

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Kathleen Normandin for the degree of Master of Science in College Student Services Administration presented April 28, 2010.

Title: Contemporary Student Veterans: Transitional Experiences for Military Life to College Life

Abstract approved:

Larry Roper

The contemporary student veteran population is growing rapidly as service members who served in the Afghanistan and Iraq conflicts take advantage of the Post 9/11 Veteran Educational Assistance Act of 2008 to receive educational benefits to attend college (Cook & Kim, 2009). However, student veterans entering college today have a unique set of qualities and experiences. As an emerging student population, little is known about the experiences and perceptions these student veterans bring with them to college (DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2008).

This study explored the nature of contemporary student veteran transition experiences from military life to college life to uncover (a) the factors that had positive effects on the contemporary student veteran transition process, and (b) the factors that posed challenges to the contemporary student veteran transition process. The information presented in this study has significance as it fills a knowledge gap that in existing literature regarding transitional experiences and perceptions of contemporary student veterans. In addition, the findings may serve as a foundation to improve the quality of resources available for those working to serve the needs of this growing student population.

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Contemporary Student Veterans: Transitional Experiences from Military Life to College
Life

by
Kathleen Normandin

A THESIS

submitted to

Oregon State University

in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the
degree of

Master of Science

Presented April 28, 2010
Commencement June 2010

Master of Science thesis of Kathleen Normandin presented on April 28, 2010

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I understand that my thesis will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University libraries. My signature below authorizes release of my thesis to any reader upon request.

Kathleen Normandin, Author

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My deepest appreciation goes to the following people, places, and establishments that made the writing of this thesis a positive, adventurous, and possible experience:

- To my participants. I am so grateful for your willingness to share your stories. I learned vast amounts from our conversations and will always be in awe of your experiences and abilities to “adapt and overcome.”
- To my committee members, Susan Shaw, Larry Roper, Moira Dempsey, and Tom Sheuermann. Special thanks to Jessica White for her guidance, support, and dedication until the end; and for her ever challenging me to develop as an individual throughout the process.
- To the “Fantastic Four” and the “Thesis Support Group,” the women with me in the challenge who supported me and made me laugh.
- To Nicole, Angela, and the College of Pharmacy student services team for always checking in on me, and giving me time and space to get work done and take care of self.
- To my family and my family-of-choice for their unyielding encouragement and patience.

- To the Oregon coast for recharging me and giving me space to think.
- To the Beanery and all the usual characters for hours of space to work, mochas to keep me going, people watching to give me a break, and the opportunity to be part of a community even as I worked.
- And finally to Justin, forever my person and partner in this process and beyond. Thank you for endearing successes, struggles, long workdays, and endless hours of editing all with generous love and encouragement. 愛してる!

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Contemporary Student Veterans: Transitional Experiences from Military Life to College Life

Chapter One: Introduction to the Study

The enactment of the Post 9/11 Veteran Educational Assistance Act of 2008 (also known as the Post 9/11 G.I. Bill) offers members of the military who served in the Afghanistan and Iraq conflicts educational benefits to attend college (Cook & Kim, 2009). It is expected that the Post 9/11 G.I. Bill will prompt a significant increase in the number of veterans who choose to attend college after completing their time in the service. In 2008, more than 336,000 veterans and active-duty personnel, 100,000 reservists and National Guardsmen and 80,000 survivors used education benefits. Based on the volume for claim of benefits, the Post 9/11 G.I. Bill could result in an approximate increase of 25 percent in the number of U.S. college students connected to the military (Lum, 2009). The American Council on Education predicts that, as this large number of military personnel complete their time in the service and choose to take advantage of the Post-9/11 G.I. Bill, college campuses will be on the cusp of having to serve over 2 million contemporary student veterans (American Council on Education, 2008).

Institutions have not experienced this immense presence of student veterans on college campuses since World War II (Cook & Kim, 2009). When veterans entered college campuses in large numbers for the first time following World War II utilizing the original G.I. Bill (also known as the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944), research was conducted in order to understand the characteristics and needs of this new student population. These earlier studies outlined how higher education institutions would be affected by the large influx of returning military men and women in an attempt to help

them transition from military life to college life (Hadley, 1945). Researchers sought to identify specific skills and perceptions student veterans acquired during their time in the military, and how these skills could be put to use within the college setting to help returning veterans readjust to scholastic life, as well as civilian life. These earlier research studies serve as the foundation of knowledge regarding student veterans, and have been expanded upon over the years (Hadley, 1945 & Kinzer, 1946). However, the contemporary student veteran population, those who are returning to college campuses after serving in the Afghanistan and/or Iraq conflicts, have unique and distinctive experiences and perceptions that differ from those studied following WWII. As a result, little is known about the expectations and experiences these contemporary student veterans bring with them to college (DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2008). As these veterans stream into college campuses, they bring with them a distinct set of experiences and needs.

The Post 9/11 G.I. Bill is seen “as a way of attempting to deal with veterans’ re-acclimation issues in a more comprehensive way. They are in a safe place in school, moving forward with their life” (Alvarez, 2008, para. 12). However, the transition from the military into college life is an extremely complex process in which the individual is posed with numerous changes simultaneously. It is important to recognize that many contemporary student veterans have experienced combat, where since September 11, 2001, over 1.6 million veterans have served in combat positions (American Council on Education, 2008). War combat can have long lasting, life-changing effects on the individuals involved. As DiRamio et al. (2008) points out “While wars are traumatic and

disruptive for a nation, they are often life-changing for those who participate in them. What are the needs of individuals who leave combat and come to post-secondary institutions – soldiers who become students?” (p. 47) This is an important question to address, as the unique experiences contemporary student veterans have during their time in the military directly affects how they transition from military life to college life. Past military experiences can have positive effects, as well as pose challenges during the transition process into college life. With the increase in the number of contemporary student veterans present on college campuses, higher education institutions are now being challenged to recognize the unique experiences and diverse needs of the this student veteran population. Institutions are beginning to address how they can best support these students in their time of transition from the military to college life (Livingston, 2009). The information presented in this study plays a role in understanding the transitional experiences and perceptions of contemporary student veterans, as well as serve as a resource for those planning to serve the unique needs of this growing student population.

Theoretical Framework

For the student veteran, completing active duty, returning home from a combat zone, or being honorably discharged from the military and then entering college is a major life transition. Transitions have the ability to change relationships, routines, assumptions, and/or roles. The greater the effect a transition has on these factors, the more an individual will be affected positively and/or negatively (Sargent & Schlossberg, 1988). Sargent and Schlossberg (1988) developed the psychosocial theory of adult transitions focusing on the issues individuals face, and this theory provides the

framework of this study and a foundation for understanding student veteran transition experiences.

