There was an attempt by the Office of Veterans Success to provide an initial list of students to the researcher that varied by ethnicity and military branch of service but not to the level of specificity that was outlined in the original sampling guidelines previously described. Although IRB approval was granted in mid-September, 2016, active recruitment did not commence for another three weeks due to more pressing priorities/deadlines on the Director of Veteran Success’s calendar that took precedence, delaying the forwarding of the list of potential participants to the researcher.

Since the minimum number of participants was targeted at 10-12, the recruitment plan was to continue contacting potential participants until the targeted number of volunteers responded back to the researcher as willing to participate. A total of 11 Veteran students participated in this study and interviews were conducted from mid-October to late November and interview transcripts sent out for member checks just prior to final exams and the end of the fall 2016 semester in early December. Some of the students who agreed to participate had already heard about the study as word spread throughout the Office of Veteran Success particularly after interviews commenced and students were curious as to what was going on. One student’s name was provided by an academic advisor who had previously worked with the researcher.

**Demographic Information**

Participants were provided an opportunity to supply their own pseudonyms at the time they filled out a brief participant questionnaire prior to interviews but all left
the decision up to the researcher. See Table 3 for a breakdown of participants’ assigned pseudonyms and basic demographic information. Although the pool of participants was representative by gender, ethnicity and major/program of study, all but one were classified as seniors and all but one had attended the university for at least two semesters. One participant was a new transfer to the university for the fall semester. All participants self-reported being in good academic standing although some expressed concerns and apprehensions about the rigor of their programs of study and current semester coursework.

Table 3
Participant Demographic Information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Student Classification</th>
<th>Major/Program of Study</th>
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<td>25-35</td>
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<td>M</td>
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<td>Senior</td>
<td>Economics</td>
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<td>Jose</td>
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<td>25-35</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>Public Health</td>
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<td>Kevin</td>
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<td>Priscilla</td>
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<td>Health Sciences</td>
</tr>
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<td>Roger</td>
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<td>Pete</td>
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<td>25-35</td>
<td>Senior</td>
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<td>Carlina</td>
<td>F</td>
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<td>25-35</td>
<td>Senior</td>
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<tr>
<td>Marcus</td>
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<td>25-35</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tim</td>
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<td>African-American</td>
<td>25-35</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>Geography</td>
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The question related to age on the participant questionnaire was based on typical age group breakdowns in higher education with traditional aged students described as 18-24 followed by 25-35 and then 36-55 and 55+. Since all of the
participants fell within the age range of 25-35, they would typically be referred to as part of a non-traditional student cohort. When asked about where they primarily grew up, answers ranged from the local area to as far away as Sweden (see Figure 4.1).

![Figure 4.1 Geographical Locations of Participants’ Hometowns.](image-url)
Background Information on Participants

Upbringing/Experiences Prior to Enlistment

The first tier of interview questions related to collecting background information on the participants. The 11 Veteran students’ descriptions of their experiences growing up varied yet reflected similarities at times. Over half moved more than once during their childhood years. Pete described his upbringing as,

Well, I’m from Port Allegany, Pennsylvania. My mom, when I was growing up was—her sister had died so as a result we moved around a lot. So I lived the military brat lifestyle without having the luxury of being in the military, so I never lived anywhere longer than two years. But I call Pennsylvania my home because that’s where I’ve accrued the most time.

while Tim described:

Actually, I was born in New York, moved here, where I started school, and got up to sixth grade basically. I went to Elementary—it was a private school—and my parents moved me to Antigua. So I lived in the Caribbean, where I went to high school and graduated from Antigua. Went to , an all-boys academy. That was a lot of fun. And then I came back to the U.S.

Four participants revealed military family backgrounds. Deion explained that his father was drafted into the Army while in high school, while Jose bragged, “My family is a big military family. My dad was in the Army. Probably five or six of my uncles, they were all Army, Marine Corps, Navy.” Some participants were more revealing than others
when discussing their childhoods and about half disclosed either having a single parent upbringing or experiencing the divorce of their parents. As Marcus put it,

I didn’t grow up in a very nice area. I guess you’d say humble family, basically. Father wasn’t around. Typical story. But it wasn’t a bad upbringing.

Kevin described moving around:

I was actually born in Sweden. My parents got divorced when I was five, and my mom moved to the States. She lived in the States prior to marrying my dad. and when they got divorced we moved to Florida, and I moved with her. So I went to a school a year in Sweden, a year here, a year in Sweden, a year here. And then once I hit high school, my dad told me, “Look you need real high school transcripts. You either stay over there, or you come here and stay here.” So I stayed here, finished high school.

while Roger described,

And my upbringing was really a mixed bag, there was a lot of...issues growing up. My parents didn’t really get along, lot of, lot of back and forth fighting. And it wasn’t until I was 17 my parents split up.

A different perspective was provided by Michael.

I grew up in a family of twelve children...huge family. I was adopted, which also included seven other people in my family that were adopted, all from South Korea. So that’s—yeah, so we had an amazing upbringing,
and I was afforded every available opportunity. I guess you could say. My parents definitely—they decided to become what we called “education poor” and provided education for all my—all my family members went to school, and so on and so forth. So I had a good upbringing, Chicago.

As part of a follow-up question later, Michael clarified that by “poor” he meant, “They devoted their money to ensuring we all could get a great education after high school.”

**Educational Background Prior to Enlistment**

When asked about their educational background after high school and prior to enlisting in the military, about one-third each gave one of three answers. Three participants started college but all affirmed they were not ready. One tried out community college and another tried a semester of college right out of high school. Still another, was confident that she was ready to go directly into college with 30 hours of college credit earned as dual enrollment while still in high school, but, as Priscilla put it, I had about 30 credit hours when I actually moved out of my house and went to college. So I started out with a nice chunk, just didn’t work out. I wasn’t prepared to be a college student, partied too hard, just not mature, ready enough for that.

Three participants entered technical schools after high school. Deion revealed he had never planned to go to college so instead went to school to become a licensed engineer and received an apprenticeship. Carlina went to school to become an EMT and got a degree in firefighting and was a paramedic. Tim also went to a community college and completed an EMT program.
The rest of the participants did not continue with post-secondary education directly after high school and two entered the military straight out of high school.

**Reasons for Joining the Military**

The participants provided a variety of different reasons for deciding to join the military and in most cases, more than one reason; some quite compelling. Figure 4.2 depicts the most common reasons provided by the 11 Vets who participated in this study.

![Figure 4.2 Participants’ Reasons for Joining the Military](image)

As explained by Ali,

I tried out community college, but that didn’t really work out. I kind of failed out of community college, and that’s kind of one of the reasons I joined the military in the first place... Because I didn’t really know kind of what I was doing with my life. So I needed sort of a purpose and kind of
a goal. That, and just a mixture of personal issues too. So it was just the right thing for me to do at that point in my life.

And by Pete who suggested:

I thought I was too dumb to do anything other than—and I didn’t have any plans. I didn’t feel like I was qualified to do anything really outside that, and it came up, it was easy, it was there and I did it. It wasn’t something where I gave it much thought. Boys don’t have much forethought; they’re like, “That’s neat, let’s do that.” And that’s it.

Carlina desired to make a connection with her father, who was prior Navy, as she envisioned they would then have common ground and she also cited the educational benefits. Tim emphasized heritage as well having come from a military family, “Most of the males joined in the military, going back to my grandfather…I always knew I wanted to go in the military.”

Marcus’s calling to join provided an entirely different perspective. He already had a decent job as an electrician earning $15. an hour at age 18. As he explained,

I remember hearing about stop-loss, about guys coming back and they weren’t in the right state of mind, or right frame of mind, where they were just struggling with PTSD, and those guys would have to—who have to go back again and again and again. And especially, like basically Fort Bragg is where the guys they’ll be—they’ll go for a year and come home for six months, and they’re back on, or they’re back out for another year. And they don’t have time to actually process or even decompress. And
those guys just perpetually at war. And I heard about that, and I heard about guys killing themselves, and I felt like that, “Well, I can do more. I can step up like some—why not me?” Right?

Jose had always wanted to go into the service and was in boot camp when 9/11 (September 9, 2011 U.S. terrorist attacks) happened and that was how his military service began.

**Military Service**

As for military branch of service, the majority of participants (n=4) for this study previously served in the United States Navy followed by Army (n=3). [Refer to Figure 4.3.]

![Military Branch Served](image)

*Figure 4.3 Participants’ Military Branch of Service [N=11]*

Years of active duty service ranged from four to 13 years with the majority (64%) of the 11 Vets reporting having served 5-6 years prior to separating. All participants except one served at least one stint overseas with the most common overseas locations
cited as Afghanistan, Iraq and the Persian Gulf. All participants held enlisted ranks ranging from E-4 – E-7 with titles ranging from Petty Officer 3rd class, Sergeant, Staff Sergeant, Corporal/C4, E-4/HM3 to SFC/E-7. 100% of the participants confirmed using military benefits to assist with funding their college tuition and expenses. Eight participants are currently using Post 9/11 GI Benefits and the other three Ch. 31 Vocational Rehab funding. Only one participant acknowledged already having exceeded the maximum eligibility of 36 months to receive Post 9/11 GI benefits.

Military Experiences

As researcher, listening to these 11 Veteran students recall their military experiences and how much their lives were effected as a result, served to enrich the meanings behind their answers throughout the line of questioning with regard to their perspectives and experiences when they entered or reentered college after separation. A snapshot of some of their positions and areas of expertise in the military is reflected in Figure 4.4.

Figure 4.4 Wordle Depicting Military Positions Held by Participants
It would be impossible to deduce Ali’s job in the military upon first meeting her (she had a quiet, reserved demeanor) with the exception, perhaps, of a possible hint suggested by a glimpse of a tattoo just visible below her shirt sleeve on her upper arm. Ali explained:

My life. It was mostly I was a heavy gunner most of the time. And as a staff sergeant, I was in charge of armory. So I was basically dealing with guns the whole time. It was a lot of stress, a lot of—just lot of reasons. I was ready to get out by the time I was done, but it ended up being the best thing that ever happened to me, at the end of the day. So all the experiences that I went through were definitely worth it. Well, here, I mean, I wouldn’t have been able to be here and now without the experiences I had. And meeting the people that I did overseas and having the experiences of being deployed to Afghanistan, you know, that’s something not a lot of people have been through. And I feel like now I’m part of a really tight-knit community of Veterans, and because of that, I want to work with Veterans the rest of my life. And I’ve kind of found my purpose within my service.

Equally soft-spoken and slightly hesitant when our interview began, Marcus described his experiences:

I was a combat engineer. I was a paratrooper. I jumped out of airplanes, and I’m afraid of heights. I’m like really afraid of heights. Yeah, my drill sergeant said, “Oh, well, you want to go to Airborne School?” and I was
like, “Yeah, I’ll go. Why not? I didn’t know what Airborne School was...I was a combat engineer. Which means I looked for—I looked for and placed explosives. I was “blown place qualified” <laughs> I was a paratrooper as well, so that means that my job specifically dealt with LARA (Land Airfield Reconnaissance Attackers). That means I would jump out of an airplane into enemy territory, set a charge on their airfield so they couldn’t deploy their jets, and then try to get out of there before they realized that—where we were.

Brad, on the other hand, had been an athlete in high school. He summarized his service of five active duty, eight total years:

Been everywhere from Norfolk, VA to Naples, Italy, Met a lot of great people. Experienced a lot of different things, different cultures. Helped give me structure, discipline. Taught me a lot of valuable lessons for life.

It was. I mean, it was a great experience.

Figure 4.5 reflects the varied geographical locations the participants reported having served at some point during their military service.
Figure 4.5 Geographical Locations of Participants’ Tours of Duty

Kevin depicted a different experience.

I shipped off to boot camp...then I went to Pensacola for 11 months...I was an air winger, at first I wanted to be counter-intel. And my recruiter told me that was fine and dandy. I could be counter-intel. And then when I got to the combat training, my sergeant major told me I couldn’t be counter-intel unless I gave up my Swedish citizenship. And I didn’t want to do that, so then they threw me in whatever the needs of the Marine Corps was...I felt a little stabbed in the back by my recruiter. Because he should have told—he knew, he definitely knew I needed a Top Secret, and Top Secret can’t be held with a dual citizenship. But I got over it...So I just went on with my military career, and I loved it, and I enjoyed it. I met a lot of good people, a lot of good guys and girls, definitely friends for
life...It was a long time, it was a good time. Didn't have any—well there's always bad experiences I guess, but it was definitely more good than bad.

The “veteran” of the group of participants served 13 years. Michael described his military experiences and later his academic experiences (including being selected as a Pat Tillman scholarship recipient) and alluded to dealing with some adversity along the way.

I joined in the Army in ’99, pre-9/11. I was in Korea then came back when 9/11 happened, and then I—probably two years later I was overseas in Iraq in Fallujah...I came back and then I worked my way up the system and I became an E-6, I became a squad leader, and was deployed again during the surge, and then I came back, was promoted to E-7 after that, and then I eventually ended up having some medical issues and then was separated from the military after 13 years...I served in every position you can probably think of in the infantry from a dismounted fire team leader, 240 gunner team leader...RTO...Humvee driver, Humvee gunner, Bradley driver, Bradley gunner, Bradley commander. I was platoon sergeant, squad leader...yeah, I’ve gone from doing nothing to coordinating assets on a battlefield with air, ground and everything, so...I do what I know needs to be done, period.

Each participants’ military experiences left an indelible impression on their later life experiences including decisions made to separate from the military as well as next
steps such as the decision to enter or reenter college. More of their experiences will be described in the sections that follow.

**Educational Experiences While Serving**

In retrospect, some of the Veteran students interviewed regretted not getting more post-secondary education completed while still serving in the military. But two participants managed to complete Associate’s degrees while still in and one had amassed around 60 credits while in.

Modes of delivery included online courses, evening classes at duty stations, coursework through UMUC (University of Maryland University College) [which has provided educational opportunities for military service members/dependents stationed around the world for over 65 years] and AIU (American InterContinental University) [a for-profit university with open admissions that offers grants to military active-duty and Veterans], correspondence courses, and military professional schools.

In a couple of cases, the Vets’ jobs were not conducive to focusing on completing post-secondary coursework. As Marcus explained,

> I tried to go to a night class and that didn’t work out...No, because being airborne, you have to jump at night. And then they can just tell ya, “Okay, well, you’re jumping tonight.” And I had no choice about it. [Researcher: So you kind of like had to just be on call, right?] Exactly.

Roger echoed that sentiment, “No, they didn’t facilitate the time and I worked way too much..And it wasn’t a priority for me much anyway.”

Michael admitted beginning to think about it at his last duty station:
Towards the end, my last duty station... I tried starting my education there. So I enrolled in an online school while I was there because I had the time. What we call “taking a knee” is pretty much just taking a break from the line and being an instructor. So I was an instructor, but it didn’t work out that well because I was still—I was getting deployed. I was TDY ten months out of a year so I was never home, and then I’d go overseas to train people. So it didn’t really work that well.

Pete admitted taking correspondence courses with the sole motivation of getting promotion points to get promoted. Tim alluded to doing the same. Jose attempted to choose training schools that would set him up to do something in the healthcare field, which was what he wanted to do from the beginning, and he studied advanced emergency medicine and eventually physiology school.

**Contributing Factors Regarding Decision to Enter or Reenter College**

The final interview question related to gathering background information on the study’s participants asked about contributing factors to their decisions to enter or re-enter college after separating from the military. In some cases, one word was enough to identify the primary reason while for others, further explanation provided a richer description of their rationale. Brief descriptors of the main influences in the Vets’ decisions to enter or reenter college are reflected in Figure 4.6.
When responding to this question, Marcus gave a subtle hint that he had been injured during service; this was the only time he alluded to this throughout the interview:

Well, I was medically retired out of the military after Afghanistan, because my job was to find roadside munitions, or---and basically destroy roadside munitions. And sometimes they find you. So I was medically retired for that---well, because of that. I got out and I was sitting around and I was thinking, "Okay, well, what's next?"

Although Jose had assumed being a paramedic was his calling, he had a change of heart after returning to civilian life and resuming work in the same field. He realized that he no longer had the same passion any longer; therefore, he decided to return to college to change career paths:

So, one of the things I realized I didn’t want to do paramedic anymore. It was just one of those things, you know, seeing a lot of loss of life. You
know, I figured I was just-- I’d have too many bad habits to be a professional EMT again. A lot of the things when you’re doing an active duty there’s a lot of leeway. There’s a lot of things that you can do, you’re allowed to do, that as a professional EMT here in the States, it’s red flags. You’re always using gloves for everything. You’re always doing everything standard SOP, very, very regimented. And in the field you can get away with unhygienic things. It’s life over limb compared to in the civilian world where it’s vastly different. So, that was one of the main things that kind of got me started…so, now that’s why I’m in public health, want to do something with occupational health and safety.

Despite having finished an Associate’s in Business Admin while still in the service, Kevin suggested having a different drive when approaching school the second time. So when he got out, he decided to follow a path similar to other family members.

While I was in the Marine Corps, my younger sister finished her degree in engineering. My dad’s an engineer, and…my other sister was going for engineering, but she stopped, she felt more of it wasn’t her passion, her passion is more with animals...But I decided that I wanted to look into engineering and see what it was all about. And I did a lot of research, and then when I was done I decided that I wanted to pursue chemical engineering. It’s a very broad field as well, so there’s a lot I can do with a chemical engineering degree.
Michael acknowledged recognizing that he would need to do something when he got out and that this would entail the necessity to further his education.

So, I started having issues, medical issues, when I---and that’s eventually what led to me getting out of the military, and then as soon as I got out, I knew that I needed to do something, and I also knew that---going from an E-7 and making this amount of money to going to nothing was huge. Even though my wife---she's a physical therapist---that doesn't matter. I mean, it's---so I enrolled in school literally I think a week after, and I knew---one, because I knew that I needed to further my education and I wasn’t going to do anything unless I did that, and that was probably going to be the most important aspect. So I knew that I couldn't be complacent and live a sedentary lifestyle so I enrolled in school right away.

Carlina had completed her EMT degree prior to joining the military and worked as a firefighter and hoped that by joining the military, she might get a jump start on getting on Bayflite, which she suggested would entail an 11-year wait in the civilian world. A family crisis changed her path.

My dad was diagnosed with cancer so I kinda made a really quick decision to go ahead and not renew and to get out. And he’s---my mom doesn’t deal well with anxiety so I got out to help her. And, while I was out, I found that I had to move forward and to do something. And part of that thing that I wanted to do as being on Bayflite was getting my nursing. So I actually went to again, [name of school] when it was Community
College. But I went and I got an ADN. So I got my degree in nursing and I worked as a nurse for a while. And I realized that, as much as I love people, I wasn’t spending the time with them that I wanted to and I wasn’t helping them the way I wanted to. So I’m back here doing my degree in biomedical science and then hopefully med school. We’ll see.

Other reasons cited by participants included just simply wanting to finally graduate, needing a credential to advance, family encouragement, financial reasons, and the inability to translate military job experience into a comparable civilian counterpart.

**Research Question Findings**

**Research Question 1** What are Veteran students' expectations prior to entering or reentering the university and to what extent are these expectations met?

**Decision to Attend this University.** The top three reasons participants gave for choosing to apply to this university were word-of-mouth from family/friends/VA counselor, location and reputation. See Figure 4.7 for a complete list of primary reasons.
Pete admitted the influence of a friend as a primary motivator for taking a first look at this university.

It was...kind of a shot in the dark to move [here] in the first place.

Because when I got out, my mom was living down in [south part of this state], my family members were down there, my older sister...and younger sister lived up in Seattle. So I kind of didn’t know where to go.

And my friend, he’s from [city close to here]. He actually works here at this office as well, and goes to school here. He told me that he planned on coming back to [here], and so before I got out I made a few trips down here..I enjoyed the area, I enjoyed the city. [It] has a little bit of everything, so I really liked it. So I decided that I’d give it a shot and move down here. So I started school at [local state college], and once I
needed to transition to my courses that weren’t offered there, then I moved here. And... I looked into the engineering program here before I moved down here, and it was within the top 10 research schools in the nation, and the chemical engineering was also within the top 10 programs. So that was really a booster for me to come down here and start school here. I wasn’t really aware of the Veterans’ office at the time. I had no idea about it, until [my friend], he introduced me to everyone here, and the office and what they could do for us.

Priscilla did not appear to care for the climate at the state college she attended particularly regarding services for Veteran students.

The level of education probably, I was at [a local state college] and I just felt like no one really cared about me as a student, they were like-- it was a different advisor every time I went in there, there was always something messed up with the paperwork, someone had lost something, they needed this other thing that I shouldn’t have needed and it just was really frustrating. And I have a lot of friends that have gone here and they were just like, "Check it out." So I came and talked to the [academic] advisor, and she was really helpful and I just thought it would be a good fit for me and it's a lot closer to my house so that helped too.

Marcus followed his heart.

Well, actually [this university] was my last choice actually. I applied to [other top universities in state]. I got in all. But I was in love at the time,
thought I was going to start a family and had to buy this house. So I bought a home, and I was kind of stuck. I didn't want to have to turn around and sell, you know, later… I looked at the best colleges in [this state] and I applied to them.