Sargent and Schlossberg (1988) defined a transition as any event or non-event that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles. Schlossberg, Waters, & Goodman (1995) believed transitions only exist when defined as such by the individual experiencing it. Transitions and changes can only occur when meaning and significance are associated with the experience (Evans, Forney, & Guido-DiBrito, 1998). Identified transitions can exist as one of three types: (a) anticipated transitions, (b) unanticipated transitions, and (c) nonevents. Contemporary student veterans can experience all three types of transitions. Anticipated transitions may occur when soldiers acknowledge their time on enlistment is coming to a close, and plans are made to start school after being released from active duty. An unanticipated transition may be when a soldier is injured and honorably discharged from the military. This transition was not planned, and entering into college after being honorably discharged may not have been originally anticipated. Lastly, student veterans may also experience nonevents where a transition was anticipated, but did not happen, leaving the veteran to adjust to the lack of change. An example of this may be when a veteran anticipates reenlisting for the military, but is unable to, leaving the veteran to seek other options. Entering college could be a response to an anticipated, unanticipated, or a nonevent.

Working through transitions is a process of reactions to events and non-events that cause change over time (Evans et al., 1998). In the transition process, individuals evaluate each event or non-event, work to determine the positive or negative effects, and

look for resources to help manage the change (DiRamio, et al., 2008). The amount of time spent during a transition, or one's ability to move through a transition, is contingent on four major sets of resources (the 4S's): (a) situation, (b) self, (c) support, and (d) strategy (Sargent & Schlossberg, 1988).

Situation involves identifying the type of transition an individual is going through, which includes determining if the transition is positive or negative, or if the event is anticipated or unanticipated. An individual's *situation* can vary based on the trigger, the timing, the amount of control one has over the situation, the resulting effect on the individual, the duration, previous experiences, concurrent stress, and whether the change is perceived positively or negatively by the individual (Goodman, Schlossberg, & Anderson, 2006). For student veterans, the situation at the time of their transition from military life to college life can vary greatly. As discussed above the trigger and timing of their transitions can be anticipated or unanticipated. Depending on the individual circumstances of the veteran, some individuals may also have past experiences that aid in the transition process. For example, some contemporary student veterans have attended college prior to their time in the military, and therefore view the situation of transitioning into the role of the student differently than those entering college for the first time. Also, some veterans may have concurrent stressors, such as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) or physical injuries, making the transition much more challenging. All of these factors also affect the individual's ability to cope, adapt, and transition into the role of a student in a positive manner.

Resources in the area of *self* are determined by a person's strengths and weaknesses, as well as his/her previous experiences. Every individual has both assets and deficits that have an effect on the transition process (Goodman et al., 2006). In addition to evaluating the situation during the time of the transition, what an individual brings to the transition is also important. Resources in the area of *self* are affected by personal and demographic characteristics, psychosocial resources, ego development, an individual's outlook on optimism, self-efficacy, level of commitment, personal values, spirituality, and resilience (Goodman et al., 2006). Again, resources in this area can vary greatly among individuals, and contemporary student veterans can enter the transition from military life to college life with different resources in the area of self. Some student veterans enter transitions with psychosocial traits, such as discipline, accountability, as well as a strong personal commitment to schooling that helps in coping and adapting to the transition into the student role.

The third factor *support* is defined by the interpersonal relationships an individual possesses that can either help or hinder a transition (Sargent & Schlossberg, 1988). Social support is an important factor that affects one's ability to handle the stresses associated with a transition. There is great variability in this category due to the variety of relationships and support systems one may possess. Like the previous categories, individual circumstances and support systems can either promote or hinder one's ability to transition effectively. Support systems can take the form of intimate relationships, spouses, family units, network of friends, and the institutions and/or communities the individual belongs to. Support systems can help an individual mobilize, seek resources,

cope with emotional burdens, aid in completing tasks, and provide extra resources such as money, materials, skills, and cognitive guidance (Goodman et al., 2006). For contemporary student veterans, support systems play a key role to cope effectively with the challenges presented in the military, as well as the changes they encounter as they transition from military life to college life. For student veterans, support systems may come in the form of other student veterans and those who have lived through similar military experiences, as well as spouses, family, and close friends. Many contemporary student veterans are strongly affected by the dissolution of their strong support system composed of fellow soldiers, who veterans relied on during their time in the military. This dissolution leaves many student veterans in a position to seek/identify new support systems in addition to the transition into the student role.

Finally, *strategy* includes having a plan of action to enhance personal strengths and gain skills necessary to cope positively with a transition (Sargent & Schlossberg, 1988). Coping refers to one's ability to deal with the life strains encountered during the transition process (Goodman et al., 2006). As discussed above, contemporary student veterans enter the transition from military life to college life with varying sets of resources and deficits. These resources and deficits directly affect the student veterans' ability to strategize and put in place strong coping techniques to help them overcome the challenges of the transition process. Coping techniques used in the transition into college life may include seeking resources from Veteran Affairs offices, joining student veteran organizations, or simply relying on skills learned in the military to create organizational systems to help navigate the new responsibilities of college and being a student.

Individual effectiveness in coping, and the impact of transitions is directly correlated to the amount of resources an individual possesses in each of the four areas; (a) situation, (b) self, (c) support, and (d) strategy (Evans et al., 1998). However, these areas are impacted by the combination of assets and/or deficits individuals bring with them into a transition (Sargent & Schlossberg, 1988). Being called to active duty, released from active duty, returning home, and going to college are all major transitions in the lives of contemporary student veterans. These transitions disrupt what is familiar and requires them to cope with new experiences, to form new relationships, and to take on new roles in life (DiRamio et al., 2008). Transitions can have a significant impact on the lives of student veterans. Therefore, it is important to have an in-depth understanding of how contemporary student veterans view their transitions from military life to college life, the resources they bring with them, and how these resources (in the areas of situation, self, support, and strategy) affect the transition process. This theory serves as the theoretical framework of this study and helps explain how not all transitions are of equal importance to the contemporary student veteran (Evans et al., 1998; DiRamio et al., 2008).

Significance and Purpose of Study

The transition process can have a significant impact on contemporary student veterans as they move from military life to college life, as transitions have the ability to change relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles (Sargent & Schlossberg, 1988). With higher education institutions expecting to serve the largest influx of student veterans into college campuses since World War II, many colleges have worked to increase their resources to support and reach this student population in an attempt to aid in their

transition process into the role of a student. These services are taking the form of veteran's offices, restructuring the admission and registration process specifically for veterans, extending counseling center resources, establishing student organizations and peer mentor programs, and training faculty and staff (Redden, 2009). Despite these efforts, however, a recent study of higher education institutions found that only 55 percent of the participating institutions had programs specifically designed for military veterans, and only 65 percent of institutions had increased their emphasis on military students since September 11, 2001. In addition to this, only 22 percent of the institutions who provide services for veterans provided transition assistance (Cook & Kim, 2009). This small percentage of available transitional assistance services may be due to the lack of current research and literature regarding contemporary student veterans and their transitional experiences (Livingston, 2009). While college campuses are making an effort to put resources in place to serve this student population, institutions are lacking the necessary knowledge for this specific population due to the very few studies that currently exist addressing the experiences and needs of contemporary student veterans (Livingston, 2009). In order for college institutions to provide effective resources, specifically regarding the process of transitioning from military life to college life, additional studies must be conducted to update existing literature on student veterans and further develop understanding of this unique student population (DiRamio et al., 2008). To gain an understanding of the unique needs and experiences of today's student veterans, which differ greatly from those addressed in former studies of WWII veterans, new research must focus on those who served in the Afghanistan and Iraq wars,

specifically the transitional process from military life to college life and the significance these transitions have on the overall college experience of these student veterans.

This study is significant because (a) it aims to explore the relatively undocumented experiences and perceptions of contemporary student veterans as they transition from military life to college life, (b) it seeks to inform higher education administration about the unique characteristics of this rapidly increasing student population, and (c) it attempts to narrow the knowledge gap in existing literature regarding this growing population of contemporary student veterans. A better understanding of the nature of contemporary student veterans, including their experiences, perceptions, challenges, and the unique skills they possess may enable higher education institutions to direct their services and resources to address the specific challenges, as well as help student veterans to effectively utilize their unique skills in order to promote a positive transition from military life to college life.

Research questions. Qualitative research was conducted in order to examine and explore the transitional experiences of currently enrolled contemporary student veterans from a medium-sized, public university and a community college as they transitioned from military life to college life. A single primary research question and two secondary research questions were developed to guide this research and gather information on the contemporary student veteran transitional experience. The primary research question was:

- What is the nature of contemporary student veterans' experiences as they transition from military life to college life?

The secondary research questions were:

- What factors had positive effects on the contemporary student veteran transition process?
- What factors posed challenges to the contemporary student veteran transition process?

The purpose of this study is to obtain honest and candid perceptions and experiences of transitions from contemporary student veterans, as well as connect these experiences to the psychosocial theory of adult transitions, so that higher education institutions may have a better understanding of how to support, care for, and educate this rapidly increasing student population.

Overview of Methodology

To gain a current and holistic understanding of the nature of contemporary student veteran experiences in transitioning into college after life in the military, qualitative research was conducted at a medium sized, four-year public land-grant institution, and a smaller sized, two-year community college both located in the Pacific Northwest of the United States. During one-on-one interviews, a series of interview questions addressing transitional experiences were utilized to encourage detailed and descriptive responses. Data was collected on their experiences on college campuses and their perceptions of transitions from military life to college life. The results of this study are not intended to be a generalization of all contemporary student veteran experiences. Instead, they offer more insight and understanding into a student population with unique experiences and diverse needs. This study adds to the growing foundation of research and literature about

current student veterans to encourage institutions of higher education to facilitate positive transitions for contemporary student veterans and foster student veteran success in college.

Definitions of Key Terms

This section provides definitions for several key terms used in this study, including definitions drawn from existing literature and theory. This section also outlines how these terms will be applied to this study and add meaning to this research.

Active duty. Active duty is considered to be full time active service, including “duty on the active list, full-time training duty, annual training duty, and attendance while in the active service at a school designated as a service school by law or by the Secretary concerned” (Glossary of DoD Work Force Terms, 2009, para. 1). All participants of this study served in active service post September 11, 2001 in the Armed Forces. Some participants are attending school while still maintaining their active duty status.

College life. For the purpose of this study, college life is defined as the period of time contemporary student veterans spend as a college student. College life spans from the time of admission to a higher education institution to time of graduation. During college life, participants of this study took on the role of student, working towards the completion of a degree at a higher education institution.

Contemporary student veterans. For the purpose of this study, contemporary student veterans are full time students enrolled in higher education, who recently participated active duty and having served in Afghan and/or Iraq conflicts between 2001 and 2009. These students were members of the reserves, the National Guard, the Army,

Marines, and Air Force personnel. On average, contemporary student veterans have completed four-six years of military service and have been deployed to the Middle-East. They have participated in patrols, raids, and security in urban and rural areas (Hancock, 2007).

The student veterans who entered college after World War II were characterized as older than average, married and had children, or disabled. They were depicted as worldly, experienced, and impatient with the “juvenile” aspects of college life. They were considered pragmatic, hardworking and in a hurry to complete their degrees (Thelin, 2004). The current population of contemporary student veterans has been depicted and described in very similar ways. The American Council on Education (2008) describes this population of contemporary student veterans as demonstrating many characteristics of “nontraditional” students. They are a population of students that “include older students with work and family responsibilities, students whose college entry has been delayed, first-generation students, and students from the lower and middle quartiles of socio economic status” (p. 3).

Deployment. “The relocation of forces and materials to desired operational areas. Deployment encompasses all activities from origin or home station through destination” (Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2008, p. 156). Deployment was a significant time in the military careers of the research participants. It is the time when they are relocated into combat zones and where they may have encountered the most impactful of their military experiences.

Enlistment. “(1) A voluntary entrance into military service under enlisted status, as distinguished from induction through Selective Service, or (2) a period of time, contractual or prescribed by law, which enlisted members serve between enrollment and discharge” (Glossary of DoD Work Force Terms, 2009). This study honors both definitions of the term enlistment. Participants refer to the date they began their service in the Armed Forces at the day they “enlisted.” Also, enlistment is referred to as the amount of time served in the Armed Forces before being released of service or honorably discharged.

G.I. Bill. The G.I. Bill, also known as the Servicemen’s Readjustment Act of 1944, was drafted to provide benefits and opportunities to veterans left without good vocational and academic prospects. In addition to unemployment insurance, medical care, and living expenses, the G.I. Bill entitled each veteran to one year of schooling plus an additional month for each month served in the armed forces (Thelin, 2004; Cohen, 1998).

Post-9/11 G.I. Bill. “The Post 9/11 GI Bill provides financial support for education and housing to individuals with at least 90 days of service on or after September 11, 2001, or individuals discharged with a service-connected disability after 30 days. You must have received an honorable discharge to be eligible for the Post-9/11 GI Bill” (United States Department of Veterans’ Affairs, 2010, para. 1). This new version of the G.I. Bill will cover the cost of tuition and fees, provide a monthly housing allowance, and an annual book stipend (United States Department of Veterans’ Affairs, 2010). All participants of this study received Post-9/11 G.I. Bill benefits.

Military. “Includes the Army, Navy, Air Force, Marine Corps, and Cost Guard, and all components thereof,” (Glossary of DoD Work Force Terms, 2009, para. 3) also known as the U.S. Armed Forces. All participants of this study served in one or more branches of the Armed Forces during the Afghanistan and/or Iraq Wars.

Military discipline. “Behavior of military personnel – as individuals or in group formations, in battle, or in garrison – in conformity with previously prescribed rule, especially in response to command and the result of instruction and drill” (Burk, 1999, p. 447). Military discipline is also explored within this study as part of the culture in which student veterans are or were once a part. All participants were influenced by the military discipline culture and bring those experiences to the college campus.

Military life. For the purpose of this study, military life is defined as the time contemporary student veteran participants spent as a member of the U.S. Armed Forces. Military life spans from the time of enlistment to the time of completion of military duties.

Reserve. “Members of the Military Service who are not in active service but are subject to call to active duty” (Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2008, pp. 464-465). There are reserve components of the Armed Forces of the U.S. in the Army National Guard, the Army Reserve, the Naval Reserve, the Marine Corps Reserve, the Air National Guard, the Air Force Reserve, and the Coast Guard Reserve. Many participants initially joined the Armed Forces through the Reserves, or have reserve status during their time in college.

Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC). “An elective course of study taken alongside the general college curriculum which prepares college graduates to enter military service as an officer” (Livingston, 2009, p. 10). The university that serves as the research site for this study has an ROTC program in which some of the participants participated. Through the ROTC program, student veterans are able to enroll in college, but also take military leadership classes that enable them to earn the rank of officer at the time of graduation.