**Qualities and Support Services.** Surprisingly, only a couple of participants were aware of the university having a strong “Vet-Friendly” reputation prior to arriving on campus. Most presumed the typical services available on most college campuses would be available such as tutors/tutoring, academic advising and financial aid. The majority admitted not doing any research at all on what qualities or services the university might have. One participant gave all the credit to his admissions counselor in the Veterans’ office who guided him through the entire process resulting in him feeling that he would be set up for success. A couple had an idea based on going on a campus tour but the majority had no idea of the services available until they arrived for new student orientation. Two participants confirmed “googling” the university and Veterans to see what came up; one felt that information was a good selling point.

**Program of Study.** Less than half of the participants indicated that the reputation of the program of study they intended had a bearing on their decision to apply to this university. A couple cited national rankings and one heard about the reputation of her intended program at the state college she was attending. Jose praised his intended major program’s website:
Actually, yeah. Public Health, when I looked into their website, they actually had a lot of Veterans actually going into Public Health. So, they had a video of specifically people that just left active duty and were in [this university] and were in the College of Public Health. So, that’s another one of the reasons why I chose Public Health and [this university] also because I saw that on there and I didn’t realize that a lot of Vets were actually choosing Public Health.

**Program Delivery Method.** When asked if the program delivery options at the university played a factor in choosing this university, about half communicated that this was not a consideration at all in their decision to apply for admission. Three confirmed desiring a hybrid option (some classroom courses; some on-line) due to work and commutes. Two acknowledged that having primarily an in-class setting with day and evening options was important to them.

**Application/ Admissions Process.** The majority of Vets were pleasantly surprised at how easy the application/admissions process was. The familiarity with the common application was mentioned as was the ease of transfer if coming in with an Associate of Arts (A.A.) awarded from one of the state’s public two-year and state colleges.

Deion cited challenges with Admissions after having to defer his admission to the following semester:

So I had submitted my application to the school. I was accepted for a semester. I wasn’t able to start that semester, so I decided I’d start the
following semester. And then from what I had understood everything was
good to go. I had been accepted into the school. So then when it came
time to register for classes and I tried to register, that’s when they told
me that I needed to sign up for an orientation first. So it was like a last-
minute thing, so I had to do like a rush orientation. Then once I did the
orientation, they told me, “You do your orientation, meet with the
advisor,” you’d be able to register. I did all that and then I tried to
register and then that’s when I found out, they were like, “Oh. Well, you
originally signed up for a previous semester, and you passed the deadline.
So now you have to wait one more semester.” So it was like, you know,
just dealing with that hassle. You know, they [the Office of Veteran
Success] were able to get things worked out for me so that I could start
that semester.

Jose described the process as relatively easy with the exception of two things:

..but the only part that actually, believe it or not, had the hardest time
was getting my residency—[in-state] residency. That was probably the
most--the immunization and the residency were the most difficult part.

Everything else was a pretty easy transition. But those two parts were the
hardest. Asking---the paper work that they require you bring it in. And it’s
understandable since students are usually at the front desk a lot of them
are, you know, up to par on a lot of the paperwork or documentation that
is acceptable or is not acceptable. And, so, that was-- that’s just a part of
the frustration that you have there. And then the immunization a lot of Vets don’t have access to their---it sounds kind of ironic-- don’t have access to their immunization records. So, a lot of them, including myself, kind of got a little bit frustrated with it. Luckily for me, I came to school here in [this city], so I just went to [this county], you know, their website and pulled up my immunization and, so, it was kind of relatively easy. But other vets it was kinda a little bit more frustrating, since they’re displaced from other parts of the country that makes it a little bit more difficult for them to obtain their immunization records.

Priscilla had a similar experience regarding immunization records.

The process I thought would be a little easier for admissions. They had problems with my vaccination records and things that apparently they always do and then military for some reason couldn't find my medical record anywhere, I never existed to them even though I have copies of it, so they wouldn't really accept my copies, they had to have official copies. So it was kind of a rigmarole trying to do that, but other than that, that was really the only hiccup I had in the initial process and yeah, it was easy, it took about a week to get everything together.

Overall consensus of the participants was that the application/admissions process was much easier and quicker than expected.

**Acceptance of Transfer Credit.** In general, participants were satisfied with the amount of transfer work (both military and college credit) that was accepted.
by this university. A few were not surprised by a lack of credits being accepted, due in part to their intended program of study (STEM majors). A couple were disappointed that technical credit was not considered as much as they thought it should be particularly when courses or training credit were seemingly relevant to their intended program of study.

**First Semester Registration.** As with most new transfer students, registering for their first semester of classes had its moments. (See Figure 4.8 for perceptions by the Vets of the registration process their first semester.) Participants unanimously reported needing somebody to assist with walking through the process to register for the first time but that it got easier as they learned how to navigate the system.

*Figure 4.8 Wordle Depicting First Semester Registration Experiences*
Comparisons to Previous Colleges/Universities. Participants often made comparisons to this university to where they had attended previously. The differences mentioned included campus size, class size, amount of writing required, more opportunities for student involvement, more attention, rigor and more of an air of professionalism when compared to a 2-year or state college.

Jose noted how much more active the university was when compared to the local community college he attended:

Actually, I had--I really did not know that they even had veteran programs here, Vet success center. I had no idea...But the sheer size of [here] compared to [previous school], it was a little bit intimidating. So, you kinda have that in your head...One of the biggest differences that I've seen here compared to [previous school] is the amount---not necessarily protesting, but a lot more active---activity as far as awareness. You know, a lot of clubs and different awareness---that was a little---that was basically the biggest thing that I've seen here. The sheer amount of information that is basically just bombarded on people...

Priscilla mentioned a difference in the level of difficulty and attention paid to students.

I feel like it's a little bit more challenging than previous schools I've attended and I like it, I feel like they want more from you, a little bit, not too much where it's overwhelming but I feel like at [previous college], they just were like, "Oh, you did it so you pass because you did it," and then no one even reads it, I don't know, I just felt like I'm being more
paid attention to here and the professors respond better. At my old school, no one ever even emailed me back, I would go three weeks and not get a response and you're not supposed to do that, and it's frustrating. But here's it's been great and every professor I've had has been extremely helpful...they're just a lot more professional than most professors I've had, so I like that.

Based on his experiences, Michael recommended getting “basics” done at an online institution or community college prior to coming to the university.

**Hindsight on Decision to Attend this University.** All but two participants felt the university had delivered what they expected; most felt it had exceeded their expectations. Pete admitted not even having looked at an advertisement for the university prior to coming but once he got here, thought it was a great school and is having a good time. Roger, who admitted being under the weather at the time of the interview as well as having apprehensions about an upcoming exam, responded:

Well...“The USS has delivered,” that’s like a service question. Have they served me? Kinda. I say kinda, because I feel like the education could be better. I feel like the delivery in which the professors can convey could be better. But my expectations out of me being a student, well I’ve met those expectations. I do what I’m supposed to do, I do my homework and I go to class. But coming from the school as a whole, I feel like the classroom could be better. Maybe they could hire more professors, or
maybe they could change the way they lecture. And the length of classes, maybe classes could be...instead of 16 weeks, they could be all year round. Those kind of semesters.

**Academic Preparedness.** Participants were asked if they felt their prior schooling, skills and abilities would contribute to or not their preparedness and readiness to start at this university. About half felt adequately prepared; slightly less than half did not feel prepared and a couple admitted being over-confident entering their first semester. Several mentioned concerns with succeeding in their math/science courses which was not surprising since most were pursuing STEM majors.

Ali made a comparison to the online school she had previously attended:

> The online school didn't prepare me at all. Because the way I studied for that is a lot different than how I'm studying for like Physics this semester in person. I think the military prepared me better, because it taught me how to prioritize my time as far as studying and things like that. So I think the military is a lot more beneficial than a community college and online college, in that aspect.

while Marcus replied,

> It didn't in my profession. I used to lay on my stomach with a 24-inch metal rod that I can probe for like land mines. Like that doesn't prepare you for Statistics or Algebra or English...once I decided on--settled on Economics, I didn't know how---what I was gonna do. I didn't know if I was even gonna, you know, if it'd be a good fit for me. I just jumped in
with a leap of faith, and thinking, "Okay, well, I'll just--," like in the military they always tell you, "There's nothing you can't do if you're well prepared. Prior preparation prevents piss-poor performance." And that's something-- The six P's. And so, you know, if you're prepared, there's nothing you cannot do.

Michael referenced the academic load:

For me, I think it was more I was just nervous about the load, the academic load that I was going to have. And plus going from an online institution to a---I call it a real university <laughs>---it's just---you're like, "Oh no, I don't know what to expect. This is the real deal. Holy smokes." But at the same time I was very well prepared at that online institution. My writing skills, they-- I'm so glad that I did my foundations there, because I really got an understanding for how to write properly and how to do things and take care of that early. But at the same time, I'm very outgoing and persistent with things, so I don't really accept---I don't want to say failure. I don't accept subpar performance.

and Kevin admitted not wanting, as he described it, to make the same mistake as he had at his first college:

I think.. as far as success goes is just self-discipline, about how much you study, and how much time you’re actually willing to give up of your free time. And at the time, coming from the—[previous college], at first I came in with a high school mentality, thinking, “Well this is fairly easy. I could
just go to class, show up, do the course, the minimal work, and I’ll be fine.” That surely wasn’t the case. After I failed my first course, and had to retake it, I shifted gears completely and was studying all the time for it. I ended up with a B in the course the second time around, which still wasn’t an A, but it was big progress from my prior grade. And then coming here, I expected the big classrooms, just it’s attending school with younger students again that don’t have--some of them do have discipline, some of them don’t. But then you have the little kids whispering here and there, so that kind of gets annoying. So the big classroom environment, for me sometimes isn’t all that great.

A similar question was asked of participants as to their confidence level regarding their ability to succeed academically at the time they started at this university. The majority were quite confident as to their ability to succeed. Marcus was not certain if he could complete with “these kids” who “come right out of high school” and Michael, who hadn’t had a science class in 20 years, remarked,

But at the same time, I was very confident because I knew my “end-state goal,” and knowing my end-state goal—that’s big--that’s probably one of the most important things, especially for Veterans, is having an end-state goal. So I knew that, “This is what has to be done to reach my goal.”

**Concerns and Limitations.** A few participants did not express any concerns or limitations that might affect their ability to succeed. Those who did primarily indicated balancing work and school, rigor of courses/program, and having
dependents at home. Only four disclosed possible physical/mental limitations including anxiety, TBI, an injury that affected a participant's memory, PTSD, and difficulty with concentration/focus. One was concerned about being in a new town and having to network with people and another was concerned about running out of benefits. As one participant explained,

Yeah, I have been diagnosed with PTSD, and it's definitely tough, especially when you come---the big---and there has---something I'm---just remembered, something that I have experienced is that there are large classes here. My first Calc class, that thing was like 300 people or something like that. And my class I'm in now, Marketing, is like 400/500 people. And so sitting in these large auditoriums, that is anxiety provoking. Like it's hard for me to pay attention. It's hard for me to stay focused. Cuz I'm always concerned about like what's going on around me. And it just---I wasn't expecting that.

Another expressed financial concerns among others:

Right now I'm running out of benefits. I used my benefits while I was in to cover for my associate's degree, because TA only covered for so much, and then my Montgomery GI Bill covered for the rest, and I was never really aware of what the Montgomery GI Bill was, what the Post-9/11 was, how they would affect me when I got out, and so I just went ahead and used it, and it's affecting me now, so that's my limitation right now. Physically I don't have a limitation, I don't think. Walking around campus
is fine...Parking is a problem which everyone knows about. [Researcher: You mentioned the attention thing, but do you think that's maybe because you're older?] I'm not sure. I haven't done any research on how it affects you as you grow up, but I know that my level of attention is definitely decreased compared to the level that it was when I was in high school, so I definitely have to put more of an effort into class, paying attention. I still daydream every now and then. I'll have to catch myself and pay attention of course, but I don't know.

Another concern expressed by more than one of the participants related to the pay cut taken after separation and as the result of making the decision to reenter college:

And here I’m working as a student. So, you’re making minimum wage compared to a full salary that you were making before, going to minimum wage, on top of the benefits that you do have. So, it’s quite a significant pay cut and it’s really-- it almost becomes unrealistic to go back to school. It almost seems foolish, in a sense, but I don’t see it that way.

Two participants also described attempting to balance school and family commitments. One, who has a teenage son at home, depicted his dilemma:

Yeah, that’s, you know, having a teenage son and working full-time and basically cutting back on almost everything, whether it's groceries, spending quality time with the family, and everybody's attitude--- everybody has a lot more resentment for you going back to school and saying, “Well, why you choose to go back to school now at this time?” And
you’re kinda---you’re not only putting pressure on yourself, you’re putting pressure on your family. Because you’re not doing the things that you were doing before. You’re not going out as often as you were before. It’s like, “Well, I want to spend some time with you,” it’s like the time that we spend it’s like, I’m helping you with your homework. You know? And that’s one of those things where it’s just like that’s not really quality time. They don’t want to spend time with homework. They want to go out. They want to go to the park. And if you go to the park, you know, you have to put your books to the side. You know, it’s one of those things where you have to sacrifice. And then so those are the nights where you stay up late, wake up early, go to work, sometimes ask, “Hey, can I leave work early? I have this paper, and it’s just like, “Really? We have to finish this project.” And it’s one of those things where it is everybody feels the frustration: your employer, yourself, and your family. And all of them can’t wait till it’s over. And that’s why the majority of the time why a lot of Vets---I’ve known a lot of them just to stop. One or two semesters they have left and they just can’t continue because they can’t continue to sacrifice the cut in their paycheck in order to go back to school. They just can’t justify the two and it’s real hard. But, so far, I’ve been scraping by to try to finish this as fast as I can.

Another explained,
I was working full-time before as a nurse for a private clinic and I was thinking, “Oh, yeah, I can maintain this. This is no big deal.” I got my schedule, I knew there was no way it could happen. So, I came to Office of Veterans Success. I pro--I signed a contract as a work study for them. I’m like, “Yeah, I can work over 20 hours a week, it’s no big deal.” That’s not going to happen. There’s---there’s no way. I probably do 18 and that’s max. But my fiancé and I had the discussion beforehand and I did a lot of research as to being pre-med, and being in med school, and how much time and dedication it took. And I watched a lot of Vlogs on it, and read a lot of things, and I told him upfront, and I said, “We have to make a decision to do this together, cuz we’re going to be together for the rest of our lives. So we’re going to have to make this work. So you need to tell me if this is okay.” And he said, “Yeah, it’s going to be good.” I told him, I said, “It’s going to be hard. You’re not going to see me.” And he understood that…So luckily, it hasn’t been a real issue. My mom is freaking out. She’s like, “I never see you anymore.” And my mom’s Hispanic, I’m Cuban. My mom’s from Cuba, and she has that real attachment issue. And she’s like, “You used to call me every day. Now you call me maybe three times a week. I don’t know what’s going on. You got some explaining to do. Let me tell you something, your grandmother...”And she goes off on this, and like-- I’m like, “Ma, I don’t have time. Ma.” “Why you don’t have no time for your family.” “Ma.” But,
I go see my dad and make sure he’s okay. He’s doing a lot better now that he’s cancer free.

Surprisingly, despite the serious nature of some of the topics disclosed by the Vets during the course of our interviews together, the overwhelming majority always exhibited a positive demeanor with an “Eye on the Prize” laser-like focus regarding it being the right decision to enter or reenter college.

**Faculty/ Staff Expectations.** All in all, most of the Vets did not have any expectations as to what their experiences might entail interacting with faculty and staff on campus. Those who did based their expectations on interactions with faculty/staff at their previous institutions. Some felt they brought with them an increased level of maturity due to their military experiences that would translate well. As Deion explained,

> Well, my expectations coming in were that, you know, I would be able to if not relate but be able to possibly hold a better dialogue with some of the professors and so forth, as opposed to someone that’s fresh out of high school who hasn’t experienced that much. You know, the fact that I’ve experienced a few things and been a few places and so forth, which gave me the ability to be able to have the confidence to ask those questions or go to office hours and dialogue. You know, even if it’s not just strictly about the work but just find out who they are, introducing who I am and so forth.

Regarding staff, Deion made comparisons to previous experiences.
I figured it’d be like most other businesses or schools, universities, where you find people are sometimes overworked and they may not be in the greatest of moods, so you come in there, you ask a question and they try to pass you off to the next person and send you to this office, to that office. That was probably my only expectation that I probably experienced that kind of stuff here and there.

He also pointed out that this stopped once he found the Veteran Success Office:

You know, so that, that was what happened, you know. I got sent this place, to that place. And then, you know, it was something that I expected and I decided to come here [Office of Veteran Success] and that’s where it stopped. Like, there was no more, “Go talk to this person,” and this person tell you this person. You know, they be like, “Okay. You know, we’ll come with you and we’ll get this resolved.”

Roger emphasized the importance of attempting to have/find good professors.

Talking to faculty is no problem, because they’re older. And that’s easy because I’m mature, they’re mature, and that’s kind of just straightforward. I talk to them, they talk to me…I have a lot of great professors I can consider mentors. My physics professor, I love him, he wrote me a letter of recommendation. He’s not an easy teacher---easy class, but I appreciate that. Dr. [X], he’s a teacher of mine, and I love all the stuff that he brings to the table in class. I consider him a mentor as well. Professor [Y], he’s great. Sometimes he’s hard to understand because he’s
Russian, but he’s good too. And I really like the faculty. But I handpick my faculty, I go by word of mouth, and I don’t trust Rate my Professor, only word of mouth helps me. And I really avoid---I’ve had… not too many teachers I can say I don’t like. Like economics professor, I didn’t care for him, he didn’t teach anything. I won’t name him. And yeah, there’s only a handful of teachers I didn’t like.

Carlina elaborated on this subject:

That a professor talks about something, like in my bio class. He was like, “Oh, you shoulda learned this in high school.” And I’m like, “Well, dude, high school was 13 or 14 years ago for me”… I’d never taken statistics but I took it this semester for the first time. I can’t understand the professor, literally I can’t understand her… Yeah, that’s what I found here a lot too is you’re not an individual. You’re one of 300. You go talk to somebody and you say, “I don’t get this,” and they’re like, “Well, read the book.” “Well, I read the book.” “Well talk to the tutors.” “But you’re right here.” “No, no. Talk to the tutors. I don’t have time”… But there’s just some people that I don’t feel are into teaching as much. I feel like they come in for their re--- I can tell they’re researchers, cuz they come in for their research. They teach the class at night and they’re done. They’re ready to go home by the end of the night. They just wanna get the information out and they don’t really care if anybody understands it. And, when you try to ask questions, they kinda get annoyed… Yeah, and I feel bad for them, like I
really do, because they don’t wanna be there. They just wanna do their research. And I get it. You’re not doing something you’re passionate about. But, in the same respects, you’re here. You might as well try. But I kinda get it. Sometimes teaching isn’t everybody’s thing.

Michael wasn’t sure what to expect.

I wasn’t sure when I first started going to school here about interacting with other staff. I wasn’t sure if they’d understand me. I wasn’t sure if they’d understand where I’m coming from. And of course I came in with a disgruntled Veteran outlook, so I came in like, "Whatever, everybody owes me something. My opinion is this," and plus I was an E-7, so I’m like throwing around like, "This is how it's done," and this and that and the other. So I was very apprehensive about that and I really kept my mouth shut, and I even went to [director of Vet Success] Dr. [X] a few times like, "This is going on in class and I don’t know what to do. This is ridiculous." Just the shock of being in a different kind of culture than I had so grown accustomed to in the military. So I think, yeah.

Kevin was the only participant to express an expectation to be prepared for the inevitability that he would not agree with all of his professor’s opinions:

Yeah, for the most part. I’m not one of those that’s hardcore about others having their opinions, so if they say something I disagree with I’m not going to go beat them up or anything like that, and I know there’s going
to be views that I don't agree with, but I just separate myself from them...

It is interesting to note that the participants, all between ages 26-35, expressed feeling much older and more mature than their non-military peers.

**Student Expectations.** The participants, overall, did not appear to have many preconceived notions about how their interactions with fellow students might play out. Ali admitted:

I thought maybe it would hinder the social aspect, because I’m not as social as I used to be before the military. I’m more---very private and to myself. So I figured that would be a hindrance. But, I mean, it hasn’t been an issue, because I work on campus and I can always come here [Office of Vet Success] if I’m having an issue or something like that.

Priscilla felt coming in as a Vet that her perspectives on faculty differed from her traditional-aged peers.

Yeah, I mean I feel like I kind of have a more, I don't want to make it sound like snobby but I feel like I have kind of more of a respect for the professor than a lot of incoming freshmen, I don't know, maybe it's just from the military, but these kids just send emails like, "Hey, Prof, like what can you do for me?" You can't talk to them like that. I don't know, it's frustrating to me sometimes that they think that the professors owe them something. They don't owe you anything, they get paid whether or not you come to class. So I don't know, that kind of just frustrates me...
And I don't know, I hate when I'm in class and everyone's talking and I paid a lot for this education, I would like to hear it. Even if it's boring, I paid a lot of money for it, so, I don't know, that just irritates me a lot… Yeah, and then they get mad when you get a C, well, you studied average, if you're going to sit there and be average then you're going to get an average grade. So I don't know, just kids.