Transition. Sargent and Schlossberg (1988) define a transition as any event or non-event that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles. Transitions exist when defined as such by the individual experiencing it, and changes can only occur when meaning and significance are associated with the experience (Evans et al., 1998). When an individual identifies a transition, it can exist as one of three types: (a) anticipated transitions, (b) unanticipated transitions, and (c) nonevents. All these types of transitions can either lead to personal growth or personal decline.

It has been acknowledged that college students experience many events and non-events that can have short-term or long-term effects on their lives (Evans et al., 1998). This is particularly true for contemporary student veterans, many who have encountered unique experiences during their time in the military. These life-changing experiences make the transition from military, to civilian, to student life even more challenging than experienced by the traditional student (American Council on Education, 2008).

Organization of the Thesis

The following research examines the nature of contemporary student veteran experiences as they transition from the military into college. It (a) aims to explore the factors that positively affect the transition process as well as the factors that pose challenges, (b) it analyzes these factors within the context of adult transition theory and the resources (in the areas of situation, self, support, and situation) contemporary student veterans bring with them to the transition from military life to college life, (c) it seeks to inform higher education administration about this rapidly growing student population, and (d) it adds to the growing foundation of scholarship and literature related to contemporary student veterans in higher education. This study provides valuable information to promote better understanding of contemporary student veterans and the experiences, perceptions, challenges, and skills they bring with them to their transition experience from the military life to college life. The following chapter (Chapter Two) provides a overview of the history of student veterans, as well as an exploration of available literature and research surrounding military culture and the contemporary student veteran experience. Chapter Two provides the background knowledge and foundation of this study. Subsequent chapters include Chapter Three: Research Design, which will outline the design and methods used in collecting and analyzing data, Chapter Four: Results which will present the themes and results that emerged from the data, and finally Chapter Five: Summary and Discussion which will provide a discussion of the study results within the context of adult development theory, and will outline unanticipated findings, limitations, and questions for future research.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

The first major influx of Student veterans into college campuses occurred following World War II. The Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, more commonly known as the G.I. Bill, allowed many veterans to take advantage of educational benefits (Thelin, 2004). Since that era, student veterans have been transitioning from military life to college life at higher education institutions in the United States. This transition is unique for student veterans as they bring with them a distinct set of experiences from the military (DiRamio et al., 2008). This study aims to explore these unique experiences, as well as college experiences, and the effect they have on the transition from military life to college life.

This study also hopes to build upon the expanding field of research and literature addressing student veterans. To date, little is known about the experiences of contemporary student veterans and in particular their experiences in transitioning into higher education (DiRamio et al., 2008). Therefore, in an attempt to understand the contemporary student veteran experience, it is important to first understand the historical context in which veterans and higher education became intertwined. This literature review will explore the history of student veterans on college campuses, and focus on the evolution of the experiences of student veterans. In addition, it will explore military culture with a focus on the unique experiences and cultural characteristics contemporary student veterans possess as they enter college life. Lastly, this chapter will outline recent research and other current literature on contemporary student veteran population that functions as the foundation for the intent and design of this study.

In sum, this review of literature will examine (a) the history of student veterans on college campuses, (b) contemporary military culture, and (c) characteristics of today's student veterans and current research surrounding this population. This section aims to provide in-depth background information and a valuable foundation for discussion surrounding the transitional experiences of contemporary student veterans as they enter college.

Student Veterans on College Campuses

The relationship between student veterans and higher education began in 1944 with the drafting of the Servicemen's Readjustment Act, also known as the G.I. Bill. President Franklin D. Roosevelt and congress had two main concerns at the end of World War II: (a) how to adjust the country's wartime production to a peacetime economy, and (b) the fear of civil unrest from the millions of servicemen returning from war without jobs or good prospects (Thelin, 2004; Cohen, 1998). The answer took the form of the Public Law 346, the Servicemen's Readjustment Act. The bill guaranteed each veteran an unemployment benefit and focused on strategies to keep returning veterans out of the labor market to give the factories enough time to switch from producing tank treads to automobile tires (Thelin, 2004). At this time, educational benefits and colleges were not included in the discussion or in the bill itself. It was not until later that educational benefits were pushed to be added to the bill by a small number of legislators and members of the American Legion (Thelin, 2004).

Once the bill passed with the educational benefits, the face of higher education changed. Almost half of the fifteen million returning veterans from World War II

participated in G.I. Bill benefits, which included a year of unemployment insurance, medical care, counseling services, tuition, books, and living expenses while attending college. Each veteran was entitled to at least one year of schooling with tuition covered, with an additional month for each month served in the armed forces. Twenty-nine percent of those who participated went to college, and many others went to pre-college or on-the-job programs (Cohen, 1998). By 1946, college enrollment of veterans grew to more than one million, and by 1950 greater than 2 million veterans had enrolled in higher education programs through the G.I. Bill.

This mass influx changed how higher education institutions functioned, as they were serving a new student population with a unique set of needs as they made adjustments from military to college. Hadley (1945) conducted a study to make sense of the problems of readjustment student veterans may face as they enter college. Specifically, she sought to gain an understanding of the characteristics and skills obtained during their time in the military, as well as discover how these characteristics and skills could be put to use to aid in positive readjustment and successful transition from military life to college life. Hadley discovered that veterans returning to college after serving in World War II had a strong desire to succeed in college. They had high standards of performance for themselves and were eager to produce desired results quickly. However, as a population, they rarely knew how to navigate the educational system to seek the appropriate resources to get started in the college process. They also struggled with the concept of “starting late” in their college careers, and felt it was difficult to transition into the life of a college student. They had difficulty parting with their previous military

habits and attitudes in to the process of readjusting to civilian life. As they parted from their previous military experiences, student veterans felt a lack of confidence in their abilities to succeed in the same way they had during their time in the military. As one participant of Hadley's study shared, "As long as I have my uniform, everything is okay, but when I change into my civvies [civilian clothing], gosh, I don't know what to make of it" (p. 89). Participants of the Hadley study also expressed a lack of confidence in their mental abilities, one participant stating, "From my viewpoint, there are times when I lack self-confidence in a lot of things, especially in the classroom" (p. 89). Participants also expressed concern regarding the challenge of developing study habits for the first time.

Hadley found that of her student veteran participants:

Nineteen of these men said, "I don't know how to study effectively." Many also encircle[d] "unable to concentrate well," "inadequate high-school training," and state[d] that they feel slow or weak in various academic skills like reading speed and comprehension, note-taking, vocabulary, and taking quizzes. (p. 90)

However, despite these transitional challenges and academic fears, student veterans quickly proved themselves to be highly motivated to succeed in college. Kinzer's (1946) study highlights that, "The motivation of the veterans group is high. This is because they feel like they have a late start in college life" (p. 10). As a result, student veterans quickly became known as pragmatic, hardworking, and in a hurry to complete their degrees (Thelin, 2004). However, because of these characteristics, veterans of World War II placed themselves under heavy pressure to successfully take on the role of a college student versus the role of the soldier (Hadley, 1945).