Marcus also had much to say as to his expectations of interacting with non-military peers.

I feel like I'm ancient compared to a lot of these kids, because they lack responsibility or just initiative. But to many of them, like they come right out of college, well, out of high school…I thought I wouldn't fit in…Well, especially, okay, now, like the wars are so unpopular. I thought that a lot of kids would be more apprehensive, or---I wouldn't say apathetic or---I thought that some students, and correctly so, that they would have an antipathy about the war, and people that participate in these wars. But they don't necessarily have it for the actual service members themselves. They have it for the people who perpetuate the wars, the people who are making the decisions about the wars. And I just thought that I don't know how I would enter a classroom with these---with people. If they would even understand the situation, or understand what it's like to be in—

Michael recalled thinking,
"I'm going to go to campus and all I'm going to deal with are a bunch of liberal hippies that want to pick flowers, save the world, make peace, talk about this, that." That's a typical perception of us going back to school, and that's straight-up honest. "I'm going to come back to school and I'm going to deal with a bunch of people that have no idea about the world, they've never done anything, they don't know, and they want to do this and protest about something." That's what we think. So that was of course going to be my---yeah, that's what I was thinking coming in here.

and Carlina reflected on relating to traditional-aged students:

I thought I was going to find younger people annoying. And I still do. I really do. I find people are like, “I’m so stressed out about this party. And I got like homework to do, but I don’t want---but I want to go to the party.” Like dude, those are not adult problems. I don’t know. I don’t want to adult. But I have to adult. So, I’m---I’m not---it’s really hard to relate to those problems, and I know that during those times, those issues were big issues for me when I was that age. But it’s very hard to relate to them. I have a friend that’s 20. That she’s in one of my classes, and she’s always like, “I spent the weekend watching Anime.” I’m like, “How the heck did you do that? Don’t you have a test?” “Well, yeah. But I’ll study for it for like an hour beforehand.” Dude, seriously. And she gets an A. She claims it’s cuz she’s Asian but I don’t believe it. She has some weird mind trick going on. I don’t understand it. But I’m sitting there studying
for like 18 hours, that is so frustrating. Good Lord. But I think the age
difference is probably the biggest thing. The more liberal people are a
little fun sometimes. Because I find com---the School of Communication, I
find that they’re a little bit more, what’s the word I’m looking for? Radical.
So if they don’t share the same opinions, a lot of times, and I’m
generalizing, a lot of times you kind of get shunned for it which I feel like
all differences should be celebrated and understood. And you should listen
to people, and you should listen to your differences. But that part, that
part of the campus over there, I’d kind of try to stay away from---
politically wise. Political wise.

Tim carried the sentiment the majority of the participants did which was the maturity
level acquired from the military set them apart from their non-military peers.

Research Question 2 Which elements of academic, social and financial support
advance or impede Veteran students’ academic progress and persistence?

Orientation. The Vets’ perspectives on new student orientation
appeared to vary in part depending on when they started at the university. It was
apparent to the researcher after reviewing the responses that over a span of a couple
of years that the orientation experiences for Veteran students at this university were
reported in a more positive light by the newest Veteran students on campus.

Michael dreaded orientation initially.

…it's interesting, orientation was horrible for me because I was so nervous
the whole entire time because of my anxiety. <laughs> For the first---
[Researcher: Did your wife come with you?] No, she didn't. She was working, so I was stuck here like, "Holy crap, I'm 35, or I'm 30, whatever, and I'm stuck at this thing. What's happening?" <laughs> And then we had the veteran orientation, which was awesome, because they kind of took us aside separately and were like, "This is what applies to you. This is what we got going on. This is the programs that we're offering for you, and just know that there's someone here to kind of guide you. So don't be a stranger to our office." So that's where I actually got linked up with [director of Vet Success]. That's where I met them for the first time. They told me that they had a class, Vet Success, so I enrolled in that class because of what they said, and then I ended up working for the office. So it was kind of like a-- and I actually ended up running orientation for veterans later on. It was cool.

Deion pointed out the number of services available.

When I started, I went to the orientation at first that they have for Veterans. And in that orientation I learned a lot about the different resources, events, opportunities that they offer here. And coming from the school I had previously went to up in Maryland, it was nothing like that. You just had the one guy that was in the Financial Aid office that did your benefits for you and that was it. So, you know, that was one of the things that stood out to me as well.

Jose reflected on both the general orientation as well as the Vet-specific portion.
Well, when I got to [this university] the only way that I really found out about it was through orientation. After orientation I found everything out that actually [here]. So, if it wasn’t for orientation I really wouldn’t have known that they actually had a Veteran office here...It was a Vet-specific orientation. So, they asked if there was any Veterans or any dependents that are using benefits to please stand up. And then, so, we all left the room and they had a small little in-service and explaining how everything works here, which was extremely helpful. You know, that’s one thing that I had no idea they had a Veteran office here. But orientation absolutely facilitated that. You know, let me know that they actually had services for us.

Roger had a different perspective on his orientation experience.

My orientation experience, it was... in my opinion, for a transfer and for an older adult veteran, it was absolutely a waste of time. It felt like a---we call things a... “holiday stand-down” or a “briefing.” And that’s just basically where they tell you, you know, they put you in a room, and they give you a PowerPoint of what not to do, “Use protection when it comes to having sex, don’t rape people.” Which makes sense, you know, that’s horrible that that’s a problem on campus. And just, “Don’t act like a fool, don’t drink too much, don’t do drugs.” And then coming from someone who’s 26, 27, it’s like, “I don’t need to hear this, I know this.”
He did appreciate the Veteran portion but was already familiar with the office as he had previously visited a couple of years prior as a prospective student and was instructed to get his A.A. (Associate of Arts) degree completed before applying for admission due to not having standardized test scores.

**Academic Support Services.** When asked how much the Veteran students had availed themselves of academic support services on campus, the majority of responses indicated minimal use. Tutoring was mentioned most often with references to on-campus tutoring services and writing lab in the library, tutoring through the students’ major dept./college, off-campus tutors, availing themselves of professors’ and t.a.’s office hours, and Vet-to-Vet tutoring through the Office of Veteran Success.

A few students mentioned use of their degree audit as helpful with academic planning once they learned how to use it. One appreciated the campus’s LMS as a convenient tool for finding out about and accessing campus resources and important information including reminders of deadlines and campus events. She also mentioned appreciating being automatically added to organizations specifically geared towards her major and receiving important reminders and information via emails as a result.

Others mentioned using study groups organized by fellow students. A chemical engineering major, Kevin referred to tutoring as well as study groups:

> There is tutoring at the Fishbowl, which is what they call the engineering building, Engineering Two building. And so there’s tutoring there. And then we are in a big group messaging online, so all of us get together and
study. Study groups a lot, especially now. I meet with them probably five, six days out of the week...Yeah, we set them up in class, so there's the app called WhatsApp, which someone started. I don't know who started it, but they started inviting other students into the app, and then they're like "Oh, who's studying tonight? Where are we studying tonight?" So everyone will go study, and sometimes there'll be multiple groups so we don't become too large but definitely take advantage of that, take advantage of office hours, the TA office hours and the tutor for the specific course every now and then.

Two students mentioned going to the campus’s SDS (Students with Disabilities Services) office on campus. As described by Michael,

I don't know if I said this earlier, but I had to go to---or I went to SDS, Student Disability Services, when I first got here because I was so anxiety-ridden about being in class, and then taking exams. So I started my first semester here and second semester doing that, where I would have to go and take exams in their little room because I was so anxiety-ridden. But again, it's almost like this entire experience has been therapy because I have expanded and I've gotten over that, and now I can take exams, and now I can sit in the classroom, and now I can do this, and now I don't---so it's just step by step. And especially for some Veterans <laughs>---some that are worse than me, you know what I mean?-- and they have worse issues, that's the great thing about being downstairs [in
the Office of Veteran Success] is I can go and I can like, "Dude, I know what you're talking about, man." Like, "Hey, let's go. I'll take you up to SDS. We'll get you enrolled there. We can get you squared away." Or, "Hey, come in and talk to our office. We have people in here that can help you." Or, "Just let me know. I got you."

Roger, on the other hand, had a different perspective, when asked, regarding seeking SDS accommodations.

I’ve tried. And I need stuff from doctors, I need like a...written consent, like, “Oh, he needs more time.” So the only reason why I keep up is because I stretch myself really, really thin, and I work really, really hard. And I’m at the point where that alone doesn’t---this semester alone I’m struggling. I’m still passing, I’m going to pass....But it’s not easy...Yeah, I think extra time would be really nice. I think that would definitely make the playing field level, in terms of a lot of the kids here were brought up...

I thought it would be easier to actually get accommodation for like, anxiety and stuff. But as a matter of fact I think it is equally difficult, than community college or any other place. And I get it though, they need documentation...

Roger continued his response as related to on-campus tutoring:

Oh yeah, in the tutoring here, they have tutoring in the library, on I think the...third floor, something like that I honestly think those are not that beneficial. It’s kind of like...it’s good for homework, someone can quickly
come in there and like, “Oh, do this and do that.” But in terms of concepts and learning, it’s not beneficial whatsoever. Because it’s usually... you have 20 to 30 kids that all are in the same boat as you are. They need help, there’s like two people to help 30 to 40 people, and it’s really not quality at all. It’s... I don’t know, that’s why I pay for tutors or I do Vet-to-Vet tutoring here... I like one-on-one, if I can get an appointment and get one-on-one tutoring, it’s so much better. But if it’s kind of like... one person gets five, it’s not helpful.

Mention was made by more than a couple of their receptiveness to the Vet-to-Vet tutoring services in the Office of Veteran Success. When discussing tutoring Carlina alluded to this:

All I know about those, as far as [this university] is concerned is that there’s some tutors in the library somewhere. That’s it. I know there’s like---I know my advisors and I’m really comfortable with them. And I know how to make appointments online, I figured that all out on my own. Pat on the back. But that’s basically the only services I really seen thus far or experienced. Everything else that I’ve done has been taken care of by the office of Veteran Success. They’ve kind of spearheaded things for me... I’ve had Vet-to-Vet tutoring and that’s great to sit there and be tutored by someone that is not 16 years old, twirling their hair, and smacking their gum. That’s really great.
A couple of other Vets admitted that they should probably go there (SDS) but had not gotten around to it or presumed the intake process would be too difficult.

**Academic Advising.** Most of the participants confirmed meeting with an academic advisor periodically, specifically, advisor(s) for their major(s) typically to ensure they were on track and to seek assistance with course selection but not much beyond that. Brad paused when he spoke of academic advising, *Academic advisor.* It’s been an experience. Meaning, yeah, it’s been as helpful as it can be. I mean, I haven’t spent much time with the advisors. You know, I’ve met with them. They kind of give me the classes that I need and that’s to the extent, really. Jose expressed not having a good experience and frustration as a lot of the advisors for his major are students in different tracks and tend to be narrow-minded and not providing what he is looking for. One of the Engineering majors appreciated the guidance provided by the faculty advisor for his major.

Three participants admitted relying primarily on the advisor (whose specific title is Academic Enhancement Coordinator) in the Office of Veterans Success. As Michael described,

> You need to make decisions. However, you don't have to make those decisions by yourself. So whether going in and talking to an advisor---which is always interesting because just having a veteran mentality is a little bit different, going in and talking to an advisor. So I've just seen that, so I actually stopped talking to their advisors and went to our---we have [names Office of Vet Success staff member]. She's our academic
enhancer. So what she'll do is I'll go into her with some questions of like, "What do you think about this, this, this, this?" and she'll be like, "How about this? Let's come up with a plan, and then I will go with you to an advising session and translate." <laughs> She's almost like the translator. So she'll translate what they're saying to “our” speak, and then it will help us out a little bit more to try and understand what's going on. So that's been really helpful. I know it works really, really well with a lot of other students that are brand new. Like it's been saving their behind a lot because they don't have to worry, but it also helps them to understand the process. So a lot of things with the advising is it's all translation, and that's what a big issue for veterans is, is translation... It's interesting, because I would go in there with direct questions. Like I would go in there literally with a piece of paper with questions. This was what I was actually told. So I was told when I got here, "If you're going to go and talk to anyone, you need to have questions already printed out, ready to go. Don't waste anyone's time, don't waste your time. Be ready to rock. Go in there with questions and get it done."

Financial Support Services. When asked about financial assistance and support on campus, the majority of Vets communicated that any assistance they needed with filling out benefits paperwork was covered by the Office of Veterans Success. They were aware of some scholarship opportunities and those who were closer to running out of eligibility had begun to think about alternate plans.
Deion mentioned assistance with the benefits paperwork.

I mean, this office was really helpful with that. They were able to guide me in the right direction and help me fill out whatever needed to be filled out, and so forth. Like I said, I didn't know this school had such a thing. Like I said, school I came from it was just one guy. He, you know, you filled out your paperwork, turned it in to him and that was it.

Roger carried a similar sentiment to other Vets interviewed regarding reliance on GI benefits to attend college:

I can’t think of too many incentives, besides the GI Bill itself. That’s a great thing, I wouldn’t go to school if it wasn’t paid for. I think going to school, it’s like going to work, you know, why would you go to work and not get paid? I see value in paying for your education, but I don’t-- at the same time I think it should be compensated. Because as a populace, it’s investing in ourselves. We have a smart population, economically we’ll do better. But if school wasn’t paid for, I wouldn't go. I’d go to trade school, I would probably follow in the footsteps of my dad. [Researcher: Do you have any concerns at all about running out?] Yeah. I’m about to run out, in about a year from now...But fortunately I’ve been selected for vocational rehabilitation. And hopefully I’ll be on that program next semester, and so my school is paid for. And I’m really grateful, I know I’m not the only-- there’s some people that are not in that situation. I know other engineers who are going to have to pay out of pocket...
One Vet (Kevin) mentioned a limited funds program on campus to assist Vets:  
This office has, but it's very limited. We have the Mile scholarship [*Last Mile Scholarship*], which pays for $1,000 a semester for only the semester after you run out of benefits, and considering tuition and fees are around $3,000 and then you also need housing and food I haven't seen any options thus far.

Jose acknowledged awareness of scholarship opportunities but trepidation about the application process.  
Nothing really comes to mind as far as that, as far as financial help. I mean, they do---even though there is a lot of scholarship opportunities for Veterans and Veterans’ families sometimes it's a little intimidating, cuz when you’re looking at the requirements, writing the essay and having the GPA requirements and having basically just---it’s almost intimidating. But there are plenty of scholarship opportunities for Vets here. I mean, that's- - it's just one thing that I haven't taken advantage of at all..It's a one thing where all you have to do is try to take a little more time out and actually fill out, you know, the application and do your essay for the scholarships.

Michael described his experience as worth it after receiving the honor of being selected as a Tillman Scholarship recipient.

I won the Tillman scholarship...so the Tillman scholarship is the Pat Tillman Scholarship through the Pat Tillman Foundation in honor of Pat
Tillman, and we all---his story is amazing. So every year they have a Pat Tillman scholarship that goes out to 60 veterans, military members or spouses or dependents, and you apply---there's probably about four thousand that apply nationwide, or maybe five-- I don't know-- and then 60 are chosen...So you do two essays, one about what you've done and where you're from, and the next-- this is very general-- and where you're going and what you aim to achieve. You do a ten-person panel interview if you get selected past that point, and then you'll do an interview with the Tillman Foundation. You'll have people-- previous Tillman scholars that are on there, that will be on that one side. You'll have people that are VPs or presidents in financial institutions in the [area]. You'll have veteran professors on campus. You'll have other professionals. I saw someone from the Alumni Institute or the—[Researcher: Was that daunting for you?]

It was horrible, only because I treat everything in a military way. So I was going in and they had to chill me out. They were like, "You can't go in there like you're in the military." Because in the military you present yourself to a board in a certain way, and in there I was like, "Hey, I'll shake your hand." In the military, "What are you doing? You don't shake people's hands." <laughs> So aside from that, it's a fraternity of---I don't want to say overachievers---that sounds weird-- but it's a fraternity of people that are really doing amazing things, ranging from medical students to medical doctors to lawyers. I was one
of three undergrads chosen. So it’s hard to get in as an undergrad but some of the people you meet along the way are amazing.

Carlina was only one of two who mentioned any interaction with the campus’s Financial Aid office.

I had to do a reduction in income change-- status change, for what do you call it, financial aid…And that’s like trying to jump through hoops. They wanted my---my tax papers. My pay stubs for being a work study. And I’m like, “I don’t have them.” And they’re like, “Why?” I was like, “Cuz it’s non-taxed.” And they’re like, “Well, why is that?” I was like, “Because it’s a Veteran benefit.” “Well, we still need it.” “No you don’t. Because it’s not technically considered income. It’s a Veteran benefit along with my Chapter 33 GI Bill.” And it’s---nobody understands VA stuff in that building. No one. So it’s been a little painful with that. And then I had to go get a letter from my past employer saying I don’t work there and this was my last date. Well, I mean, not-- luckily I loved my employer and we’re still friends, but not everybody stays on the level with their bosses. Especially when people take it personally and they’re like, “Oh, you’re leaving me to go here.” If that were the case, I’d probably be screwed but fortunately she understood. But that was like a crazy loop hole to jump through. That’s insane, like, why? Why do I have to do that? You should know that I’m not working now…[She went on to say] I think financial--
like a financial class during orientation of how to go through financial aid and stuff, would be great. But, it is what it is.

**Campus Life.** Participation in on-campus activities outside the classroom was non-existent or very limited at best for the Veteran students who participated in this study. Reasons for not being involved included lack of time, scheduling conflicts, being a commuter, work and family obligations, and needing to focus on their academics. A couple were involved in intramural sports and a couple in professional organizations related to their majors. However, those who had worked or used the services in the Office of Veterans Success regularly were more inclined to participate in some of the sponsored activities designed specifically for Veteran students on campus.

**Social Support.** When asked about level of support participants felt they had outside the university, the answers ranged from none (one student) at all to great support (four students). In some cases, there appeared to be a correlation between some students’ answers to this question related to social support to some of their responses on the participant questionnaire each filled out prior to their interviews. Four (36%) confirmed having dependents at home while the other seven (64%) had no dependents. Nine (82%) confirmed having to work while attending college and of those, four (36%) are working 0-20 hours per week; three 21-39 hours; and two students reported working more than 40 hours per week. One of the students who reported having no support system at all had moved to the area with no dependents and no family or friends in the area. The participants with children at home, or on the way, exhibited stressors related to that as did the students having to work more than
20 hours per week, which accounted for 64% of the participants. Those participants who reported being married or engaged all suggested having positive support from their significant others with regard to entering or re-entering college. But not all participants’ dependents/family members were as understanding about their decision.

**Support Services Lacking.** The last question asked regarding support was whether or not Vets felt any support services in particular were lacking at this university. Just over half responded either none or none that they could think of at that moment. Some of the other responses were of a more serious tone and others not as much so are listed here in no particular order:

- free parking
- more parking
- cleaner classrooms
- better Student Disabilities Services (more Vet-friendly; more understanding of Veterans’ needs)
- more assistance with finding scholarships
- better Chick-fil-A on campus
- more classes held outside
- campus activities such as clubs and organizations with events scheduled that are more commuter- and working student-friendly
- relaxation room for Vets
- hire more professors; less lectures/more interactive classes
- altering length of classes; perhaps year-round classes.
Research Question 3 What are Veteran students’ perceptions on the extent to which students, faculty, and staff acknowledge and contribute to the needs of Veteran students related to student success?

Campus Attitudes. When asked, the majority of Vets interviewed felt that in general, campus attitudes towards Veterans were positive. A few included a disclaimer that they had “heard” of others having not so positive experiences but that they themselves had not experienced that. Marcus admitted that he felt faculty/students/staff were actually more welcoming once they discovered he was a Vet,

...once people realize I'm a Veteran, like I talk to them and they find out that I'm a Veteran, it seems like I don't-- maybe I'm making this up, but it just seems that way to me, like it seems that I kind of have a little---I don't know, I'm a little jumpsy here, but it seemed they don't-- they're far more welcoming to me once they realized that-- I realized that, you know, that I have served in the military and stuff. Like they find more interest in me, I guess. Like they talk to me more, and like I know someone in class, they might call me out in class now. Or maybe it's just cuz I walked up to them and talked to them out of 500 kids, they only know me now, so they can point me out...Because if they ask questions in class and ask for feedback or perspective and I give my feedback or perspective and they find out I'm a Veteran, it usually changes for the better. I've never had a situation where it got worse.
Jose also concurred that campus attitudes are fairly positive with the caveat that public opinion may be changing.

No, probably-- the only time where I ever saw not an issue, but it just---a little different way when you’re introducing yourself and you know where you---you know, who you are, where you’re coming from, your background. And then when people found out that I was a Veteran, that I was a lot older than what I seemed and---then what it seemed, it was---I kinda got treated a little bit differently. A little bit of negative. It was like---I guess they’re now---there’s kinda like a small movement when it comes to---can I say, the whole war. You know, a lot of people are very opinionated about it. So, they have slight negative connotation when they see that “Oh, you were in the Service,” and it’s kind of a little bit differently. So, it was unfortunate. But that was really the only thing that happened...Overall, I believe it’s fairly positive. I’ve seen especially with the ROTC program here and Veterans-- I see them walking around in uniform. I don’t see anybody getting harassed or all talked down upon...Yeah, just besides the isolated incidences, I mean, overall I still feel it’s very positive.

**Faculty/Staff Attitudes.** Regarding the attitudes of faculty and staff, towards Veteran students, the responses were similarly primarily positive. As pointed out by Roger, Veteran students are not necessarily treated any differently than other students:
I’d say fair. Because the whole attitude I get is from the Vet office, and we’re all Vets. So of course...they’re going to treat us good here. But around campus they’re not as, you know, you’re a student, you’re a student, you’re a student. You’re not special just because you’re a Veteran...And I respect that in some areas, and other areas it’s like, “Hey, you really should consider the fact that I’m a Vet.” You know? So maybe a little bit more. I kind of wish professors had more awareness and...that would just be nice. I’m not expecting a whole lot more though.

Along that same line of thinking, Carlina reflected more than once that it had been her experience that professors seem to forget that not all students are fresh out of high school:

I thought I’d be more prepared for it but I literally spend, on campus, either studying or in class, I’m on campus from 7:00 AM until 8:30 PM, and I live an hour away. So, it’s kind of one of those push through things. But the only thing I really notice, again, is the difference between what they expect you to know and what you actually know, because you’re not lumped in with the general student populous---or you are lumped in with the general student populous. So their...expectations are very broad. They’re very all-encompassing. So when the [professor] says, “Oh, well, this should’ve been known already.” Well, how should I know this? I spent the last six years of my life working on this. How-- I wasn’t in school.
Kevin recalled one particular instance in which he felt a professor’s passing comment was inappropriate.

I feel like everyone’s entitled to their own opinion. I have not---I have yet to meet a professor to talk down to the military, I guess I would take offense to that. The only bad experience I had with a professor, was when I wasn’t doing so well in his course, he approached me and said, “[Kevin], aren’t you a Marine? Shouldn’t you have the discipline to finish this course?” And I was pretty offended by that. But I mean..I took it in a positive way...Maybe he was trying to encourage me in his own way. And I mean I gave it my all, I still passed the course with a B. But I feel like that’s maybe not something he should have said. But it’s something that will stick with me forever. I don’t think about it a lot, but I still feel like a lot of other Veterans would have handled that very differently. I just didn’t pay attention and walked away.

Kevin went on to acknowledge,

Yeah, I do have a lot of a shorter fuse now than I did before joining. I’m not sure what’s caused that, my family says that I’ve kind of disconnected emotionally. I don’t feel like I have..actually I know that I have, but not to the extent that they make it seem. And he definitely..sparked that short fuse when he said that, so I did feel rage and anger. But the best of me just told me to walk away.
Providing a different perspective, Michael generalized that a lot of professors appear to appreciate Vets in their classes.

Towards Vets? From what I know, I don't really see any---I think there's a really good attitude. I really---I don't know, I haven't really witnessed a lot of things..I've had a good thing, and I think a lot of professors appreciate a lot of Veterans in their courses because we're kind of---we're going to be there on time, we're going to ask questions, we're going to take lead, we're going to do what needs to be done. So I think they---just making a complete guess or assumption---that they appreciate it...

Carlina recalled an incident that made her feel uncomfortable.

...I had an incident one time that---I’m uncomfortable with things around my back generally, which is why you see me looking around. I very-- it’s hard for me to eyeball people because I’m always looking. But I had a situation in a classroom, where I moved my seat, my normal seat, to the back of the class with another Veteran that I sit next to-- well, that I occasionally sit next to for a test. And I was questioned as to why I’m moving my seat. Well, whenever people turn in papers for the test, they line up right there where I’m sitting, so they’re all around me, behind me, looking over me, and it freaked me out. I’m not---I don’t have PTSD or anything, but I am hyperaware. And that’s part of your training, you’re just hyperaware. But, that’s like the only thing that really stands out as far
as the classrooms, like that one, kind of, incident. But, it's definitely-- it's definitely a fun---fun acclamation.

This recollection also brought to mind an observation, in hindsight, by the researcher that it appeared intentional that most participants were quite deliberate when choosing where to sit for our interviews. They attempted to choose a spot in which they had a birds-eye view of their immediate surroundings. Depending on the setting (inside or outside), none sat with their backs to anyone in the vicinity and when we were indoors, the participants were always in clear view of the nearest entrance/exit and typically looked up when others entered the room or office.

**Non-Military Student Attitudes.** The most common adjectives that came to mind when the participants were asked about student attitudes towards Veterans on campus were “positive” and “indifferent”. As Jose pointed out,

> Overall, I believe it’s fairly positive. I’ve seen especially with the ROTC program here and Veterans---I see them walking around in uniform. I don't see anybody getting harassed or all talked down upon...Yeah, just besides the isolated incidences, I mean, overall I still feel it's very positive.

Kevin responded that when students and others on campus find out he's a Veteran, they tend to try to make a connection more than anything else.

> I guess once they find out they have a lot more respect for you, but I don't walk around advertising that I'm a student veteran either, so I'm just another student out there, and then if we get into the conversation they're like "Oh, so what do you do?" this and that, and then we get into
the conversation and I let them know that I'm a Veteran then their attitude changes completely, but besides that... No one's ever said "Oh, well, you fight wars that shouldn't be fought." I've never had that kind of attitude. It's always like "Oh, my father was this" or "My brother is in," and so it always kind of more of a connect, I guess.

Priscilla suggested,

I think no one really-- I haven't really noticed, I mean I see people in uniform all the time and I think people just don't really care. I don't know, I haven't seen anyone being rude towards them or... Yeah, kind of no one really pays them any attention and I don't pay them any attention, they don't pay me any attention. Most people that I walk by in uniform wouldn't think that I was too. [Researcher: Do you get a certain kind of reaction when you do reveal that you're military?] Yeah, they're like, "Oh, really, that's cool, you don't look like it." That's usually all I'll get... Yeah, just indifferent, I mean it's not rude, it's not like, "Oh Vets, yay!"

Some of the Vets made comparisons to traditional-aged college students on campus. As Carlina explained,

...I see people that are getting their college paid by their mom and dad. I, well actually---I have friends on campus that are like, “Yeah, my mom and dad pay for school.” I got friends that one of their moms is a doctor. Another one of her moms has two PhDs. And those parents pay for school for them and they don't seem as driven. And see a lot that people around
here have differing priorities. When you’re younger, your priorities are all kinda messed up anyway. But I’ve noticed that when you’re older-- like the older students have more of an unwavering commitment towards what they’re doing...But, I mean, I don’t wanna generalize everybody but it just seems kind of like the pattern.

**Faculty Instruction.** With the exception of a couple of the Vets who participated in this study, the reaction was typically positive when asked about the quality of faculty instruction (see Figure 4.9).

![Wordle Depicting Participants' Attitudes on Faculty Instruction](image)

*Figure 4.9* Wordle Depicting Participants’ Attitudes on Faculty Instruction

Deion provided this assessment:

The care and concern. You know, I've never experienced it myself, because I came from a smaller school, but I've heard of professors at big schools where they really don't care. You're just a number. You know, it's just you know your number...That’s who you are. They don't even
know your name. But so far what I’ve found is the professors, they actually care. They want you to learn the information. They’re going to go above and beyond to help you figure it out or work your way through what it is that they’re trying to teach you. And for example, I had a professor that during the holiday break, you know, a couple people in the class, we got together and made like a study group and she volunteered to come in. During the break…And kind of just go over questions with us that we may have had, you know, for the exam coming up. So, you know, those kind of things. You know, they stand out.

Jose suggested that treatment was different at times for Veteran students when compared to “typical” students.

The biggest problem that I see is that we’re so stubborn that we almost come off as arrogant. And then you tend to clash with your professor. And that’s usually one of the biggest things: your arrogance. And it happened to me before…but then I realized, you know, you only know so much and professors make mistakes. We all do. And that was one of the biggest things that I could remember now, the arrogance and being hard, that you don’t need—“I don’t need a tutor. Tutor is a sign of weakness.” You know, “You can do it yourself”…especially when your professor’s younger than you or a PhD student is 25 years old and it’s just like---you know, it’s one of those-- it’s another ego thing for the Veterans. It’s just like, “Well,
this guy, he doesn’t know anything.” And that’s a lot for conflict. It’s a recipe for a conflict.

As for faculty expectations, Jose elaborated,

Usually, they do expect a little bit more out of the older students and Veterans as we’ve already had the experience, kind of a little bit more discipline when it comes to, “Hey, did you get your homework done? Or did you do the assignment?” And, so, they’re not expecting any excuse from you, “Hey, my dog ate my homework.” You know, compared to somebody that just got outta high school. So, it is-- It’s not fair, but it’s one of those things where they expect a little bit more out of you than the typical student. [Researcher: But do you find it’s different then if you haven’t disclosed?] Yes. Absolutely.

Along the same line, Jose provided an example of a professor who was aware of his Vet status.

If something comes up where---you know, cuz my fiancée, she’s also in the military, so if there’s something that we have to get away from or I can’t make it to this class, he knows that I’m invested into the class instead of saying, “Well, I’ve never talked to [you] the whole semester. I don’t know who you are.”

With regard to classroom instruction, Ali reflected,

They’ve been pretty good. I just, I really, like, I sit in the back and I try to just focus on the lectures. I mean, it’s okay, you know. It’s stuff I
could really teach myself I feel sometimes. I really don’t feel like a lecture
is necessary, because they’re basically just teaching me things I could
read out of the book. But, I mean, I try to stay engaged and I try to learn
as much as I can while I’m in there...Like the labs, like, for chem lab and
physics lab, you know, the hands-on kind of stuff are a little bit better.
Those are more engaging.

Most participants, including Michael, appeared candid as they spoke of their experiences
with faculty and instruction:

Usually I provide pretty good feedback. I’m not-- unless a professor is a
total jerk about things. But aside from that, I’ve pretty much always been
impressed with the course content and what's presented during the
classes. Some of them, it's not---you're going to run into your fluff
courses where you're just sitting there literally like, "I don't know what I'm
doing here, but I have to take it, so." <laughs> And I think that's a
struggle. I mean, me personally, I hate that. Some others are like, "Oh,
<inaudible>." But I'm like, "No, don't waste my time." But I think
content is really good and I think they keep up to date with a lot of stuff.
It's mainly from a science aspect, so there's not really-- it's just, "This is
what's going on."

Roger elaborated on the subject of faculty instruction.

Well, for my classroom experience here, you know, it’s a sink or swim, 80-
20 school. 80 percent you learn outside, 20 percent you learn in the
classroom. I don’t really like that, I kind of wish things were different. Because I feel like they shove a lot of information and stuff at you, all at once. And you’re expected to kind of like understand it, and know it, by the time class is done. And it’s just not---that’s not a fact, you know, if they give you a whole lot of dense material in---there’s no way I can really retain it, without taking my time learning it outside of the classroom...

Yeah, I kind of wish they made it mandatory for professors to go through public speaking, and learning how to convey the material in a way that’s friendly. But that takes them knowing their craft even better, to convey it... Yeah, most of the learning is done-- or a lot of the professors could utilize YouTube. Because a lot of the professors are brilliant. But if they broke it down slower, or put it in a format where I could just review it more than once, it’d be beneficial. But I think a lot of teachers are really stuck in their ways of like, “Okay, you have to go to class. If you’re not in class, you’re lacking.” And that’s not true.

**Office of Veterans Success.** On the campus where this study took place, Veteran student services are centrally located in the Office of Veterans Success. Services and activities specifically designed for Veteran students on campus were the ones most highly praised by the Vets. Figure 4.10 depicts a list of the support services/activities specifically for Veteran students that came to mind when study participants were asked to give examples of feeling supported on campus.
Carlina shared sentiments similar to those shared by the overwhelming majority of the Veteran students interviewed:

The only way I know how to navigate any system around here is because the Office of Veterans’ Success. It really is. Everybody’s taken the time to be like, “Well, let me show you. It’s not just they tell you. It’s, “Let me get on the computer with you. Let me show you. Let me hold your hand. Let me pull you through. Let me do this.” And I’m not saying this just because I work there but it is a process where you need to have somebody take you by the hand and guide you around. And they really did that. I feel like, if I was just coming in as a transfer student, not a Veteran, that it woulda been a lot harder, a lot more difficult. I don’t feel like the orientation really prepares you for navigating the school system at all. The only thing that helps was the Veteran part of the orientation and the
Veterans’ Office of Success...Honestly, the most comfortable I feel is at the Vet Center. I feel like they kinda get you and when you say, “That person’s a jack freak,” or “These kids who were talking in class annoy the crap outta me, cuz they couldn’t even listen to the instructor.” Most people are like, “So,” but they kinda understand. They’re like, “Yeah, I know. That’s so annoying right?” They kinda have the same parallel.

Other adjectives often mentioned in association with the Vet Services area on campus included community, support system, and problem resolution. As a couple of Vets affirmed, once they discovered the services of the Office of Veteran Success on campus, the “runaround” stopped.

**Research Question 4** To what extent do Veteran students feel engaged with faculty and fellow classmates in the classroom and on campus?

**Veteran Status Disclosure.** The Vets had mixed feelings when asked if they readily disclose their Veteran status on campus. Some are proud to do so while others prefer not to or will do so more easily if around other Vets. Two admitted they probably need to do so to Student Disability Services office but have yet to do so. As Marcus admitted,

> Well, I have not disclosed about the PTSD issue, even though---because I'm Voc Rehab, so I have a counselor comes in, and he always tells me, "Well, why don't you go up to the disability office and tell them and they'll inject...And I'm pretty sure they can accommodate." And it's just I don't
want to feel like I'm the guy that needs help, like I'm the special child that needs the other help so he doesn't lick the window. You know...

Kevin expressed a similar sentiment.

I've thought about going to the disability office and maybe taking exams there, but at the same time I feel like I'm given more of a booster than my counterpart, like the younger students, I guess. I don't know...

Because they would have to sit in the classroom and take their exam, and I'd get more time taking it at the disability office, which actually-- now that you mention that the time limit is my only limit during my exam...Like for [one class] I'll sit there and I'll look at the exam and I'll think about it, and then a light bulb will click, but at that time maybe I'm two, three minutes behind what I really should be, so I'm always short on time. I feel like I can always finish the exams. I know the material. I just don't have enough time to finish it.

Tim suggested only disclosing when necessary.

..I know personally I can speak for myself, but the only thing that-- the only reason why I disclosed it was because I was using PHEAA [ph?] benefits. That was the only reason why. I mean, I never went to my instructors and introduced myself as a Veteran or anything like that. I just, the only time I, like I said, <laughs> when I was talking to all the VA, you know, the VA guys and I wanted to get my PHEAA, you know, get my JAG wheel started...this semester, actually, yeah, this is the first
semester since I've been here that I've actually been engaged with the Veterans' Office, other than just coming in and telling them I'm starting up.

Carlina described being acknowledged by a professor during a recent class discussion:

Actually, today in my Communication Diversity Class, she asked, “Do we have”---she was talking about Veterans Day. She was like, “Do we have any Veterans in the classroom? Please stand up.” And I was kinda looking around nobody stood up. This is a class of like 300 people. Nobody stood up and I’m like, “Okay,” move my desk over and I stood up, and here I am lone ranger in the entire class. And she’s like, “What’d you do?,” and I’m like, “Let me tell you what I did.” And someone was like, “Did you ever shoot anybody?” I’m like, “That’s not an appropriate question but we’ll talk about it later.” So, I mean, I’m comfortable with it but I know many people that aren’t so it’s really kinda one of those personal things, so.

Classroom Engagement. When asked if they consider their level of engagement in class e.g. active, engaged, anonymous, the responses varied. Some prefer to be front and center while others to prefer to remain in the back. Dani expressed a preference for limited interaction:

I really don’t have much of an interaction. I really keep to myself, unless I’m forced to be in a group. Because that’s just how I prefer to learn and how I prefer to be in school. I just like to be by myself. It keeps me
focused, because other people tend to distract me and distract each other. So I just like to be by myself...I’m engaged with the teacher, but as far as the other classmates, yeah. I’m just kind of in the back.

while a couple of the Vets described having “evolved”. As Jose explained,

Before I used to sit in the back and now I try to sit either pretty close to the front and try to participate a lot more. That was one of the biggest difference that I’ve changed since starting college. You know, cuz at first, you know, you’re not very sure, you’re kinda withdrawn, and throughout the semesters you kinda gain a little bit more confidence, sit a little bit closer to the front, you know, try to make an impression, you know, with the professor to see if, “Hey, I’m actively trying to help. I’m trying to actively participate. So, if I ask you, you know that, ‘Well, this guy never participated in the class, so...”’ Kinda want to have---try to build a relationship with that professor that way.

Roger expressed a similar sentiment.

I used to sit in the middle of the classroom, but now I sit in the front. And it’s because I changed, because I’m an adult now, not a kid, so I care about my education. When I was a kid, I didn’t. And not to mention, being in the military, you know...life is really finite and precious. So it’s like, you don’t want to waste your time anymore. So it’s like you show up to school, and you go to school.
For Priscilla, who is in her first semester at this university, class size is a factor:

I try to sit towards the front to pay attention better but this semester I've tended to migrate towards the back because the classes are so big and I'm kind of overwhelmed but I just try to participate, my physics class I don't really because it's 340 kids and very hard to pay attention and it's a professor reading a PowerPoint so there's really no point in participating. But in all my other classes, they're pretty small and I've talked a fair amount I suppose.

Carlina attributed her military experiences to making her a more active participant in class.

I'll raise my hand, I don't care. That's--that's like the joke I always make during one of my presentations, is a veteran is more vocal. They have more self-confidence, they feel more comfortable in that situation. And I always, make the joke that I've been shot at, it doesn't bother me to raise my hand. It really doesn't. But we have a lot of life experiences that we want to get out there, and when they talk about things, and they talk about places, we can really be active participants in that discussion. So that's why I always feel like, “Hey, let me put my two cents in. Let me answer. Let me try.” It keeps me engaged, and hopefully the professor will remember me at some point when it's time to decide if you want to add an extra bonus point my way, just sayin’.
As Tim put it, it depended on the day. Usually active he admitted that on some days, he prefers to be anonymous. Kevin expressed a similar sentiment:

It depends. So for courses where I already know what's going on I'll be very interactive, but if it's in a course where I'm still learning and I'm unsure then I won't interact. I guess it's just-- some days I will go in there and I'm very hyper and I want to interact and I will interact, and other days I'll just sit there and I'll be tired and... [Researcher: Does it depend what time of day the course is offered?] No, it's probably more the amount of sleep I get.

**Program Delivery/ Learning Style.** Eight out of 11 (73%) prefer face-to-face classroom instruction to other modes of delivery including on-line and a hybrid model citing more structure, involvement, less distractions and more accountability. As Marcus explained,

I would say classroom because of involvement. It's the atmosphere. Not only you're in a class so you're forced to be there-- a lot of people would say you're forced to be there---but you're in a situation where learning is going to happen during that hour and whatever change, and just being around others that are interested in it as well, and then working with professors that are really good. So it's just much easier than sitting around at home reading a book.

although he also advised finishing “basics” prior to entering the university:
My experience, I would recommend doing your basics at an online institution or a community college and just get them done, and then come here and do whatever you got to do...

Two participants indicated a preference for a hybrid model primarily for convenience e.g. lessens commute, more flexibility to schedule around work hours. Carlina suggested that it depends on the level of difficulty of the course content.

I do better in class for something that’s really difficult. If it’s like an art class or issues in public health class, I don’t mind doing it online. But I wanted to make sure that I keep myself on track and show up to class. And just the first time coming back, when I’m 32 years old, I really wanted to make sure that I was in the right frame of mind and I was motivated and something was keeping me motivated to get here. And attendance points are one of those things that motivate you so I definitely showed up for that.

She went on to elaborate that she prefers learning by doing.

But I just like to get outside and do things and not just learn by PowerPoint. Nobody likes death by PowerPoint. No one. And when I can’t understand you it makes it even worse, good Lord.

Other participants had an inclination for active-learning preferably from a professor who brings real-world experience to the class. Deion described it as follows:

Some are typically academia. Very few, but the good bulk of the professors I’ve had so far in my degree, they have a lot of real-world
experience...there’s a difference between just learning straight out of a book and actually applying the knowledge and doing it day in, day out. Like, for instance, I took an environment economics class and the professor, he’s been doing environmental economics for over 20 years. So his level of expertise that he brought to the classroom was just, you know, can’t put a price on that...That’s the style of teaching that really compliments me, you know, as opposed to somebody who’s just assigning assignments and there’s really no guidance or anything of that nature.