The G.I. Bill offered educational opportunities to those who might not have otherwise had access to higher education or occupational prospects, and veterans excelled in the classroom proving they were worthy of educational benefits (Livingston, 2009). The G.I. Bill continued to provide educational benefits to veterans throughout the Korean War and the Cold War. However, the student veteran experience was impacted greatly and changed in profound ways by the time of the Vietnam War.

The Vietnam War was unpopular and college campuses became the center of activism and protest against the draft and the war (Cohen, 1998). However, the unpopularity of the war led to student veterans during the Vietnam War to be identified as a unique and vulnerable student population (DiRamio et al., 2008). Administrative personnel were concerned with the management of the campus climate, which was often hostile towards those involved in the war, in order to ensure safety of veterans entering the college setting (Livingston, 2009).

In 1973, the conscription, or draft ended and the military became an all-volunteer force. This changed the nature of the G.I. Bill and the recruiting strategies of the Armed Forces. The military now had to compete with civilian employers, as those eligible to serve in the military faced a choice of entering the military, going to college, or entering the work force after completing high school (Cohen et al., 1995). The G.I. Bill then changed from being a reward for time of service, to an incentive to serve. In essence, the G.I. Bill became a recruiting tool, to entice those eligible to serve in the military to enlist (Livingston, 2009). This resulted in many veterans initially enlisting in the military as a means to finance their future college educations.

The contemporary student veteran is now present on college campuses due to the historical relationship between the military and higher education. College campuses continue to experience the effects of war, the G.I. Bill, and the recently increasing population of student veterans. The Post 9/11 G.I. Bill continues to be used as a recruiting tool and incentive to serve, but it has been rewritten to provide enough benefits for contemporary student veterans to take advantage of a full college career.

Recently, congress passed a new GI Bill, or the Post-9/11 GI Bill, “for individuals with at least 90 days of aggregate service on or after September 11, 2001, or individuals discharged with a service connected disability after 30 days” (United States Department of Veteran Affairs, 2009, para. 1). Veterans who take advantage of the benefits of this bill are eligible to receive tuition remission, money to cover housing costs, and an annual stipend to cover additional books and supplies for a period of 48 months after beginning school (United States Department of Veteran Affairs, 2009). On September 30, 2009 the Department of Defense reported approximately 1.2 million military personnel currently serving in active duty. This number does not account for the number of soldiers who have completed their active duty and already returned home after having served in the Afghanistan and Iraq conflicts. With educational benefits being offered to veterans returning home, college campuses are expecting a large influx of student veterans. The American Council on Education predicts that as these large numbers of military personnel return home and choose to take advantage of the Post-9/11 GI Bill, college campuses could potentially serve over 2 million additional contemporary student veterans who served in the Afghanistan and/or Iraq conflicts (American Council on Education,

2008). In the 2007-08 academic year, military undergraduates already represented four percent of all undergraduates in higher education (Radford, 2009).

Similar to previous wars, contemporary veterans have a unique set of experiences and needs (American Council on Education, 2008) due to the distinctive historical and social context in which the Afghanistan and Iraq conflicts took place. As a result, new research is required to explore the unique experiences and needs of today's student veterans in order for college campuses to guide effectively them through the transition process. As we attempt to understand this student population, it is important to investigate and gain an understanding of current military culture and experiences of veterans that have an impact on their process of moving out of the military and transitioning into a student role in college.

Current Military Culture

Culture refers to a pattern of basic assumptions invented and/or developed by a group as it learns to cope with problems of adaptation and integration (Burk, 1999). When these assumptions and/or patterns continue to work, they are considered valid, and therefore taught to new members entering the group as the correct way to perceive, think, feel, or act (Snider, 1999). Military culture is unique because it exists in order to deal with and overcome the uncertainty of war, to provide some pattern to war, to control war's outcome, and to invest meaning and significance in the experience of war (Snider). Every soldier who serves in the military is trained and socialized within the U.S. military culture. There is a distinct set of beliefs, values, and symbolic productions that organize and sustain military organization (Burk, 1999). Every soldier becomes a participant in

this culture, and therefore it can be expected that military culture will continue to have an influence in the lives of veterans, and ultimately impact the student veteran experience as well. As will be discussed in Chapter Four, student veterans may call upon lessons learned in military culture to navigate the uncertainties of college, to bring pattern to their student experiences, to control the outcome of their time in school, and to bring meaning and significance to their college experiences. Burk describes four main elements of military culture: (a) discipline, (b) professional ethos, (c) ceremony and etiquette, and (d) cohesion and “esprit de corps.” Each of these elements and characteristics of the military culture were evident in the interviews conducted for this study. Therefore, it is important to have an understanding of the experiences and culture that the participants of this study and other student veterans bring with them to college. The different aspects of contemporary military culture will be outlined in the following paragraphs.

Discipline. “Military discipline refers to the orderly conduct of military personnel – whether individually or in formation, in battle, or in garrison – most often prescribed by their officers in command” (Burk, 1999, p. 448). High levels of discipline are required by the military, and it is prescribed at the time of enlistment. Discipline is perfected through repetitive drills, which turn disciplined actions into habits. Discipline is important because it minimizes confusion and consequences in battle, but most notably, it gives military personnel a register of patterned actions, on which they can rely on in a time of battle or crisis to take initiative, quickly adapt, and prevail (Snider, 1999). Contemporary military discipline is very group based. That is, the culture of the group dictates what is required out of the individuals. He individual must be subordinate to the

needs of the group as a whole in order to succeed during a time of battle or crisis.

Soldiers are taught that successful military units function as a team and group (Snider, 1999).

The military culture of discipline directly affects the student veteran experience. As explored further in the Chapter Four, student veterans can bring disciplined habits to college with them, such as the ability to provide structure to their college journeys, relying on discipline and patterned actions to navigate the responsibilities of being a student, as well as the desire to be self-accountable and quickly adapt to challenges posed in their college experience. However, there are aspects of the military culture that can also present challenges in the student role. For example, student veterans are taught to rely on and serve the greater team or group. On the contrary, being a student often involves functioning independently, which can be a difficult adjustment for many student veterans coming from a culture of relying on the team or group for success.

Professional ethos. A career in the military brings with it a unique identity. As described by Snider (1999), when individuals act in the same way over a long period of time, they tend to develop habits. These habits become more narrowly defined within a profession as they are conditioned intensively and isolated from other human activity. These habits give rise to shared values, attitudes, perspectives, and identity in professional settings. In the case of the military, acting in the same way over time due to military discipline creates professional values, attitudes, perspectives, and identities that involve “a shared commitment that presumes personal willingness to kill and to accept the risk of being killed” (Burk, 1999, p. 450). Soldiers take on personal liability on

behalf of American society (Snider, 1999). Fulfilling this commitment, however, requires more than bravery. It requires buying-in to the culture of discipline, as well as theoretical and technical understanding of war. It is critical to have an understanding of the importance of professional ethos in the military in order to fully understand the experiences of student veterans. Contemporary veterans voluntarily enlist in the military and have willingly given themselves to serve to kill or to be killed. This mentality is not commonly shared with civilians, and sets them apart as a unique population of individuals. Due to the professional ethos of the military, many student veterans have risked injury or death, moved to different geographic location, dealt with separation from their homes and family, as well as friends (Segal, 1988). It can be assumed that these experiences allow student veterans to have unique and diverse perspectives on college and college life. In addition, the process of transitioning from military life to college life involves separating from the professional ethos of military culture and creating a new ethos as a college student. Student veterans are required to take on new roles, learn new habits of thought, and form new shared values, attitudes, perceptions, and identities as students and individuals who are a part of an institution. As discussed further in Chapter Four, this can present challenges for many student veterans during their transition process.