Participants who had previously taken primarily on-line classes felt there was a distinct difference. Regarding on-line classes, cons expressed in their responses included:

- requires too much self-discipline; regimentation
- have to teach yourself
- harder to retain the information
- no back-and-forth verbal-wise
- too easily distracted
- just kind of fill in the blank; not much thought process
- promotes procrastination
- dislike of random posts by on-line instructors.

**Interaction with Other Students.** The majority of participants admitted to being most comfortable when interacting primarily with other Veteran students followed by “older” students. For Deion, this applied to upperclassmen in his major classes as well:
And for the most part, I mean, the majority of the people in the classes that I’m taking now, you know, like I said, it’s upper-level, so they’re pretty focused on what they’re trying to achieve. So it works out, you know, because we connect and we get together, we study together and whatever, so...I’m pretty active. Every professor I’ve ever had knows who I am. I sit in the front. I ask questions. I don’t hesitate to ask questions, you know. Might make a joke here or there. You know, keep the class lively. Keep everybody engaged, on their toes.

Priscilla described her interactions with students on campus a bit differently.

Yeah, it’s kind of just like everybody’s on their own little---I feel like here everybody’s kind of in their own little bubble and no one’s really paying attention to anyone else especially when you’re walking around outside and everybody’s like, <laughs> "I’m going to run over you, you should probably look both ways before you cross the street"...you’re not even allowed to walk on the grass in the military, so it’s just like, "Okay, well pay attention. Be aware of your surroundings, stop catching Pokemon." But whatever.

Roger expressed what he described as interacting with “kids” on campus:

Working with kids, sometimes that’s annoying. Because sometimes I’ll encounter 18-year-olds, 19-year-olds, and they’re scared to think for themselves. And I’m not. The military kind of taught us, you know, if we need to get something done, sometimes we had to color outside the lines
to get those things done. And a lot of students are really, really...really, really sticking to being like, I don’t know...being---I’m trying to think of the word. But...I guess “honest,” but it’s not like I’m trying to encourage anything negative. I’m just trying to encourage like, “Let’s not break the rules, let’s bend the rules. Let’s look at things from a different perspective.” And I’ve worked-- working with kids in groups, sometimes they’re scared to lead. They’re scared to try to make things...bend perspectives, or look at other people’s perspectives. And it’s kind of annoying <laughs>, you know?...I’m not a fan of group work, I’m terrible about that. I mean I don’t mind teamwork, but not group work.

Michael, admitted that he feels like a parent at times.

I usually take the dad role, <laughs> because I’m the old mysterious dude that like, "What is this old guy doing in my class?" Then they find out I’m in the Army, and then they're like, "Whoa, this old, weird"---and then I'm outgoing, and I'm very commanding, so I usually take charge of whatever's going on in the classroom and kind of do that. I've had good interactions. I have a good time. Not everyone's the same as me though. I get along well because I can adapt to the situation. So I've had a good time with students.

He also agreed that it is easier to relate when there are fellow Vets in class.

It's always nice having a fellow Veteran in the class because you have someone that automatically understands what's going on, and that was---
in the beginning, that's what really helped me with my anxiety, was having another veteran there that knew what the deal was. It doesn't matter what you did in the military, you still get it. So we would hang out in the front of the class and hang out together, and then we'd study together. Even if you never met the person, instantly you're bonded and you're going to help each other get through whatever you got to get through. It doesn't matter.

**Campus Life.** As for participating in campus activities outside of class, the majority either do not participate at all in activities on campus outside of their classes or only on rare occasion. About one-third are typical commuters meaning they only come to/from campus to go to class and participate in classroom activities and then leave immediately for work or home. Roger blamed having no time to participate in campus activities on the rigor of his STEM major:

> I wish my degree wasn’t so difficult, so I could enjoy more of the campus stuff. Because I came here after my AA, so I haven’t had the couple of years of easy classes to really enjoy campus, and do all their fun stuff. I’m stuck studying all the time. So when they’re doing crazy things on campus, like zombies or something, I typically don’t do those things, because I have to maintain my grades.

Pete has tried but also has time constraints due to the rigor of his major as well as being a parent.
Oh, I've been to one football game and I thought about joining the I Fix It Club but as a parent and an engineering student, I really have zero time, I tutor also. I mean that would be the most extracurricular thing that I think I'd do. And I went to a few tutoring courses that they offer for free, so I've done that. But aside from anything else, I haven't really had much time.

Marcus would like to be more involved but has to find a way to push himself to do so.

I want to be more involve---well, I said this semester, I'm gonna get out, and put myself out there and I've been a hermit this semester as well. So I don't think it's gonna happen. I'm trying. But it's very slow. Very slow developing. [Researcher: What about with the Veteran Services, anything?] I went to my first game! The Navy one.

A former athlete in high school, Deion’s love of sports contributes to his getting involved on campus.

I play a lot of intermural sports. Played on the club team. We put a office team together, and we enter into the basketball tournaments, football tournaments. I am part of a [sic] economics club. We have meetings, like, biweekly. Try to get involved with just any and everything. You know, I’ve been to a couple meetings for other organizations and just.. I try to dibble dabble in everything.

Concluding Thoughts
Retrospect. None of the Veteran students who participated in this study expressed regrets about their decision to enter or reenter college after their military service. Some do still have some apprehensions including self-doubt about the ability to finish and possible changes in life circumstances or running out of funding. Ali suggested that her biggest fear is an internal struggle.

I still struggle with self-doubt, actually thinking that I can complete this finally after being in school for, like, off and on for 10 years. I guess just myself stopping myself would be the only real issue...My biggest challenges is me, like, overcoming myself. Because I feel like everything else is there, you know. It’s paid for, I have the support. It’s just a matter of me doing it. So I am my own obstacle for some of these things...I think I’m really lucky to be able to be here and have it paid for and have all the support. And I feel like we have a great opportunity and I hope a lot more people utilize that opportunity that we’re given, you know, to be able to get an education when a lot of people can’t. So I’m just really grateful to be here.

Intimidation came to mind when Jose pondered this question.

I mean, as a Veteran student one of the biggest, biggest, biggest things is transitioning from the military to a college student and just getting out of the military in general and starting college is actually very intimidating. Because the majority, we’re just going from high school to the military and then to college. So, two different disciplines and it’s just---it gets
pretty overwhelming. And you're kind of intimidated. It's like, "Do I still have what it takes to go back to college?" I mean, at my age and or should I just go into something into the workforce and just get a tech job where I could just make a decent living and not have to worry about a college degree anymore? You know, it's one of those things where it's a hard choice to make... If you're coming out of the military and thinking about going back to college, it's a lot easier if you don't have kids, or if you're married and you don't have kids just because you have a dual income. The dual income helps a lot with everything cuz you kinda offset all the costs by going back to school and justifying staying in school as least that you have one source of income. So, yeah, but that's the biggest thing. If you're single and a parent, it makes it a little difficult.

In retrospect, Priscilla described her biggest challenge was indecision.

Deciding what I want to do, that's been the biggest challenge.

[Researcher: Did you get much assistance with that?] No. Just like, "Oh, well take this class, take this class, see what you're interested in." I'm interested in a lot of things so I used my first year of GI Bill just taking electives and so maybe that didn't really turn out so well. But I figured out what I wanted to do, so... I've transferred a lot and that's probably been the biggest obstacle is getting everything from one school to the next, it's just kind of overwhelming sometimes, it can be frustrating. No, no regrets, I would do it all over again, I just wish the GI Bill was a little
bit more, I wish they would give you a little more leeway with figuring out. Because a lot of people getting out of the military don't know what they want to do and I wish that maybe they would give you a few more months or some forgiveness program like you can turn in these credits for something else or something. So I don't know.

She also suggested that, based on her experience, transition services provided by the military were lacking.

Yeah, they make you take a resume class right before you get out and that's really all you get, "Here's how to write a resume, good luck." They don't really care about you once you're getting out.

Roger was not the only Vet to mention in retrospect that he regretted not having completed more college coursework while still in the military.

I wish I would have studied in the military. I wish I kind of knew I was going to get into this field, and I wish I would have sat down with these textbooks and read them when I was on watch, and taught myself stuff before. But of course that's just me being wishful.

Carlina acknowledged challenges involved in returning to college.

There are definitely challenges coming back. There are. Decreased math skills, decreased writing skills, decreased test taking abilities. The inability for somebody to relate to you in that situation because chances are them-they, themselves, it's not like you, where you kind of took breaks, and you started back up and went...And then I thought I'd be a lifer. And I
wasn’t. Once I got in, I loved it so much, I was like, “Oh, I’ll just stay here forever. Yeah, retirement, okay.” No, it didn’t work that way. Life--life is funny that way. It throws you in loops and you got to---you got to roll with the punches.

**Derailment.** When asked to think of anything that might derail their education, the most common answer was running out of benefits prior to graduation. See Figure 4.11 for other reasons cited.

![Figure 4.11 Wordle Depicting Veteran Students' Reasons for Possible Derailment](image)

*Figure 4.11 Wordle Depicting Veteran Students’ Reasons for Possible Derailment*

**Words of Wisdom.** At the conclusion of each interview, participants were asked if they had any parting thoughts for future Veterans and military service members contemplating entering or reentering college. The top three responses were:

- Just do it.
- Finish as much as you can while you’re in the service.
- Do your research.

As Roger advised,

Finish as much as you can while in you’re in the service. Take advantage of every opportunity you get, you know. Your downtime, there is some
downtime for active duty. I know it’s---it’s still difficult, but you can do tuition assistance. You know, they get paid for some---even though there is a tuition cap, but you can still take one or two classes, you know, while you’re in. I mean, you can finish probably one or two semesters while you’re in active duty. And that’s probably one of the biggest. Do as much college as you can while you’re in. Or there’s also programs that the military will pay for you to go to college while you’re still in. You know, if you want to go to an officer program and that’s your intention, you know, it’s---there’s a lot more programs that Veterans don’t even know about.

Priscilla mirrored this sentiment:

Take as many classes as you can while you’re in, while you’re still active duty because you will have so much more left over for your master’s or your doctorate or whatever you decide to do.

For Pete, it’s all about connections and competition.

It depends what kind of student or what kind of Veteran they are. I have some Veterans that get out and go straight into the workforce, and they’re making very good money, close to six digits, a little bit under, and they don’t have any college experience, but that also depends on what kind of connections you have and you have built. It depends on who you know. But if you’re someone that’s not well-connected I feel like a university is definitely a place to get started. Even if you don’t finish your degree start connections here and there, but I definitely encourage
everyone to fall back on a degree, because right now it seems like everyone is getting their degree---or not everyone, but a lot of the younger population are getting their degree, so it makes them more marketable. If you go out with just a military background and no degree I don't feel like you're going to be as successful... As competitive. When I first got out I actually did search for jobs, because during the summer I didn't have any courses I wanted to take, and I couldn't get a job the whole summer with my military background, and I even applied as a security officer. I couldn't get that. So it was pretty stressful, and then coming to school the first booster was the GI Bill, because I know I'm going to have school paid for and I'm getting paid to go to school in a way, so it was definitely a booster. And then in general... I feel like getting your degree will make you more marketable and more successful in the future.

Research with regard to choice of college/university, intended program of study, pros/cons were mirrored by the majority of participants. And finally, Michael felt inclined to communicate a reality check to future Vets:

I hope this makes it on the news: You're not entitled to a damn thing. <laughs> You want something, you need to work for it. Don't be scared to ask for help. Don't be scared to get help. And don't live an introverted life being a recluse on campus and not getting involved. You need to get involved, whether it's on campus, in the community, or with other
Veterans. Find like-minded people that share your vision and go and do it. Don't show up, go to class, and go home.

**Post-Bac Plans and Final Thoughts.** As to what may follow after graduation, responses varied (see Figure 4.12) but the majority predicted either continuing on in a graduate level program or entering the workforce and then possibly returning later for an advanced credential.

![Figure 4.12 Wordle of Veteran Student Participants’ Post-Bac Plans](image)

A recurring theme in final thoughts expressed by the participants was one of humility and no regrets. As Ali explained,

> I think I’m really lucky to be able to be here and have it paid for and have all the support. And I feel like we have a great opportunity and I hope a lot more people utilize that opportunity that we’re given, you know, to be able to get an education when a lot of people can’t. So I’m just really grateful to be here.

Her fellow Veteran student peers mirrored this sentiment in their concluding thoughts.
Chapter Summary

This chapter presented a description of the selection/recruitment process of participants and basic demographic information. A more detailed summary of background information on the Veteran students who participated in the study followed. The results of the data collection and analysis were then organized and discussed in terms of the four research questions. Finally, concluding thoughts and reflections by the participants on the decision to enter or reenter college were summarized.

Chapter 5 will include a discussion of the findings and how this study contributes to the previous research on Veteran students in higher education as well as implications and opportunities for future research.
CHAPTER 5:
Discussion and Implications

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative study was to describe and explain selected Veteran students’ perspectives on academic success as they entered or reentered the university setting. In educational research, this type of design allows the researcher to focus on providing a detailed account of one or more cases with an interest in both their uniqueness and commonality. The primary method of data collection was the recording, transcription, and analysis of oral interviews conducted with 11 participants. This study sought to contribute to the body of scholarly research on the use of qualitative research in the field of higher education administration and research related to improving persistence and graduation rates among Veteran students. The results may also inform future decision-makers in higher education and provide suggestions for program development and implementation of enhanced strategies related to existing efforts focused on student success.

This final chapter is organized as follows:

- a summary of findings as aligned to the research questions,
- a comparison between the research findings and current literature,
- research implications for practice,
- limitations,
• recommendations for future research, and
• conclusion.

Summary of Findings

Chapter Four presented the results of the data collection and analysis organized and discussed in terms of the four exploratory questions which were guided by the overall question: What are Veteran students’ perceptions of their academic experiences? This chapter includes a discussion of the findings beginning with the results as aligned to the theoretical framework for this study which was adapted from Tinto’s *Conditions for Student Success* (2012).

**Research Question 1** What are Veteran students’ expectations prior to entering or reentering the university and to what extent are these expectations met?

One theme that emerged was related to the lack of research the Vets conducted prior to making a decision to apply to this or other colleges/universities. The Vets who participated in this study listed three primary reasons for choosing this university: location, reputation, and word-of-mouth from family, friends or VA counselors. A possible takeaway from this feedback is that it should not be presumed that Vets are conducting extensive research with regard to choosing a college or university nor are they necessarily aware of the services, or extent of services, offered to Veteran students by a particular university until after they arrive on campus. Participants also admitted not necessarily having a familiarity with the term “Vet-friendly” prior to making their decisions as to where to apply nor did the majority proactively seek out colleges/universities advertised as such when making application decisions. Participants
also suggested that inadequate assistance is provided by the military prior to separation particularly in regard to guidance related to their decisions upon separation to immediately use their Post-9/11 G.I. benefits and transition from soldier to college student.

The participants also admitted not giving much consideration to program modes of delivery offered by the university or that this information was a significant factor in their decision-making process as to where to apply. Although a couple of Vets acknowledged avoiding applying to on-line institutions citing past experiences. Others acknowledged desiring some flexibility in delivery modes in order to accommodate work hours, commutes, and outside responsibilities. None of the Vets who participated in this study preferred on-line learning as their primary mode of instruction. Face-to-face instruction was the preferred mode of course delivery by all of the participants although a hybrid model was deemed more convenient by those with long commutes and those working over 20 hours per week. The rationale for this preference for face-to-face instruction was more emphatically voiced by those students pursuing STEM-based majors with heavy math/science/problem-solving components. In hindsight, a couple of Vets admitted they probably should have given a little more thought beforehand of the program delivery modes offered for their particular programs of study.

Although their intended program of study was of some consideration when choosing this university for most participants, some admitted doing very little research before applying as to the specific requirements of their intended majors. As a result, some regretted not getting more prerequisites completed prior to entering the
university as in some cases they were off track until those requirements were met. Only two participants mentioned having conducted some research as to which universities in the state were most highly ranked with regard to their intended program of study.

With regard to the application and admissions process for this particular university, the majority found it to be a relatively easy and seamless process particularly when transferring in from one of the state public two-year colleges with an earned A.A. (Associate of Arts) degree. It may be noteworthy, however, to denote that two obstacles were mentioned by a couple of the Vets after receiving their acceptance: difficulty in providing required immunization records and challenges related to establishing in-state residency. Benefits processing was surprisingly easy as well; most of the participants thought that the paperwork involved would be much more arduous and time-consuming.

When asked about their confidence level with regard to succeeding academically prior to starting at this university, most had high expectations. With regard to academic preparedness, students were split as to feeling adequately prepared or not prepared enough, particularly when discussing math/science requirements. Two who entered from a two-year college admitted being perhaps over-confident and having to adjust during their first couple of semesters at the university. As is often typical of non-traditional age college students, some lamented the time lag between high school and entering the university as a possible slight disadvantage over traditional-age students with regard to recall of subject matter.
Veteran students also admitted the need to have some kind of assistance with first semester registration and learning how to navigate the system for the first time, which is a common answer of most students new to a college or university. As for the kinds of support services they expected to be available to them, most presumed services would be similar to ones they had access to at previous institutions attended including tutoring, academic advising, and a VA representative to assist with benefits paperwork. All of the Vets who participated in this study acknowledged that this university had exceeded their expectations. In particular, they consistently commended the services offered by the campus’s Office of Veterans Success.

Finally, when asked if they had any preconceptions of interacting with staff and faculty on campus, the most common response of participants was that they presumed that past experiences with staff and faculty/instructors at colleges/universities previously attended would be about the same at this university. As for interacting with fellow students, most acknowledged feeling like adults having to interact with the “kids” on campus even though the age difference between the Vets and traditional-aged students was typically between five and ten years. And, as has been alluded to in the literature, when the Veteran students were asked if they would readily disclose their Veteran status to others on campus, the answer was typically “No”. They were not necessarily inclined to disclose their Veteran status to others on campus unless required to do so. They were even less inclined to reveal any limitations that might impact their academic performance. Even those who proudly and readily revealed their Vet status to
others on campus expressed hesitation when asked if that included disclosing any possible physical or other limitations including at times, asking for help.

**Research Question 2** Which elements of academic, social and financial support advance or impede Veteran students’ academic progress and persistence?

Based on the feedback from this study’s participants, Veteran students unanimously agreed that the part of new student orientation that was most valuable was the Vet-specific portion presented by the Office of Veterans’ Success staff in which they were pulled out separately and introduced to services available to and applicable to them specifically. In fact, they would have preferred to have a separate new student orientation that included Veteran students only. At this particular university, the breakout session during new student orientation for Veteran students has expanded over the last couple of years and includes both staff from the Office of Veterans Success as well as current Veteran students providing the content and assisting new Vets with information related to VA benefit processing as well as programs and services available to them. One of the participants who was a first-semester transfer mentioned how helpful it was to be provided with a USB thumb drive at that session with step-by-step instructions for benefits processing and navigating policies, procedures, and services available on campus. It also includes the slides presented during the Vet-specific portion of orientation.

When asked how often they availed themselves of academic support services offered on campus, the participants admitted minimal use. The academic support service cited as used most often by the participants was tutoring. Several referred to
the tutoring services offered by the university as inadequate and they communicated an extreme dislike of large group tutoring. Instead, the Vets preferred one-on-one tutoring, and preferably, Vet-to-Vet tutoring, when available. Vet-to-Vet tutoring is a service offered by the Office of Veterans Success in which fellow Vets serve as tutors. Some Vets were more comfortable with participating in and creating their own study groups with smaller groups of fellow students. Once introduced to on-line academic and campus resources, many of the participants referred to some of these resources as tools they were comfortable navigating on their own and therefore, would access often e.g. degree audit, LMS, Clockworks.

Overall, the Vets were lukewarm when asked about academic advising and most admitted that they did not frequently meet with one unless mandated to do so. Those who felt confident interpreting the online degree audit were also less inclined to regularly meet or consult with an academic advisor. Students who were mandated to meet with an advisor prior to registering preferred having a specific departmental advisor assignment (professional or faculty) as opposed to a general advisor or random advisor dependent upon availability at the time. Some of the participants preferred meeting with the Academic Enhancement Coordinator in the Office of Veterans Success for academic advising. This position was created to assist Veteran students with course planning and academic coaching, and as a referral when encountering academic difficulties. One participant relied heavily on this staff member when first entering the university for both advising and academic support services and appreciated the coordinator’s willingness to accompany him when he met with his regular academic
advisor to serve as a translator. As he put it, so that I can get the information in “our speak”.

When asked about availing themselves of possible services or accommodations offered by the Students with Disabilities Services office, those who responded either had used SDS services frequently or not all. One participant confirmed registering with SDS services immediately upon arrival to campus and frequently requesting services at first and then gradually not needing to request any services at all. A couple of participants admitted not seeking out services but acknowledged that they probably needed to do so. For some of the participants, they felt, based on their personal experiences, that SDS staff at this university needed to be more understanding of Veteran students’ needs.

Assistance with benefits processing was acknowledged as readily available and services appreciated by the Vets. However, the majority also admitted being much less familiar, if at all, with the University’s financial aid services or how to navigate searching for scholarships. Essentially, if their current benefits were meeting their needs, they had not considered looking any further into other financial aid options. However, some participants who admitted being close to meeting maximum benefits eligibility had recently begun to think about what their options might be. A couple who did acknowledge having had interactions with the University’s financial aid office felt the staff did not understand their unique needs as Veteran students including an understanding of their VA benefits and how those benefits would work with other financial aid. It was not readily apparent either as to if the Vets were aware that they
might have eligibility for other grants or awards or aid as they had never completed a FAFSA (Free Application for Federal Student Aid).

The Vets who reported having worked in or frequented the Office of Veterans Success were more inclined to participate in some of the sponsored activities designed specifically for Veterans students on campus. As was the response when questioned about the frequency of use of academic support services, the majority of Veteran students also reported minimal participation in campus life activities outside the classroom. Although a couple mentioned intramural sports and professional organizations related to their majors, most reported rarely participating in a campus event outside of class. Reasons for not being involved included lack of time, scheduling conflicts, being a commuter, work and family obligations, and needing to focus on their academics. A couple of the Vets suggested that they would probably be more involved if campus activities were offered at more varied times that would accommodate their commutes as well as their full-time class schedules (and for many, this entailed attending lectures with lab components).

As for social support, the single participants communicated having less stressors than those with dependents or those having to work more than half-time. The participants who were married or engaged felt positive support from their significant others with regard to their decision to enter or reenter college. Although, in some instances, some participants’ dependents or other family members were not as supportive of their decision to enter the university. Some had taken significant pay cuts
to do so either due to a reduction in pay after leaving the military or due to leaving a higher-paying job in order to attend college full-time.

Less lectures and more interactive classrooms was the mantra for most of the Vets. They also preferred instructors with real-world experiences and less so the ones they perceived as valuing their research agendas over teaching. Most expressed being comfortable working in groups due to their military experiences and also comfortable expressing their opinions in class. They were typically more open when fellow Vets were in classes alongside them. Many mentioned a preference for “learning by doing” perhaps due in part to a familiarity for this type of instruction when learning their jobs in the military.

**Research Question 3** What are Veteran students’ perceptions on the extent to which students, faculty, and staff acknowledge and contribute to the needs of Veteran students related to student success?

The majority of the Vets interviewed for this study felt that in general, campus attitudes at this university towards Veterans were positive. Some mentioned feeling more welcomed once students/instructors discovered that they were Vets. They did not necessarily feel like they were treated any differently than other students on campus although a couple mentioned feeling like some faculty had higher expectations of them if they disclosed their Veteran status and less expectations of more traditional-aged students. Non-military students’ attitudes towards Veterans on campus were typically reported as positive and indifferent.
With regard to faculty instruction, as mentioned in the previous chapter, the participants had mostly favorable things to say including feeling that their instructors had high expectations but were caring and concerned. Those who compared faculty instruction to what they had received at two-year colleges and from on-line institutions felt the standards were higher and that faculty appeared to exhibit a more professional demeanor at the university level. This seemed to resonate with them as they communicated taking their academics very seriously and some described comparably different experiences with the less professional, less serious demeanors of some of their previous instructors at two-year colleges.

Some of the older Vets who participated in this study alluded to riding the wave of patriotism over the past fifteen years since 9/11/2001. They felt that this had contributed to the positive opinions towards Veterans and the military on campus. At the same time, they expressed apprehension that the campus climate might take a turn if the current political climate does. Participants also seemed genuinely surprised that the overall campus climate was not nearly as liberal as they presumed it would be. Some, however, expressed varying levels of discomfort with other on-campus protests held routinely by what they termed to be groups being a bit too extreme and graphic in attempting to push their agendas. Some even admitted to avoiding “that side of campus” at specific times due to these demonstrations. Overall, the Vets appeared to be in agreement that people should have a right to their opinions, and that on occasion, they were willing to speak their minds as well. For one participant, this confidence to speak up was a quality she did not possess prior to serving in the military.
The Vets who participated in this study applauded the services offered by the Office of Veterans Success as a key factor in their academic success and that because of this office, any “runaround” immediately stopped. Services and benefits provided by this office that came to mind when participants were asked to elaborate included:

- resume building and transition assistance,
- work study opportunities,
- the “Strategies for Success” course for Veteran students,
- academic coaching and assistance with benefits paperwork,
- “Mandatory Fun Club”, tailgates and cook-offs,
- Vet-to-Vet tutoring, mentorships and internships, and
- a sense of community, a built-in support system, and problem resolution.

Of all the support services available on campus, those offered by the Office of Veterans Success resonated most with the Veteran students who participated in this study. It was also invaluable in their acclimation to campus that these services were introduced to them during new student orientation. They did not have to seek them out on their own and surprisingly, the majority were not aware of the extent of the services that would be available to them until they received this briefing at their new student orientation.

**Research Question 4** To what extent do Veteran students feel engaged with faculty and fellow classmates in the classroom and on campus?

As previously mentioned, the Vets had mixed feelings when asked if they readily disclose their Veteran status on campus. Some are proud to do so while others prefer
not to or will do so more easily if around other Vets. The level of classroom engagement also varied by participant. Some prefer to be front and center; some prefer to be anonymous; and for others, it depended on the day. Some indicated feeling more confident than when they had previously attended college perhaps due in part to their prior experiences in the military. Some affirmed that they simply were not ready to go to college the first time around. An observation was made by a couple of students close to graduating that their level of engagement in their classes increased as they entered their upper level major coursework. They were more familiar with their instructors and some of their classmates as they recognized them from previous classes.

The Veteran students felt most comfortable interacting with fellow Vets in class followed by “older” students. Typical of adult students, many viewed themselves as having more of a parental role when interacting with younger students and portrayed themselves as more mature and engaged than their traditional-age classmates. When asked about the extent of their involvement in campus activities outside of class, most of the participants responded that they did not actively participate in campus activities outside of class. Some explained it was due to the rigor of their major, work schedule, commute, or other outside commitments. A common response was that the Veteran students acknowledged the necessity to dedicate their primary focus to their academics. By taking full-time course loads to expedite graduation before their benefits eligibility expired, their primary extracurricular activities were typically related to completing assignments, studying for tests, and maintaining good grades.
Final Thoughts of Participants

None of the 11 Veteran students who participated in this study expressed regrets about opting to use their V.A. educational benefits and enter or reenter college after separating from military service. However, many did express disappointment at the lack of transition services available to them while they were still in the military that might have provided better guidance as to their options and next steps. Some also regretted not availing themselves more fully of opportunities to complete college coursework including prerequisite courses while still on active duty. Doing so would have possibly preserved some of their future education benefits.

When asked to think of anything that might derail their education, the most common answer was running out of benefits prior to graduation. Many were adamant that they would not have returned to college if it had not been for their eligibility to receive Chapter 33 (and for some, Chapter 31) V.A. educational benefits. A couple also expressed apprehension that they might not graduate if their benefits were to expire and alternative funding options that would not result in incurring student loan debt were not available to them.
Comparison to Current Literature

Researchers have reported that the current literature on Veteran students is limited and dated and there is an urgent need for updated literature focused on the current cohort of Vets, those having served in the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan (DiRamio, Ackerman, and Mitchell, 2008, Lackaye, 2011). The longevity of U.S. involvement abroad coupled with minimal studies of the student veteran experience equate to a literature gap (Livingston et al., 2011). This study addresses that gap as it tells the stories of 11 former service members who served recently as part of the current U.S. military’s All Volunteer Force. All of the Veteran students who participated in this study served in the U.S. military post-9/11 (9/11/2001).

Some of the potential gaps that were reported in the current literature (2005-2015) that were referenced in this study included:

- the importance of peer groups to the student Veteran population (DiRamio, et al., 2008),
- strengths and assets of Veteran students (Morreale, 2011), and
- factors contributing to persistence among Veterans at the postsecondary level (Lopez, 2013), and
- an imbalance in the research in which Veteran students’ shortcomings or deficits are highlighted with little discussion related to their positive qualities (Hassan, et al., 2010).

The researcher also observed upon review of the current literature that there was a need for more current research as older research/data that may not have applied
directly to today’s All Volunteer Force needed to be updated. The results of this qualitative study touched upon some of those areas including:

- the effect of academic preparedness,
- potential impact of time limit to use benefits,
- perceptions on interaction with faculty and non-military peers, and
- acceptance and use of prior college credit for military service/training.

Since the current literature has only recently begun to highlight the positive attributes of student Veterans (Hassan, et al., 2010), the results of this qualitative study should also contribute to the current body of scholarly literature that highlights positive attributes that Veteran students possess that may contribute to persistence including: leadership skills acquired and developed in the military (Ackerman, DiRamio, & Garza Mitchell, 2009; Lopez, 2011) along with maturity and acquired skills related to global and cultural awareness (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011). Results also validated the assertion that Veterans are vocal and will express themselves, which is an important component for classroom and campus engagement.

Other common positive traits attributed to Veteran students that were included in the current literature and affirmed in the results of this qualitative study included: strong skills of self efficacy, organization, and motivation (Wheeler, 2012; Glasser, Powers, & Zywiak, 2009), the ability to self-regulate, acknowledgement that postsecondary education is a necessary step in improving their lives, being mission driven and goal-oriented, and recognition of the importance of teamwork, persistence, and resiliency (Hassan, Jackson, Lindsay, McCabe, & Sanders, 2010).
The stories told by the 11 participants of this study contributed to Callahan & Jarrat’s (2014) contention that once a Veteran feels validated in a class, degree program, college context, or as a member of a community, the natural talents of any Veteran may sustain them through to degree completion. Since the current literature pertaining to Veteran students has primarily focused on physical and mental challenges commonly experienced by Veterans and transition/readjustment issues (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011; Baechtold & De Sawal, 2009; Wheeler, 2012; Rumann & Hamrick, 2009, 2010), the results of this study attempted to heed the suggestion by Vacchi (2012) that prior qualitative inquires have suggested that Veteran students do not experience any more transition difficulty than other student populations.

Other findings of this study that supported the current literature included:

- the effectiveness of veteran resource centers (Kirchner, 2015),
- a new student orientation specifically for Veteran students as preferable (Ackerman, DiRamio, & Garza, 2009, Lackaye, 2011, Kirchner, 2015),
- the addition of qualitative research designs to gain more detailed and rich data regarding the individual stories of military veteran students (Lackaye, 2011),
- underestimating the leadership potential of student service members (Callahan and Jarrat, 2014),
- programming efforts specifically geared toward Veteran students that have contributed to success including peer support groups (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011; Baechtold & De Sawal, 2009) and the importance of cultural support (Griffin & Gilbert, 2015),

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• community-based initiatives to more fully engage Veteran students as well as to bring about awareness through special events, particularly on Veterans Day and Memorial Day (Burnett & Segoria, 2009), and

• Veteran students are typically less likely to disclose limitations or ask for help (Church, 2008, 2009, Baechtold & De Sawal, 2009; Shackelford, 2009; Lighthall, 2012).

Research Implications for Practice

Admissions/Recruitment/Acceptance

Colleges and universities should not presume that Veteran students are going to do extensive research prior to choosing where to apply. The participants in this study confirmed that they did not conduct extensive research prior to choosing this university nor were they necessarily familiar with the services offered to Veteran students. Their primary reasons were: location, reputation, and word-of-mouth. However, attractive websites that promote services for Veteran students and testimonials by other Veteran students as to their experiences including how a particular program of study translated to their prior military experience are beneficial. Institutions, including admissions recruiters should also not presume that Vets have researched program delivery methods e.g. classroom, on-line, hybrid options and class times/schedules e.g. daytime only, evenings, weekends, alternative calendars. Vets need this information prior to submitting an application.

A further examination of obstacles upon acceptance mentioned by the Vets in this study is recommended:
• procedures related to Veteran students providing immunization records,
• possible challenges Veteran students face when attempting to establish in-state residency, and
• protocol and best practices for assisting Veteran students with providing sufficient documentation to the Students with Disabilities Services office on campus including partnerships with the Veterans Services office to ensure Vets are aware of the types of services available to them.

**Academic Support Services**

As the Veteran students who participated in this study admitted, they will not necessarily seek out academic advising services unless mandated to do so. Mandatory academic advising may be a consideration to ensure they do meet with an academic advisor regularly particularly since it is imperative that with limited benefits eligibility, that they ensure they are taking the proper courses in the proper sequence in order to graduate on time. Having an academic support position housed within the Veterans Services office, if the campus has one, or a liaison to Veteran students within each college or academic advising office to provide academic advising and coaching is ideal. The suggestion of that position serving as a liaison between a Vet and his/her regular academic advisor might also be beneficial as well in ensuring the right questions are asked and the student’s academic plan is realistic and accurate and any concerns pro-actively addressed.

**Campus Support Services**
Consideration should be given to establishing a primary liaison in the Financial Aid office who understands the unique needs of Veteran students. Veteran students admit that they presume that financial aid options do not need to be explored unless they are close to losing their eligibility. However, as with the concerns some of the participants of this study had with the processes related to immunization and residency requirements, Vets should learn financial aid basics including submitting a FAFSA sooner rather than later. Some may even be eligible for grants or awards that they were unaware of if they had started the process sooner. The first step, however, is reassuring Veteran students that they will have a contact in the financial aid who is there for them; another potential partnership is encouraged between the Veterans Services office and the Financial Aid office.

The majority of Vets who participated in this study intended to pursue post-bac degrees after graduation either immediately or in the future but few had begun to prepare to do so. Some will need to enter the workforce first in order to afford to continue their educations. Universities need to facilitate this transition by implementing more intentional programming to assist with post bac planning as well as job placement assistance.
Recommendations Related to 2015 Vets Program Summit Report

The primary themes and recommendations of ACE’s 2015 Service Member and Veteran Academic Advising Report were briefly described in Chapter 2. Some of the recommendations from that report were reflective of the sentiments of the Vets who participated in this study. Higher education institutions need to:

- increase one-on-one support services for Veteran students.
- train advisors on military culture and language.
- encourage service members to develop peer networks.
- facilitate increased connections between the military, higher education, and employers.
- develop a consolidated information website for employment and education resources.
- “educate to employ” by placing a greater focus on career readiness.
- work with employers to articulate and document the benefits of hiring veterans.

Limitations

In addition to the limitations previously identified in Chapter One, two additional limitations were identified. The criteria established for a purposeful sample was not fully met. Representation by classification and academic standing was not achieved. All of the Veterans students who volunteered to participate were in good academic standing and all except one were seniors.

Also discussed in the limitations section in Chapter 3, the researcher opted to forego a second round of interviews due to time constraints and the lack of availability...
of participants for follow-up interviews. Although data saturation was evident, the lack of follow-up interviews may be considered a limitation for this study. The length of time between receiving IRB approval and being provided with a list of potential participants resulted in a shortened timeline in which to complete the research protocol within the designated time frame the researcher had allotted for data collection. A second interview with each participant was expected to be conducted based on the initial review and analysis of the first interview. By the time the initial round of interviews were conducted and initial findings ready and provided to the participants for feedback, it was already close to the end of the fall semester and final exams week followed by Winter Break. This information may be useful for future researchers who might choose to replicate this study.

**Suggestions for Future Research**

Since the majority of participants were seniors and all self-reported being in good academic standing, a replicated study might include a comparison of results to students not in good academic standing or to those in different classifications such as first-year/second-year students. In regard to engagement/mattering, future research might examine if there is a correlation between those Veteran students who actively interact with other Veterans and Veterans services on campus versus those who do not.

Two unanticipated outcomes of this study involved 1) participants’ comparisons of their experiences as Veteran students at two-year colleges compared to their experiences at this university, and 2) an expression of animosity by many participants regarding previous experiences with on-line learning. Further research would be needed
to more fully understand their perspectives and how their prior educational experiences or experiences in the military influenced their perspectives.

A recurrent theme in the current literature and this study revolves around Veteran students’ concerns about running out of benefits eligibility prior to graduation. The participants in this study were not necessarily inclined to continue their education if it would entail incurring student loan debt. More research is recommended related to how Veteran students who have graduated made it financially e.g. mechanisms that worked to supplement or extend funding. How many are eligible to use both Ch. 31 and Ch. 33 benefits and are Vets properly informed about their options? This university offers a scholarship that pays Veteran students $1,000. the semester after they run out of eligibility and is actively recruiting donors to set up foundation funds to be able to offer future scholarships for Veteran students. They have also compiled on-line an easily accessible list of scholarship opportunities both at the state level and scholarships specifically targeting military Veterans. Future research might explore what other colleges/universities are doing to assist their Veteran students financially or how university financial aid offices are educating their staff or partnering with Veterans services offices on campus to inform and assist students as to their options.

Other suggestions for possible future research on Veteran students include:

- an examination of why so many Veteran students are contemplating a helping profession, particularly dedicated to working with other Veterans,
• how universities can use Veteran students’ experiences from serving all over the world to contribute to global citizenship initiatives including many Vets’ desires to continue seeing the world after separation,
• how colleges/universities have formed partnerships with local or remote military installations to offer courses to active duty military service members, and
• a study related to if/how universities have implemented suggestions for Universal Design by Branker (2009) in order to create inclusive, barrier free learning and social environments that would require fewer adaptations and accommodations for Veteran students,
• an examination of how colleges/universities are aligning academic programs of study to Vets’ military job specialties/areas of expertise as a major exploration tool.

Conclusion

This chapter included a summary of findings of this study as aligned to the research questions. A comparison between the research findings and current literature was followed by research implications for practice. Limitations were also discussed followed by recommendations for future research.

The 11 Veteran students who generously volunteered their time to give their perspectives on their academic experiences for this study were inspiring. Veteran students are capable of and prepared for success, as long as colleges and universities proactively offer them the support they need. They value the educational opportunities they have been provided due to their V.A. benefits and do not take this opportunity for
granted. Colleges and universities need to continue to develop and improve conditions on campus that are known to promote student success for Veteran students. In return, if the stories of the amazing men and women who participated in this qualitative study are any indication, they will certainly give back not only to this university as proud alumni but will serve as an inspiration to future Veterans contemplating entering or reentering college. They are paving the way for student success and demonstrating a return on investment both to the V.A. for the educational benefits provided to them as well as their contributions as Veteran students to the colleges and universities who recruit, admit, retain, and more importantly, graduate them.
REFERENCES


doi:10.1002/cc.457


VA needs to improve program management and provide more timely information to students. (2013). *GAO Reports*, 1-53.