Ceremony and etiquette. Ceremony and etiquette can be described as the uniforms of military personnel, flags, insignia, award ceremonies, and other rituals that serve as a constant or identifiers for a group. Military ceremonies are used as a means to mask anxieties about dangers faced in war, to affirm solidarity with one another, and to

celebrate being connected to something greater. Military ceremony and etiquette serve to mark collective identity and group affiliation (Burk, 1999). Snider (1999) explains that anxiety plays a major role in the daily lives of soldiers. Rituals help to guide individual conduct and provide the appearance of order to the reality of war, which can be threatening or overwhelming. The salute, uniform, insignia of rank, ceremonies of induction, promotion, and change in command all help to provide structure, hierarchy, and continuity within the military culture. Ceremony and etiquette help to provide substance and motivation during one's time in the military.

Military ceremony and etiquette is also evident on today's college campuses, as many have memorials for those that have served and/or given their lives up in times of war. Also, active Guard and ROTC members often wear their uniforms once a week on campus, and many student veterans can still be spotted going to class with backpacks issued to them in the military. Military ceremony and etiquette on college campuses can help student veterans feel a connection to the greater campus and their military past which can help them feel recognized and less marginalized as a unique student population.

Cohesion and esprit de corps. The feelings of cohesion and esprit de corps are what keep morale high during times of trial in the military. Military cohesion is the feeling of identity and comradeship that soldiers feel for one another. "Esprit de corps" refers to the commitment and the pride soldiers take in the larger military establishment (Burk, 1999). This feeling results from the unique military structure and discipline, and creates emotional attachments, as soldiers often do not fight because of the ideology of

patriotism, but rather because of loyalty to other members of the military unit (Snider, 1999). Soldiers rely on one another to meet the basic needs of food, shelter, affection, and esteem. When these needs remain met despite the threats of war, soldiers believe themselves to be a part of a powerful unit and feel responsible to fight for the group's well being (Snider). Soldiers often become more determined and empowered to fight when cohesion and esprit de corps is present, because they believe they are fighting out of loyalty to the meaningful relationships they have formed.

The cohesion and esprit de corps of military experiences spill over into student veteran experiences. As explored further in Chapter Four, many contemporary student veterans may feel a greater connection with other veterans on campus because of shared life experiences and the feelings of cohesion and comradeship for fellow soldiers. Because of this, when in need of help or resources, student veterans may feel more comfortable asking fellow veterans rather than non-veterans students. The shared experiences and mutual understanding of the military culture makes cohesion and esprit de corps play out between student veterans, but may also limit them from forming bonds and relationships with non-veteran students.

As explored further in the Chapter Four, military culture, specifically these four elements of discipline, professional ethos, ceremony and etiquette, and cohesion and esprit de corps, play a significant role in the college experiences of contemporary students. Military culture often serves as the unique sub-culture to the traditional student culture for contemporary student veterans on college campuses. Numerous aspects of

military culture greatly affect student veterans' time in college and can determine how effectively they transition from military life to the life of a student.

Current Issues in Understanding Contemporary Student Veterans

As outlined above, contemporary student veterans have distinct experiences as part of the military culture. These experiences have a great influence on their transition process into college. Student veterans may face challenges that are unique to their military status during the transition from military life to college life. Although there is very limited research and literature that currently addresses how past military experiences affect the student veteran transition into college, a few key issues have been identified. Key themes issues identified regarding the transition from military life to college life in current research include: (a) the non-traditional student role as a veteran, (b) connecting to campus as a veteran, and (c) psychological and/or physical post-war trauma.

The non-traditional student role. Being a student veteran often means being a non-traditional student on college campuses. Contemporary student veterans are often older than average, are late in starting their college careers, have other work and/or life responsibilities, and have a high prevalence of being married. Although the Post 9/11 G.I. Bill offers benefits in financing education, many contemporary student veterans still feel the need to work during their time as a student to support their family responsibilities. In addition to student responsibilities, many student veterans also take on work responsibilities that may distract from classes and school (Radford, 2009).

In addition to having work and school responsibilities, many student veterans also need to balance family responsibilities as well. Approximately three-fourths of

contemporary veterans are married. Between 2007 and 2008, 48 percent of all military undergraduates were married, and 47 percent were raising children (Radford, 2009). Family responsibilities and demands on time may make the transition from military life to college life more challenging. Many student veterans take on the role of a spouse and/or a parent in addition to taking on the role of a college student, which can pose numerous challenges. This reflects the need for a holistic approach as we learn about the needs of contemporary student veterans as they often are working through more than one transition process.

Connecting to campus as a veteran. Being out of a classroom for a significant amount of time can make the adjustment to college life difficult for many contemporary student veterans. In addition to navigating their new college responsibilities, veterans may also encounter cultural barriers in their transitions out of military life and into college life. For example, it may be difficult to relate to other non-veteran students on campus (Radford, 2009). In a video interview project completed by Central Vermont College (Schworm, 2009), in which student veteran experiences were examined, one student recalled how he felt he could not connect with his peers and even felt out of touch with his oldest friends. As he conversed with his peers, he noticed that the only stories he could share were from his military experiences (Schworm, 2009). This student expressed feeling out of place after returning home from his time in the military. He felt an inability to relate to his closest friends and/or other students on campus.

Military and non-military perspectives on college also differ, and contemporary student veterans face the challenges of having a different outlook on college than non-

veteran students (Radford, 2009). Student veterans often feel that they do not share the same experiences as other students, and consequently exhibit different levels of maturity resulting from their time in the military service. One participant in the DiRamio et al. (2008) study noted, "I've just seen so much more than most of the college students here. I've traveled the world. I've been given so much responsibility and leadership. I feel it has helped me quite a bit" (p. 87).

Another aspect of these varying perspectives is that many non-military students may ask their military classmates inappropriate questions. Another participant of the DiRamio et al. (2008) study shared, "They always end up asking me whether I killed someone over there or not. That's a question I don't like people asking me, but of course, I answer 'no.' And I probably wouldn't tell them if I did" (p.88). To avoid uncomfortable questions, many contemporary student veterans focus on blending in with the other students and not drawing attention to their past military experiences (Radford, 2009). Participants in the DiRamio et al. study expressed that they did not like to stand out on their college and university campuses. They wanted to go to college and be viewed as a normal college student. Blending in prevents student veterans from having to answer questions that make them feel misunderstood, alienated, or force them to re-live past events. Blending in can lead to student veterans being quiet and neutral in classes and distant in interactions with others. Another participant in the DiRamio et al. (2008) study shared:

I had a professor in journalism class. He kept pushing me for information and some sort of insight as to my experiences in the military and he was just annoying. I wanted him to shut up because that was gone and that's a

different life. For me that was really annoying. I just, I kind of got to the point of dreading going to that class. (p. 88)

Psychological and/or physical post-war trauma. Along with the various emotional challenges contemporary student veterans face during their transition into college life, some student veterans also have unique physical and/or mental challenges resulting from their experiences in the military. College campuses can expect that student veterans are more likely to have physical and/or mental disabilities compared to that of the general student body. Due to rapid response medical teams and advances in medical technology, more and more soldiers are surviving combat injuries and trauma and returning home with injuries with lasting effects (DiRamio et al., 2008). This is a pressing issue, as many campus disability offices are not equipped to accommodate a large influx of students with disability. In the DiRamio et al. study, a marine commented:

If we have 2000 more veterans coming [to this campus] in the next years, how many of those veterans are going to be disabled? We already don't have enough handicapped parking...So how are we going to handle those people coming back? (p. 91)

In addition to physical disabilities, transitions can become increasingly difficult for student veterans due to the high prevalence of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The Washington Post (Vedantam, 2006) reported that more than one in three soldiers who served in Iraq have sought help for mental health problems; the most prevalent being PTSD. PTSD can result in debilitating flashbacks, irritability, and emotional numbness; the younger the veterans are, the more likely they are to suffer from PTSD (Roehr, 2007). In the DiRamio et al. (2008) study, the most common side effect of PTSD was anger.

Difficulty with anger issues impact student veterans' experiences in college and their interactions with others. One student veteran noted:

You can ask my roommate... When I left I was a lot more interpersonal. Apparently I've got this mean, scowling look all the time that I frighten certain people away. Which is something I am working on mainly because, you know, I want to get a date. You can't be mean like that.
(p. 92)

Psychologists believe that PTSD can be triggered or exacerbated in college students by large crowds, the constant stress of studying, and sleep deprivation (Hancock, 2007). Many veterans refuse to acknowledge PTSD and are reluctant to share stories, admit problems, or seek proper help. As one student in the Central Vermont College project reflected, "You are taught to drive through the pain. It is just part of the [military] culture" (Schworm, 2009, para. 18). However, PTSD is a mental disability that can prohibit a student from transitioning effectively as it inhibits the use of psychological resources, such as effective coping skills, ego development, healthy outlook, optimism, self-efficacy, and commitment and values (Evans et al., 1998). Without these psychological resources, a student veteran cannot have a complete and healthy sense of self, and may therefore be unable to experience a positive transitional process.

A summary of current issues. In addition to the key issues discussed regarding transition from military life to college life, contemporary student veterans are dealing with a readjustment to civilian life. This process involves adapting to a new lifestyle, reestablishing relationships, and leaving the role of a soldier and taking on the role of a civilian (Radford, 2009). This adjustment is occurring at the same time as the transition into college life, which often makes contemporary student veteran transitions from

military life to college life more complex. As discussed above, contemporary student veterans often (a) take on multiple roles in addition to the student role, (b) face challenges in connecting to campus and other students, and (c) experience psychological and/or physical challenges as a result of trauma from war. These factors directly affect student veterans' ability to have a positive transitional experience into college life, let alone civilian life.

Research and literature on the transitional experiences of contemporary student veterans is limited, and additional information is necessary to understand and effectively serve the contemporary student veteran population. However, based on existing knowledge, it can be assumed that as contemporary student veterans move from military life to college life, student veterans (a) generally go through a process of transition when entering college, (b) the experiences and needs of contemporary student veterans are unique due to their past military experiences, (c) higher education institutions will be challenged to accommodate and/or support this unique student population, and (d) additional research must to be conducted to fully understand the experiences and perceptions of contemporary student veterans and their transitional experiences in order for higher education institutions to gain a better understanding of this population and work to meet their needs during their transition process.

Summary

This review of history, military culture, and current issues forms the foundation for this study. The history of veterans transitioning into college life was examined and trends could be found both in the past and in the present. Also, the detailed exploration

of military culture and its influence on today's veterans provides a background for understanding the needs and challenges faced by contemporary student veterans as they transition into the college environment. The chapter concluded with an exploration of the current experiences of contemporary student veterans. While this review of literature allowed for a broad and generalized understanding of today's student veteran experiences, the following research aims to identify specific ideas and perceptions of contemporary student veterans on transition, and the factors that may have a positive affect on the transition process, as well as those which pose challenges. This research asks questions specific to these areas of exploration in an attempt to understand this student population's needs and how to best serve their needs as college students.

Chapter Three: Research Design

This study examines the nature of contemporary student veteran experiences as they transition from military life to college life. A qualitative study was conducted, which involved participants attending a medium sized, four-year public land-grant institution and a smaller two-year community college both located in the Pacific Northwest of the United States. The purpose of this study was to obtain additional knowledge to build on existing literature (DiRamio et al., 2008 & Livingston, 2009) regarding contemporary student veteran experiences in higher education. The secondary purpose of this study was to gain a greater understanding of the contemporary student veteran population and to connect findings to Sargent and Schlossberg's (1988) adult transition theory in an attempt to uncover more effective ways to serve this population and their needs in the process of transitioning into college. This chapter details and justifies the significance of the (a) research questions, (b) research design, (c) participants and sampling methods, (d) data collection, and (e) data analysis process as it relates to this topic.

Research Questions

A primary research question and two secondary research questions were developed as a tool to guide this research and gather information on the contemporary student veteran experiences. The primary research question was:

- What is the nature of contemporary student veterans' experiences as they transition from military life to college life?

The secondary research questions were:

- What factors had positive effects on the contemporary student veterans' transition process?
- What factors posed challenges to the contemporary student veterans' transition process?

Data gathered in response to these research questions provides feedback from contemporary student veterans as to what factors, resources, systems, and processes have assisted them in the transition process, as well as what factors posed challenges.

Methods

The ultimate goal of this research was to acquire a deep and current understanding of contemporary student veterans and their transitional experiences into college. To date, there is a lack of research and literature pertaining to this unique population (DiRamio et al., 2008). Therefore, a detailed exploration of student veteran perspectives can contribute a great deal to the overall understanding of this growing student population and the experiences they have in transitioning from military life to college life. In order to accomplish this goal, a qualitative research design was utilized for this study. A qualitative approach fits this study for multiple reasons. First, qualitative research is emergent rather than pre-determined (Creswell, 2009). This means that the researcher is able to make adjustments to the research process and approach as the researcher begins to discover new information. Second, qualitative research allows the researcher to be the key instrument, where the researcher can collect data him/herself through document examination, observing behavior, and conducting interviews (Creswell, 2009). Third, the qualitative research process focuses on learning the meaning that the participants possess

around certain issues or experiences instead of the researcher bringing meaning to the study (Creswell, 2009). This style of inquiry allows the researcher to collect data for research questions that ask what, how, and why about the contemporary student veteran view on their transitional experiences and perceptions of college life. This means that the participants are given the opportunity to form responses in their own words, enabling the collection of a more holistic and honest information regarding a topic. In an area with limited research, a qualitative approach enables the researcher to explore numerous aspects of a process or a phenomenon, which in turn helps to identify areas in need of further exploration in the future.