# APPENDIX A
## RECENT DISSERTATIONS AND THESIS ON VETERAN STUDENTS

### Table A1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year Published</th>
<th>Author, University</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Primary Method</th>
<th>Theoretical Framework/ Theories</th>
<th>Abstract Summary</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>Heath, William Monroe, SUNY at Brockport</td>
<td>A Wellness Profile of Student Veterans at 4-Year Higher Education Institutions: The Role of Gender, Combat Tours, and Deployment</td>
<td>Quantitative; Five-Factor Wellness Inventory and demographic data form; expo facto study; n=143; descriptive and inferential statistics</td>
<td>Wellness (Myers &amp; Sweeney) Model of Wellness (Hettler)</td>
<td>The purpose of this study was to examine associations between student-veterans in relation to gender, number of combat tours, that is, one tour versus more than one tour, and deployment, that is, student-veterans that stayed in the U.S. versus those that were deployed to Afghanistan and/or Iraq.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>Ureno, Gerardo, University of San Francisco</td>
<td>Integrated Academic and Social Support for Military Veteran Students: Imagining a New Horizon in Education</td>
<td>Critical Hermeneutic Theory; participatory research; n=7</td>
<td>Identity Theory (Ricoeur) Theory of Fusion of Horizon (Gadamer) Theory of Imagination (Kearney)</td>
<td>The purpose of this study was to reach a new understanding about the academic and social factors influencing the educational experience of military veteran students pursuing a bachelor's degree at a private four-year institution.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>Cole-Morton, Gladys S., East Tennessee State University</td>
<td>Experiences and Expectations of an African American Male Veteran Student in Higher Education</td>
<td>Qualitative; narrative inquiry/analysis; interpretivism</td>
<td>Transition Theory (Schlossberg) Critical Race Theory and Critical Theory (Denzin &amp; Lincoln)</td>
<td>The purpose of this study was to evaluate the experiences and expectations of an African American male veteran student at an institution of higher education.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>Lopez, Eddie S., Cal State</td>
<td>The Effectiveness of University Programs, Qualitative Case Study</td>
<td>Student Integration Model (Tinto) Student</td>
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<tr>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>University</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Methodology</th>
<th>Theory</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Univ, Los Angeles Services, and Practices in Retaining Student Veterans Transitioning to Higher Education: Voices of Student Veterans - A Case Study Analysis Approach at Two Universities</td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>Lackaye, Bryan (Northeastern University)</td>
<td>Qualitative research design; phenomenological; purposeful sample n=8</td>
<td>Critical Theory (McClaren) Transition Theory (Schlossberg) Theory of Cultural Capital (Bourdieu) Theory of Marginality and Mattering (Schlossberg)</td>
<td>This research will delve deeper into how the personal combat zone experiences of veterans affect their engagement in education, and how this information can aid in the development of more effective educational programming.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lopez, Charles A. (Stephen F. Austin University)</td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>Factors Influencing Affordability, Accessibility and Academic success of Military Student Veterans In Higher Education: A Descriptive Case Study</td>
<td>Descriptive Case Study; n=249 students; descriptive statistics</td>
<td>Social Capital Theory (Coleman) Social Reproduction Theory (MacLeod) Transitional Theory (Schlossberg) Student Involvement Theory (Astin)</td>
<td>The purpose of this descriptive case study was to obtain a greater understanding of factors influencing affordability, accessibility, and the academic success of military students in higher education.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Murphy, Patrick M. (The University of North Carolina at Greensboro)</td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>Military Veterans and College Success: A Qualitative Examination of Veteran Needs in</td>
<td>Qualitative; phenomenological; semi-structured interviews; n=13</td>
<td>College as a Black Box Theory (Padilla)</td>
<td>The needs of military veterans were examined to assist college administrators in the development of programs to help meet those needs.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Year</td>
<td>Author(s)</td>
<td>Institution</td>
<td>Methodology</td>
<td>Instruments</td>
<td>Research Purpose</td>
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| 2011 | Morreale, Cathleen | SUNY Buffalo         | Quantitative Study; web survey using compilation of instruments. | Academic Motivation and Academic Self-Concept: Military Veteran Students in Higher Education  
Academic Motivation Scale (Vallerand et al.)  
Academic Self-Concept Scale (Reynolds et al.)  
Combat Exposure Scale (Keane, et al.) | The purpose of this study was to explore the academic motivation and academic self-concept of these students in relation to their demographic characteristics, educational experience, and military experience, with, as a context, an understanding of the unique transitions they make between the military and civilian worlds. |
| 2009 | Livingston, Wade   | Clemson University   | Qualitative; grounded theory; n=15 | Discovering the Academic and Social Transitions of Re-enrolling Student Veterans at One Institution: A Grounded Theory | Theory of Adult Transitions (Schlossberg)  
The purpose of this study was to build a base of research on the academic and social experiences of re-enrolling student veterans with the goals of better understanding the student veteran experience and discovering new avenues of support for this population. |
APPENDIX B
Executive Order 13607 (2012)

Presidential Documents

Executive Order 13607 of April 27, 2012

Establishing Principles of Excellence for Educational Institutions Serving Service Members, Veterans, Spouses, and Other Family Members

By the authority vested in me as President by the Constitution and the laws of the United States of America, and in order to ensure that Federal military and veterans educational benefits programs are providing service members, veterans, spouses, and other family members with the information, support, and protections they deserve, it is hereby ordered as follows:

Section 1. Policy. The original GI Bill, approved just weeks after D-Day, educated nearly 8 million Americans and helped transform this Nation. We owe the same obligations to this generation of service men and women as was afforded that previous one. This is the promise of the Post-9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Act of 2008 (title V, Public Law 110–252) (Post-9/11 GI Bill) and the continued provision of educational benefits in the Department of Defense’s Tuition Assistance Program (10 U.S.C. 2007): to provide our service members, veterans, spouses, and other family members the opportunity to pursue a high-quality education and gain the skills and training they need to fill the jobs of tomorrow.

Since the Post-9/11 GI Bill became law, there have been reports of aggressive and deceptive targeting of service members, veterans, and their families by some educational institutions. For example, some institutions have recruited veterans with serious brain injuries and emotional vulnerabilities without providing academic support and counseling; encouraged service members and veterans to take out costly institutional loans rather than encouraging them to apply for Federal student loans first; engaged in misleading recruiting practices on military installations; and failed to disclose meaningful information that allows potential students to determine whether the institution has a good record of graduating service members, veterans, and their families by some educational institutions. For example, some institutions have recruited veterans with serious brain injuries and emotional vulnerabilities without providing academic support and counseling; encouraged service members and veterans to take out costly institutional loans rather than encouraging them to apply for Federal student loans first; engaged in misleading recruiting practices on military installations; and failed to disclose meaningful information that allows potential students to determine whether the institution has a good record of graduating service members, veterans, and their families by some educational institutions.

To ensure our service members, veterans, spouses, and other family members have the information they need to make informed decisions concerning their well-earned Federal military and veterans educational benefits, I am directing my Administration to develop Principles of Excellence to strengthen oversight, enforcement, and accountability within these benefits programs.

Sec. 2. Principles of Excellence for Educational Institutions Serving Service Members, Veterans, Spouses, and Other Family Members. The Departments of Defense, Veterans Affairs, and Education shall establish Principles of Excellence (Principles) to apply to educational institutions receiving funding from Federal military and veterans educational benefits programs, including benefits programs provided by the Post-9/11 GI Bill and the Tuition Assistance Program. The Principles should ensure that these educational institutions provide meaningful information to service members, veterans, spouses, and other family members about the financial cost and quality of educational institutions to assist those prospective students in making choices about how to use their Federal educational benefits; prevent abusive and deceptive recruiting practices that target the recipients of Federal military and veterans educational benefits; and ensure that educational institutions provide high-quality academic and student support services to active-duty service members, reservists, members of the National Guard, veterans, and military families.
To the extent permitted by law, the Principles, implemented pursuant to section 3 of this order, should require educational institutions receiving funding pursuant to Federal military and veterans educational benefits to:

(a) prior to enrollment, provide prospective students who are eligible to receive Federal military and veterans educational benefits with a personalized and standardized form, as developed in a manner set forth by the Secretary of Education, working with the Secretaries of Defense and Veterans Affairs, to help those prospective students understand the total cost of the educational program, including tuition and fees; the amount of that cost that will be covered by Federal educational benefits; the type and amount of financial aid they may qualify for; their estimated student loan debt upon graduation; information about student outcomes; and other information to facilitate comparison of aid packages offered by different educational institutions;

(b) inform students who are eligible to receive Federal military and veterans educational benefits of the availability of Federal financial aid and have in place policies to alert those students of their potential eligibility for that aid before packaging or arranging private student loans or alternative financing programs;

(c) end fraudulent and unduly aggressive recruiting techniques on and off military installations, as well as misrepresentation, payment of incentive compensation, and failure to meet State authorization requirements, consistent with the regulations issued by the Department of Education (34 C.F.R. 668.71–668.75, 668.14, and 600.9);

(d) obtain the approval of the institution’s accrediting agency for new course or program offerings before enrolling students in such courses or programs, provided that such approval is appropriate under the substantive change requirements of the accrediting agency;

(e) allow service members and reservists to be readmitted to a program if they are temporarily unable to attend class or have to suspend their studies due to service requirements, and take additional steps to accommodate short absences due to service obligations, provided that satisfactory academic progress is being made by the service members and reservists prior to suspending their studies;

(f) agree to an institutional refund policy that is aligned with the refund of unearned student aid rules applicable to Federal student aid provided through the Department of Education under Title IV of the Higher Education Act of 1965, as required under section 484B of that Act when students withdraw prior to course completion;

(g) provide educational plans for all individuals using Federal military and veterans educational benefits that detail how they will fulfill all the requirements necessary to graduate and the expected timeline of completion; and

(h) designate a point of contact for academic and financial advising (including access to disability counseling) to assist service member and veteran students and their families with the successful completion of their studies and with their job searches.

Sec. 3. Implementation of the Principles of Excellence.

(a) The Departments of Defense and Veterans Affairs shall reflect the Principles described in section 2 of this order in new agreements with educational institutions, to the extent practicable and permitted by law, concerning participation in the Yellow Ribbon Program for veterans under the Post-9/11 GI Bill or the Tuition Assistance Program for active duty service members. The Department of Veterans Affairs shall also notify all institutions participating in the Post-9/11 GI Bill program that they are strongly encouraged to comply with the Principles and shall post on the Department’s website those that do.
(b) The Secretaries of Defense, Veterans Affairs, and Education, in consultation with the Director of the Bureau of Consumer Financial Protection (CFPB) and the Attorney General, shall take immediate action to implement this order, and, within 90 days from the date of this order, report to the President their progress on implementation, including promptly revising regulations, Department of Defense Instructions, guidance documents, Memoranda of Understanding, and other policies governing programs authorized or funded by the Post-9/11 GI Bill and the Tuition Assistance Program to implement the Principles, to the extent permitted by law.

(c) The Secretaries of Defense, Veterans Affairs, and Education shall develop a comprehensive strategy for developing service member and veteran student outcome measures that are comparable, to the maximum extent practicable, across Federal military and veterans educational benefit programs, including, but not limited to, the Post-9/11 GI Bill and the Tuition Assistance Program. To the extent practicable, the student outcome measures should rely on existing administrative data to minimize the reporting burden on institutions participating in these benefit programs. The student outcome measures should permit comparisons across Federal educational programs and across institutions and types of institutions. The Secretary of Education, in consultation with the Secretaries of Defense and Veterans Affairs, shall also collect from educational institutions, as part of the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System and other data collection systems, information on the amount of funding received pursuant to the Post-9/11 GI Bill and the Tuition Assistance Program. The Secretary of Education shall make this information publicly available on the College Navigator Website.

(d) The Secretary of Veterans Affairs, in consultation with the Secretaries of Defense and Education, shall provide to prospective military and veteran students, prior to using their benefits, streamlined tools to compare educational institutions using key measures of affordability and value through the Department of Veterans Affairs’ eBenefits portal. The eBenefits portal shall be updated to facilitate access to school performance information, consumer protection information, and key Federal financial aid documents. The Secretaries of Defense and Veterans Affairs shall also ensure that service members and veterans have access to that information through educational counseling offered by those Departments.

Sec. 4. Strengthening Enforcement and Compliance Mechanisms. Service members, veterans, spouses, and other family members should have access to a strong enforcement system through which to file complaints when institutions fail to follow the Principles. Within 90 days of the date of this order, the Secretaries of Defense and Veterans Affairs, in consultation with the Secretary of Education and the Director of the CFPB, as well as with the Attorney General, as appropriate, shall submit to the President a plan to strengthen enforcement and compliance mechanisms. The plan shall include proposals to:

(a) create a centralized complaint system for students receiving Federal military and veterans educational benefits to register complaints that can be tracked and responded to by the Departments of Defense, Veterans Affairs, Justice, and Education, the CFPB, and other relevant agencies;

(b) institute uniform procedures for receiving and processing complaints across the State Approving Agencies (SAAs) that work with the Department of Veterans Affairs to review participating institutions, provide a coordinated mechanism across SAAs to alert the Department of Veterans Affairs to any complaints that have been registered at the State level, and create procedures for sharing information about complaints with the appropriate State officials, accrediting agency representatives, and the Secretary of Education;
(c) institute uniform procedures for referring potential matters for civil or criminal enforcement to the Department of Justice and other relevant agencies;
(d) establish procedures for targeted risk-based program reviews of institutions to ensure compliance with the Principles;
(e) establish new uniform rules and strengthen existing procedures for access to military installations by educational institutions. These new rules should ensure, at a minimum, that only those institutions that enter into a memorandum of agreement pursuant to section 3(a) of this order are permitted entry onto a Federal military installation for the purposes of recruitment. The Department of Defense shall include specific steps for instructing installation commanders on commercial solicitation rules and the requirement of the Principles outlined in section 2(c) of this order; and
(f) take all appropriate steps to ensure that websites and programs are not deceptively and fraudulently marketing educational services and benefits to program beneficiaries, including initiating a process to protect the term “GI Bill” and other military or veterans-related terms as trademarks, as appropriate.

Sec. 5. General Provisions.
(a) This order shall be implemented consistent with applicable law and subject to the availability of appropriations.
(b) Nothing in this order shall be construed to impair or otherwise affect:
   (i) the authority granted by law to an executive department, agency, or the head thereof; or
   (ii) the functions of the Director of the Office of Management and Budget relating to budgetary, administrative, or legislative proposals.
(c) This order is not intended to, and does not, create any right or benefit, substantive or procedural, enforceable at law or in equity by any party against the United States, its departments, agencies, or entities, its officers, employees, or agents, or any other person.

THE WHITE HOUSE,
April 27, 2012.
[FR Doc. 2012–10715
Filed 5–1–12; 8:45 am] Billing code  3295–F2–P
APPENDIX C
Participant Recruitment
Assistance with recruitment of Veteran students for study

Mon, May 30, 2016 at 1:20 PM
b1smith <b1s@mail.usf.edu>

To: [Redacted]

Dr. [Redacted],

Thank you for meeting with me again this past week.

As I mentioned to you, I will be targeting a minimum of 10-12 Veteran students to interview for my qualitative study.

Purposeful sampling will be the intent with criteria as follows:
• Veterans or service members who have served post-9/11.
• Undergraduate Veteran students who are currently or recently enrolled.
• Undergraduate Veteran students who are presently or have previously utilized Post-9/11 GI benefits.
• Representation will vary demographically by gender, ethnicity, age and classification in college (first-year, second-year, junior, senior, Post-Bac)
• Representation will vary by academic standing, cumulative GPA, and academic program/area of study.

Based on this criteria, do you foresee any difficulty in assisting me with recruiting the necessary number and a variety of Veteran students willing to be interviewed for my study?

Thank you for all of your assistance thus far,
Bea Smith
USF Doctoral Candidate

Fri, Jun 3, 2016 at 3:35 PM
To: "Smith, Beatrice" <b1s@mail.usf.edu>

Hi Bea,

I’ll be able to provide you with the veterans you need. Glad I can help! Have a good weekend,

[Redacted], Ed.D., US Army (Ret.) | Director Office of Veteran Success
APPENDIX D
INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE

To: Beatrice L. Smith, xxx Doctoral Student
From: Beatrice L. Smith, xxx Doctoral Student
Sent: Request for Research Study Participation as referred by Dr. [redacted], Director, Office of Veteran Success

Dear [redacted] Veteran Student:

My name is Bea Smith, and I am a doctoral candidate and I was provided your email address by the xxx Office of Veterans Services as someone who might be willing to be interviewed for my dissertation which is entitled: “A Qualitative Study of Veteran Students’ Perspectives of their Academic Experiences.” Please let me know if you are interested in learning more about my study and what your potential participation would entail.

Essentially, I will be interviewing 10-12 Veteran students. The initial interview will only take about an hour and would be scheduled at your convenience and at a location of your choice either on-campus or at an alternate location, if better for you. The interview will be recorded (audio), with your permission, and after it is transcribed, I will send you a copy of the transcription and initial findings for your review. After that, a second follow-up interview will be scheduled, again at your convenience.

I am currently a doctoral candidate at xxx working on my dissertation. I have a Master’s degree in Counseling and my area of study for my doctorate is in Curriculum and Instruction with a concentration in Higher Education Administration. I have worked as a University Administrator in Student Services areas for over twenty years and prior to that started my academic career as a high school English teacher.

I care about students and have a special interest in Veteran students due to having been a military dependent previously and also due to working with Veteran students throughout my higher education career. I have a particular interest in potential impacts related to Student Success.

If you are willing to learn more please email me back. If then confirmed that you will participate, you will be asked to let me know when might be a convenient time or times for you to meet with me. I will then confirm a date/time/location with you for the initial interview and will also forward a participant questionnaire and a copy of the interview guide to you in advance of our conversation and will possibly briefly meet you informally prior to the interview, if convenient for you.

All participants will be kept confidential with a pseudonym assigned in place of your first/last name. I sincerely appreciate your willingness to learn more about participating in this study and look forward to hearing back from you soon. Please feel free to e-mail me at bls@mail.xxx.edu or call me (xxx-xxx-xxx) at your earliest convenience. Sincerely, Beatrice L. Smith
APPENDIX E
Participant Questionnaire

What is your gender?
☐ Female
☐ Male
☐ Prefer not to answer.

What is your ethnicity?
☐ African-American
☐ American Indian/Alaskan Native
☐ Asian/Pacific Islander
☐ Caucasian
☐ Hispanic
☐ Other

What is your age?
☐ 18-24
☐ 25-35
☐ 36-55
☐ 55+

What is your current student classification?
☐ Senior (90+ earned hours)
☐ Junior (60-89 earned hours)
☐ Sophomore (30-59 earned hours)
☐ Freshman (0-29 hours earned)
☐ Post-Bac (already have college degree; pursuing additional bachelor’s degree)

What is your major/program of study?

In what branch of the military did you serve?
☐ Air Force
☐ Army
☐ Coast Guard
☐ Marines
☐ Navy

What rank did you hold upon separation from the military?

How many years did you serve? (If more than one tour, combined # of years)

Did you ever serve overseas?
☐ Yes.
  If yes, where?
☐ No.

Do you currently have any dependents?
☐ Yes
☐ No
Are you currently working while attending college?
☐ *Yes ☐ No
*If yes, on average, how many hours?
☐ 0-20 hrs. per week ☐ 21-39 hrs. per week ☐ 40 hrs. or more per week
Did you have any prior college coursework completed at the time of admission to this university?
☐ Yes ☐ No
Are you currently utilizing Post 9/11 GI benefits?
☐ Yes ☐ *No
*If no, did you utilize GI benefits previously? ☐ Yes ☐ No
*If no, have you exceeded maximum eligibility (36 months)? ☐ Yes ☐ No

Thank you for taking the time to answer these background questions.
APPENDIX F
Confirmation Email/Interview Guide for Participants

Body of confirmation email to participants once interview was scheduled:

Dear xxx:

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this research study. I look forward to meeting with you on month, day, year at time at location. Provided below are some sample questions to give you a general idea of the questioning that will occur during our initial interview. We will also go over the Letter of Informed Consent, in which you confirm your willingness to participate including whether or not it will be permissible to audiotape each interview. You will be informed of your rights as a participant, prior to the interview and you will sign two (2) copies, one of which will be provided to you for your records at that time.

To protect your confidentiality, pseudonyms will be used in place of actual names during the course of this research study. If you would like to request a particular pseudonym be used in place of your name, let me know.

The purpose of this study is to describe and explain Veteran students’ perspectives on academic success as they enter or reenter the university setting.

The overall question that will broadly guide this study is:

As a Veteran student, what is your perspective of your academic experiences?

Additional questions to further guide the overall question:

1. What were your expectations prior to entering or reentering the university and to what extent were those expectations met?
2. What types of support (academic, social and financial) on campus have either advanced or impeded your academic progress and staying on track to graduate?
3. What are your perceptions on the extent to which students, faculty, and staff acknowledge and contribute to the needs of Veteran students on this campus related to student success?
4. To what extent do you, as a Veteran student, feel engaged with faculty and fellow classmates in the higher education classroom and on campus at this university?

I look forward to meeting with you! If anything changes, feel free to text or call me at xxx-xxx-xxxx or email me at bls@....

Sincerely, Bea Smith
APPENDIX G
Interview Protocol

Background
1. Let’s start by having you give a little background about yourself.
   Prompts:
   • Upbringing
   • Educational background/experiences prior to joining military and during military service
   • Reasons for joining the military
   • Military experiences
   • Deciding to enter or reenter college

Expectations prior to entry
2. What contributed to your decision-making process in choosing this particular university?
   Prompts:
   • How did you find this university e.g. reputation, recommendation, past affiliation
   • Particular qualities or services or options that this particular institution advertised in
     general or specifically geared to Veteran students
   • Program of study
   • Program delivery options e.g. classroom, on-line, alternative calendars, primarily day,
     primarily night, hybrid, etc.

3. How would you describe your expectations from the point of 1) making the decision to attend
   this university, 2) applying for admission, 3) acceptance decision, and 4) registering for your
   first semester of coursework?
   Prompts:
   • Admissions application process
   • Navigating the system
   • Transfer of credit, credit for prior learning and training
   • New student orientation
   • Registration for classes

4. How would you describe your expectations related to academics prior to entering this
   university?
   Prompts:
   • Prior schooling, skills and abilities that contributed to, or not, your academic
     preparedness
   • Self-efficacy; confidence in ability to succeed, adequately prepared
   • Apprehensions related to academic transition e.g. rigor of university, rigor of intended
     program, interaction with students/staff/faculty
   • Level of commitment that would be required

5. Describe any expectations you had as to possible challenges you might encounter or
   limitations that might affect your academic success.
   Prompts:
• Academic concerns e.g. readiness, rigor of program, delivery mode
• Physical limitations; ease of getting around campus
• Possible mental or cognitive limitations
• disclosure of Veteran status or possible needs
• outside obligations e.g. dependents, work, outside responsibilities

6. **What expectations did you have as to the kinds of support services that would be available to you?**

Prompts:
• Dedicated services for Veteran students on campus; if so, types?
• Academic support services e.g. tutoring, study groups, academic advising, support services related to disabilities or special accommodations, major exploration/career-planning/post-bac assistance
• Social support services e.g. student life activities, student organization, ability to connect with other Vets, wellness services
• Financial/bureaucratic e.g. financial assistance, assistance with benefits paperwork

7. **What were your expectations, as a military Veteran or service member, as to what your experiences might entail when interacting with others on campus?**

• faculty, staff, students, other Vets, and the university campus in general
• Campus attitudes

**Experiences since Matriculation**

8. **To what extent, including your participation related to your academic coursework, have you been actively involved on campus outside the classroom?**

Prompts:
• Activities primarily designed for Veteran students or to promote Veterans on campus
• Extracurricular-intramurals, athletic events, student organizations
• Tutoring or mentoring
• Study groups
• Student Life programming

9. **What stands out most regarding your experiences within the classroom setting?**

Prompts:
• Expectations by faculty
• Course delivery e.g. preferred delivery mode
• Course content e.g. rigor, assessment and feedback
• Interactions with faculty
• Interactions with fellow students
• Level of engagement e.g. active participant, engaged, anonymous

10. **What incentives or services provided by this university, or not, for Veteran students stand out?**

Prompts:
• Financial
• University-sponsored benefits/services dedicated to Vets
• Delivered what was advertised
• Possible services lacking or needing improvement particularly for Vets
• Post-bac Planning/Assistance
11. **How would you describe your level of engagement/involvement in the classroom and on campus?**
   
   Prompts:
   
   - Level of engagement as a student in your classes e.g. active participant, engaged, anonymous
   
   - Extent of interaction with fellow students
   
   - How often/to what extent have you availed yourself of academic support services such as tutoring, advising, mentoring, etc?
   
   - Campus life- Have you been involved in any extracurriculars-intramurals, athletic events, student organizations
   
   - Vet activities- Have you participated in activities primarily designed for Veteran students or to promote Veterans on campus? To what extent?
   
   - Factors that have limited or contributed to active involvement or not on campus.

Retrospect/Concluding Thoughts/Future Plans

12. **Do you have any final thoughts you would like to express about your experiences as a Veteran student?**
   
   Prompts:
   
   - Can you think of anything that might have derailed or may derail your education?
   
   - Regrets?
   
   - Words of wisdom for future Veteran students
   
   - What’s next? E.g. future plans, grad school, career
## APPENDIX H

### INTERVIEW PROTOCOL ANALYSIS

Table A2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interview Question</th>
<th>AtlasTi Codes</th>
<th>Alignment with Tinto’s 4 Conditions for Student Success</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>1. Let’s start by having you give a little background about yourself.</strong></td>
<td>BGUpbringing</td>
<td>All four frames.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educational background/upbringing</td>
<td>BGEducation</td>
<td>All four frames.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decision to join the military</td>
<td>BGReasonforjoining</td>
<td>Expectations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Military experiences</td>
<td>BGMilitaryExp</td>
<td>Support Involvement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educational Experiences in Military</td>
<td>BGEdinMilitary</td>
<td>All four frames.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deciding to enter or reenter college after separating from the military</td>
<td>BGDecisiontoentercollege</td>
<td>Expectations Support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>2. What contributed to your decision-making process in choosing this particular university?</strong></td>
<td>G1ExpUniv</td>
<td>All four frames</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Particular qualities or services or options that this particular institution advertised in general or specifically geared to Veteran students</td>
<td>G1ExpQualities</td>
<td>All four frames</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Program of study</td>
<td>G1ExpProgofStud</td>
<td>All four frames</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Program delivery options e.g. classroom, on-line, alternative calendars, primarily day, primarily night, hybrid, etc.</td>
<td>G1ProgDeliv</td>
<td>All four frames</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>How would you describe your expectations from the point of first, making the decision to attend this university, then applying for admission, then acceptance decision, and finally registering for your first semester of coursework?</td>
<td>G1ExpAcceptance G1ExpAdmissions G1ExpNavigSyst G1Exp1stsemreg</td>
</tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Transfer of credit, credit for prior learning and training, options to receive credit through other mechanisms such as testing out</td>
<td>G1ExpTransfercredit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>How would you describe your expectations related to academics prior to entering this university?</strong></td>
<td>G1ExpConfidence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Prior schooling, skills and abilities, that would contributed to, or not, academic preparedness</td>
<td>G1ExpAcadPrepared</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Describe any expectations you had as to possible challenges you might encounter or limitations that might affect your academic success.</strong></td>
<td>G1ExpVetStatDiscl G1ExpLimitations G1ExpOutsideLim</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>What expectations did you have as to the kinds of support services that would be available to you?</strong></td>
<td>G1ExpSupportAvail</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>What were your expectations, as a military Veteran or service member, as to what your experiences might entail when interacting with others on campus?</strong></td>
<td>G1ExpFacultyStaff G1ExpStudents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>To what extent, including your participation related to your academic coursework, have you utilized campus resources and support services?</td>
<td>G2Sup</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>New Student Orientation</td>
<td>G2SupOrientation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Academic Advising</strong></td>
<td><strong>G2SupAdvising</strong></td>
<td><strong>Support</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Activities primarily designed for Veteran students or to promote Veterans on campus</td>
<td><strong>G2SupVetSrvcs</strong></td>
<td><strong>Support Involvement</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Student Life programming/Extracurriculars-intramurals, athletic events, student organizations</strong></td>
<td><strong>G2SupCampLife</strong></td>
<td><strong>Support Involvement</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tutoring, mentoring, study groups</td>
<td><strong>G2SupAcademic</strong></td>
<td><strong>Support Involvement</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial Services/Support</td>
<td><strong>G2SupFinancial</strong></td>
<td><strong>Support</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Benefits/Paperwork</td>
<td><strong>G2SupWork</strong></td>
<td><strong>Support</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Major/Post-Bac/Career Planning</td>
<td><strong>G2SupMajorCareerPB</strong></td>
<td><strong>Support</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

9. **What stands out most regarding your experiences within the classroom setting?**

| Perceptions of faculty, teaching methods, grading. Overall impression of faculty/instructors. | **G3AssessFeedFacInstruction** | **Assessment and Feedback** |
| Course content, rigor, difficulty | **G3AssessRigor** | **Assessment and Feedback** |
| Preferred delivery options/schedule/course load | **G3AssessFeedLrngStyle** | **Assessment and Feedback** |
| Course content/delivery methods | **G3AssessFeedClassEngagement** | **Assessment and Feedback Involvement** |
| Overall impression of interactions with fellow students | **G3AssessFeedStudents** | **Assessment and Feedback Involvement** |
| Campus Attitudes towards Veterans | **G3AssessFeedCampusAttitudes** | **Assessment and Feedback Support** |

10. **What incentives or services provided by this university, or not, for Veteran students stand out?**

| In hindsight, has university delivered what was advertised? | **G3AssessFeedUniv** | **Assessment and Feedback Support** |

11. **How would you describe**

<p>| <strong>G4Inv=Involvement</strong> | <strong>Involvement</strong> |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>your level of engagement/involvement in the classroom and on campus?</th>
<th>G4InvClassEngagement</th>
<th>Involvement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Level of engagement as a student in the classroom.</td>
<td>G4InvStudents</td>
<td>Involvement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extent of interaction with fellow students.</td>
<td>G4InvAcademicSrvcs</td>
<td>Involvement Support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How often/to what extent have you availed yourself of academic support services on campus?</td>
<td>G4InvOutsideClass</td>
<td>Involvement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Campus Involvement outside the classroom.</td>
<td>G4InvCampusLife</td>
<td>Involvement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level of engagement in Campus Live activities.</td>
<td>G4InvVetActivities</td>
<td>Involvement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participation in activities dedicated to Vet students or to promote Vets on campus.</td>
<td>G4InvReasonsYesorNo</td>
<td>Involvement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Factors affecting level of engagement on campus.</td>
<td>FinalThghtsRetrospect</td>
<td>All four frames</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. <strong>Do you have any final thoughts you would like to express about your experiences as a Veteran student?</strong></td>
<td>FinalThghtsDerailment?</td>
<td>All four frames</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>As you continue your studies or as you near graduation, can you think of anything that might have derailed or may derail your education?</td>
<td>FinalThghtsWordsWisdom</td>
<td>All four frames</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Words of wisdom for future Veteran students contemplating entering or reentering college?</td>
<td>FinalThghtsPost-BacPlans</td>
<td>All four frames</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What’s next? e.g. future plans, grad school, career</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Key:**

**Primary Question:** What are Veteran students’ perceptions of their academic experiences?

**Background**

**BG:** Background questions relevant to Exploratory Questions/Conceptual Framework

**Exploratory Questions**
Guiding Questions

1. What are Veteran students' expectations prior to entering or reentering the university and to what extent are these expectations met?

G1Exp=Expectations entering or reentering university

2. Which elements of academic, social and financial support advance or impede Veteran students’ academic progress and persistence?

G2Sup=Support. Academic, social and financial support on campus.

3. What are Veteran students’ perceptions on the extent to which students, faculty and staff acknowledge and contribute to the needs of Veteran students on their campus related to student success?

G3AssessFeed=Assessment and Feedback. The extent to which students, faculty and staff contribute to the needs of Veteran students on campus.

4. To what extent do Veteran students feel engaged with faculty and fellow classmates in the higher education classroom and on campus?

G4Inv=Involvement. Level of engagement/involvement in the classroom and on campus.

FinalThghts=Final Thoughts. Concluding thoughts at end of interview.
APPENDIX I
SCRIPT FOR VETERAN STUDENT INTERVIEWS

Signed Informed Consent obtained  __√___Yes  Date: ______________________________

Date/Time of Interview: _______________________________________________________

Location of Interview: _________________________________________________________

Participant: ________________________________________________________________

After greeting participant, obtaining informed consent, and thanking participant for volunteering for
the interview and research project, briefly re-state the research purpose and how participants were
selected.

Hi,

My name is Bea Smith. Thank you so much for agreeing to talk with me today about your perspective as
a Veteran student on academic success upon entering or reentering the University. I am a University
administrator in the Student Services area and am currently pursuing my doctoral degree at USF. One of
the requirements is a dissertation which is a research project on a topic of importance related to Higher
Education. I have a special interest in both Student Success implications as well as serving the needs of
Veteran students.

I have known Dr. [redacted] for a few years and as Director of the Office of Veteran Success, I asked for
his assistance in identifying students who would be interested in talking with me about their
perspectives of their academic experiences. Thank you for agreeing to talk with me.

This interview will last approximately one hour. If ok with you, I will be using an audio tape recorder to
record our conversation. The recording will be kept secure. Your name will not be included as part of
the research study, only your thoughts and impressions related to the topic.

You do not have to answer any of the questions that you do not feel comfortable with and we can stop
the interview at any time. Do you confirm that you understand informed consent and your rights?

Then, let’s begin.

Interview Questions (see Appendix G for interview protocol)

Thank you so much for your time today! I will let you now as soon as I have a copy of the interview
transcript ready for your review.
Informed Consent to Participate in Research Involving Minimal Risk

Pro #  00027522

You are being asked to take part in a research study. Research studies include only people who choose to take part. This document is called an informed consent form. Please read this information carefully and take your time making your decision. Ask the researcher or study staff to discuss this consent form with you, please ask him/her to explain any words or information you do not clearly understand. We encourage you to talk with your family and friends before you decide to take part in this research study. The nature of the study, risks, inconveniences, discomforts, and other important information about the study are listed below.

We are asking you to take part in a research study called:

A Qualitative Study of Veteran Students’ Perspectives of their Academic Experiences

The person who is in charge of this research study is Beatrice L. Smith. This person is called the Principal Investigator. However, other research staff may be involved and can act on behalf of the person in charge. She is being guided in this research by Dr. William H. Young.

The research will be conducted at the USF-Tampa campus or at an alternative location, whichever is most convenient for you.

Purpose of the study

The purpose of this study is to describe and explain Veteran students’ perspectives on academic success as they enter or reenter the university setting.

This research is being conducted by a doctoral candidate for her dissertation.

Why are you being asked to take part?

We are asking you to take part in this research study because you are a current undergraduate student who is a military Veteran or service member who has served Post-9/11.

Study Procedures:

If you take part in this study, you will be asked to: fill out a participant questionnaire asking for basic demographic information and then participate in an initial and follow-up interview, each of which will be about one hour in length.
You will be asked about your perspective related to your academic experiences. The overall question that will broadly guide this study is:

As a Veteran student, what is your perception of your academic experiences?

Additional questions to further guide the overall question:

1. What were your expectations prior to entering or reentering the university and to what extent were those expectations met?
2. What types of support (academic, social and financial) on campus have either advanced or impeded your academic progress and staying on track to graduate?
3. What are your perceptions on the extent to which students, faculty, and staff acknowledge and contribute to the needs of Veteran students on this campus related to student success?
4. To what extent do you, as a Veteran student, feel engaged with faculty and fellow classmates in the higher education classroom and on campus at this university?

The first interview will occur in person either on campus or at an alternative location, whichever is most convenient for you. The second follow-up interview will be conducted by phone or in-person, and is expected to last 1 hour or less. With your permission, these interviews will be digitally audio recorded and then transcribed. You will be able to review the transcripts of both interviews and make changes/corrections. A pseudonym will be used in place of your name in order to protect your confidentiality and any identifying information redacted from the questionnaire and interview transcripts. These files will be kept on a private password-protected drive for five years. Only the research team will have access to these files during this time. At the end of five years after the final report is submitted to the IRB, the digital files will be permanently deleted, and the paper transcripts will be shredded.

Total Number of Participants
About 10-12 individuals will take part in this study at USF.

Alternatives / Voluntary Participation / Withdrawal
You do not have to participate in this research study. You should only take part in this study if you want to volunteer. You should not feel that there is any pressure to take part in the study. You are free to participate in this research or withdraw at any time. There will be no penalty or loss of benefits you are entitled to receive if you stop taking part in this study. A decision to not participate will not affect your student status.

Benefits
The potential benefits of participating in this research study are educational. This study seeks to contribute to the body of scholarly research on qualitative study research in the field of higher education administration and research related to improving persistence and graduation rates particularly among Veteran students.
Risks or Discomfort
This research is considered to be minimal risk. That means that the risks associated with this study are the same as what you face every day. There are no known additional risks to those who take part in this study.

Compensation
You will receive no payment or other compensation for taking part in this study.

Costs
It will not cost you anything to take part in the study.

Conflict of Interest Statement
N/A

Privacy and Confidentiality
We will keep your study records private and confidential. Certain people may need to see your study records. Anyone who looks at your records must keep them confidential. These individuals include:
- The research team, including the Principal Investigator and study coordinator.
- Certain government and university people who need to know more about the study, and individuals who provide oversight to ensure that we are doing the study in the right way.
- Any agency of the federal, state, or local government that regulates this research including the Office for Human Research Protection (OHRP).
- The USF Institutional Review Board (IRB) and related staff who have oversight responsibilities for this study, including staff in USF Research Integrity and Compliance.

We may publish what we learn from this study. If we do, we will not include your name. We will not publish anything that would let people know who you are.

A federal law called Title IX protects your right to be free from sexual discrimination, including sexual harassment and sexual violence. USF’s Title IX policy requires certain USF employees to report sexual harassment or sexual violence against any USF employee, student or group, but does not require researchers to report sexual harassment or sexual violence when they learn about it as part of conducting an IRB-approved study. If, as part of this study, you tell us about any sexual harassment or sexual violence that has happened to you, including rape or sexual assault, we are not required to report it to the University. If you have questions about Title IX or USF’s Title IX policy, please call USF’s Office of Diversity, Inclusion & Equal Opportunity at (813) 974-4373.

You can get the answers to your questions, concerns, or complaints
If you have any questions, concerns or complaints about this study, or experience an unanticipated problem, contact Beatrice L. Smith at bls@mail.usf.edu or call her at 813-257-3593.
If you have questions about your rights as a participant in this study, or have complaints, concerns or issues you want to discuss with someone outside the research, call the USF IRB at (813) 974-5638 or contact by email at RSCI-IRB@usf.edu.
Consent to Take Part in this Research Study
I freely give my consent to take part in this study. I understand that by signing this form I am agreeing to take part in research. I have received a copy of this form to take with me.

_________________________                ______________________
Signature of Person Taking Part in Study Date

_________________________
Printed Name of Person Taking Part in Study

Statement of Person Obtaining Informed Consent
I have carefully explained to the person taking part in the study what he or she can expect from their participation. I confirm that this research subject speaks the language that was used to explain this research and is receiving an informed consent form in their primary language. This research subject has provided legally effective informed consent.

_________________________                ______________________
Signature of Person obtaining Informed Consent Date

_________________________
Printed Name of Person Obtaining Informed Consent
APPENDIX K
MEMBER CHECK CORRESPONDENCE FOR VETERAN STUDENT PARTICIPANTS

Month, Day, 2016

Dear xxx:
Thank you so much for taking the time to interview with me regarding your perspective as a Veteran student on academic success as you entered or reentered the university setting. Attached is a draft of the initial findings along with the interview transcript of our conversation for your review. Please check the transcript for accuracy to ensure your responses have been reported correctly. Feel free to provide clarification or elaboration on our interview conversation as well as provide possible suggestions for consideration by me as to other sources of data that might be relevant to this study.
Please send any changes or comments to me as soon as possible preferably within 10 business days (month day). I will send you a follow-up reminder in one week. If I do not hear from you within this timeframe, I will assume that the transcript and initial findings accurately reflect your responses during our interview session.
Feel free to contact me at (xxx) xxx-xxxx or via email at xxx@mail.usf.edu if you have any questions or would like to discuss. If you would prefer to discuss by phone or in person, let me know.

I cannot express my gratitude enough for your willingness to share your insight and experiences with me. You are a valuable part of my research project.

Sincerely,
Beatrice L Smith
APPENDIX L
Certificate of Completion: USF IRB Researcher Workshop
COLLABORATIVE INSTITUTIONAL TRAINING INITIATIVE (CITI PROGRAM)
COURSEWORK REQUIREMENTS REPORT*

* NOTE: Scores on this Requirements Report reflect quiz completions at the time all requirements for the course were met. See list below for details. See separate Transcript Report for more recent quiz scores, including those on optional (supplemental) course elements.

- **Name:** Beatrice Smith (ID: 3004530)
- **Email:** bls@mail.usf.edu
- **Institution Affiliation:** University of South Florida (ID: 425)
- **Phone:** 813-257-3593
- **Curriculum Group:** Human Research
- **Course Learner Group:** Social / Behavioral Investigators and Key Personnel
- **Stage:** Stage 3 - Refresher Course

- **Report ID:** 19656032
- **Completion Date:** 05/26/2016
- **Expiration Date:** 05/26/2019
- **Minimum:** 80
- **Reported Score:** 100

### REQUIRED AND ELECTIVE MODULES ONLY

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<tr>
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APPENDIX M
IRB Letter of Approval

September 15, 2016
Beatrice Smith
L-CACHE - Leadership, Counseling, Adult, Career & Higher Education
Tampa, FL 33612

RE: Expedited Approval for Initial Review
IRB#: Pro00027522
Title: A Qualitative Study of Veteran Students' Perspectives of their Academic Experiences

Study Approval Period: 9/15/2016 to 9/15/2017

Dear Ms. Smith:

On 9/15/2016, the Institutional Review Board (IRB) reviewed and APPROVED the above application and all documents contained within, including those outlined below.

Approved Item(s):
Protocol Document(s):
Pro #00027522 Study Protocol Version 1

Consent/Assent Document(s)*:

SB Adult Minimal Risk Pro00027522.docx.pdf

*Please use only the official IRB stamped informed consent/assent document(s) found under the "Attachments" tab. Please note, these consent/assent document(s) are only valid during the approval period indicated at the top of the form(s).

It was the determination of the IRB that your study qualified for expedited review which includes activities that (1) present no more than minimal risk to human subjects, and (2) involve only procedures listed in one or more of the categories outlined below. The IRB may review research through the expedited review procedure authorized by 45CFR46.110. The research proposed in this study is categorized under the following expedited review category:

(6) Collection of data from voice, video, digital, or image recordings made for research purposes.
(7) Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.

As the principal investigator of this study, it is your responsibility to conduct this study in accordance with IRB policies and procedures and as approved by the IRB. Any changes to the approved research must be submitted to the IRB for review and approval via an amendment. Additionally, all unanticipated problems must be reported to the USF IRB within five (5) calendar days.

We appreciate your dedication to the ethical conduct of human subject research at the University of South Florida and your continued commitment to human research protections. If you have any questions regarding this matter, please call 813-974-5638.

Sincerely,

[Signature]
John Schinka, Ph.D., Chairperson USF Institutional Review Board
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Beatrice L. Smith currently serves as Director of Academic Advising at The University of Tampa. Campus committee memberships include the Registration Task Force, ERP Implementation Leadership Team, EAB/SSC implementation Leadership Team, Planning and Budgeting Leadership Team, Orientation Workgroup, and she is liaison for two faculty committees: the Academic Appeals Committee and the Academic Advising Committee.

Prior to that, she served as Director of Academic and Student Services at the University of South Florida with responsibilities including undergraduate student academic support services, liaison to faculty for interpretation of academic policies, curriculum development, academic grievances and academic integrity issues; and representative to undergraduate students seeking academic exceptions to policy and reinstatement after academic dismissal. She has also served on taskforces related to Student Success, QEP implementations, strategic planning, new program development, and reaccreditation teams for both professional and regional accreditation.

Bea received her B.S. from the University of South Florida and her M.S. from Central Missouri University. Prior to becoming a higher education administrator, she was a high school English teacher, a high school guidance counselor, and an academic advisor. Her doctoral studies focused on Curriculum and Instruction with an emphasis in Higher Education Administration. She has served as an academic affairs administrator at both public and private universities. Bea’s research interests include all aspects of student success including student persistence and retention with a particular interest in new trends related to improving students’ academic experiences including non-traditional student populations such as Veteran students.