This study incorporates aspects of ethnographic design. An ethnographic approach to qualitative research aims to describe, analyze, and interpret a culture-sharing group's patterns of behavior, beliefs, and experiences that develop over time (Creswell, 2005). This research was influenced by the ethnographic research tradition, which was appropriate because contemporary student veterans are a culture-sharing group. As discussed in Chapter Three, contemporary student veterans have had unique experiences in the military where they were part of a distinct military culture. All veterans share the influence of military culture, and it directly affects the perceptions and experiences that student veterans have as they transition from military life to college life. The study aims to describe, analyze, and interpret student veteran shared patterns of behavior, perceptions, and experiences that developed over their time in the military and in college (Creswell, 2005). Ethnographic studies are also useful when understanding a particular group helps to shed light on a greater issue (Creswell, 2005). This study aims to gain a

current and detailed understanding of the contemporary student population and the factors that positively affect their transitions from military life to college life, as well as those factors that pose challenges. This inquiry helps to shed light on the greater issue of how higher education institutions can best serve this student population as they enter the college setting.

Site selection. Two research sites were selected for this study. The first was a medium four-year public land grant institution in the Pacific Northwest of the United States, from here on to be referred to as Anonymous University (AU). The second research site was a small two-year community college, from here on to be referred to as Anonymous Community College (ACC), also located in the Pacific Northwest and within nine miles of AU. These institutions were selected for a number of reasons. The initial reason was due to geographic proximity of the two institutions. AU and ACC are in close proximity to one another, which allowed easy access to the population of interest at both institutions. Also, due to their close proximity, AU and ACC share an educational relationship where students can dual enroll and complete course work at both universities. This enabled the recruitment of participants enrolled full time at AU, ACC, as well as those dual enrolled at both AU and ACC. In addition, conducting this study at both institutions allowed for a greater variation of experiences and perceptions. Existing research on this topic has been conducted at large four-year institutions, therefore the two-year community college perspective adds to the foundation of knowledge on this subject. Both AU and ACC offer a variety of programs in different fields and disciplines, providing a large pool of contemporary student veterans from which to seek out

participants. Request for approval to conduct this study at the two institutions was submitted to AU's Institutional Review Board (IRB), and additional approval was sought from the Dean of Students at ACC. AU's Institutional Review Board and the ACC Dean of Students approved this study.

Participant recruitment. Participants were recruited and selected for this study because they (a) had recently served in military positions, post September 11, 2001 and served in the Iraq and/or Afghanistan conflicts, (b) were currently enrolled as full time students at either AU or ACC, and (c) represented a range of institutions, academic majors, years of academic standing, ages, and genders. Participants were selected from a pool of student veterans who served in the military post September 11, 2001 because this is the population of student veterans on the rise on college campuses, and from which the researcher had the greatest access to. Also, the researcher chose to specifically interview full time students at both AU and ACC because full time contemporary student veterans may experience the transition from military life to college life more acutely than those only enrolled part time in college. Lastly, the researcher chose to collect data from student veterans that represented a range of institutions, academic majors, years of academic standing, ages, and genders in order to achieve the highest range of diversity and variation within the sample as possible, and represent as many different perspectives as possible when presenting the data.

To begin the recruitment process, the researcher contacted all academic advisors at AU to distribute the participant recruitment letter to all contemporary student veterans with whom they work and who they felt may be interested. The same letter was provided

to the Dean of Students at ACC who sent it out to all the identified student veterans at ACC. The recruitment letter outlined the study and the participation requirements (Appendix A – Recruitment materials). The letters were distributed in early fall quarter of the 2009 academic year. The researcher then allowed two weeks for responses from student veterans enrolled at both AU and ACC. Twenty-nine individuals volunteered to participate. However, due to time limitations, only eleven participants were selected to be interviewed using maximum sampling methods. Follow-up emails were sent to the candidates to arrange for an interview time and to answer any further questions they may have regarding the study. The researcher was able to schedule interviews with all eleven participants. An additional email was sent to participants one week prior to their scheduled interview time with an attached copy of the Informed Consent form (Appendix B – Informed Consent Form), the interview questions (Appendix C – Interview Script), as well as a demographic survey (Appendix D – Demographic Survey) they were asked to fill out prior to the interview. Information was sent in advance to all participants so they could prepare for the interview, and to allow time for them to reflect on their experiences prior to being interviewed, as well as address any questions or concerns they might have about the interview process. Also, asking participants to fill out the demographic survey prior to the interview allowed the researcher to maximize time spent interviewing the participant during the scheduled interview time. The other 18 volunteers willing to participate in the study also received a follow up email outlining the time constraints of the study and thanking them for their willingness to contribute.

Sampling and participants. Purposeful sampling method was utilized to identify participants for this study. Creswell (2005) explains that this method allows purposeful selection of research sites and participants “that will best help the researcher understand the problem and the research question” (Creswell, 2005, p 204). Purposeful sampling allowed the selection of participants who offered in-depth data directly related to the research questions of this study. Participants were selected if they met all of the following criteria: (a) have served in the military after September 11, 2001 in the Afghanistan and/or Iraq wars, and (b) currently enrolled in an undergraduate, graduate, or post-baccalaureate program at either AU or ACC.

This study aimed to explore the multiple perspectives of contemporary student veteran experiences on college campuses regarding their transition process from the military to college life. According to Creswell (2005), “One characteristic of qualitative research is to present multiple perspectives of individuals in order to represent the complexity of our world” (p. 204). Specifically for this study, maximum variation sampling “is a purposeful sampling strategy in which the researcher samples...individuals that differ on some characteristic or trait” (p. 204). Therefore, a sample was developed through maximum variation sampling consisting of contemporary student veterans from different institution types, academic majors, years of academic standing, ages, and genders. Participant demographics and military experiences will be discussed further in Chapter Four.

Data collection. This study aimed to obtain descriptive and detailed information from the perspectives of contemporary student veterans. Therefore, one-on-one

interviews were conducted incorporating numerous open-ended questions to prompt responses that were true and reflective of the participants' unique perspectives and experiences. Sargent and Schlossberg's (1988) adult transition theory, specifically the concept of the 4S's: situation, self, support, and strategy, offered a theoretical foundation for the formulation of the interview questions, which focused on obtaining information about contemporary student veteran transition experiences (Appendix C – Interview script). When conducting interviews, it was important to establish an interview protocol that was easy to understand and open ended in order to allow the participants to fully explore the topic from their own perspective. Asking open-ended questions allowed the participants to “best voice their experiences unconstrained by any perspectives of the researcher or past research findings” (Creswell, 2005, p.214).

This form of data collection also allowed participants to explore the topic independently and have the freedom to choose how to respond. This study was designed for student veterans to reflect on their transition experiences from military life to college life, as well as the factors that positively affected the transition process and those which posed challenges in a manner that is meaningful and significant to the individual. Therefore, it was important to utilize open-ended questions to allow the participants to direct the flow of the interview. The interviewer asked follow-up and clarifying questions in order to gain information that is as detailed and as unbiased as possible. The interviews were conducted in a semi-structured format in which student veterans were asked to explore their military experiences and their choices to enroll in college. They

were also asked to describe their experiences transitioning from military life to college life, including positive experiences, as well as the challenges they faced in the process.

Prior to the beginning of the interview, participants returned their demographic surveys and were asked to sign the Informed Consent Documents. The interviews then began with a discussion of the research purpose as well as an explanation of the study. The interview format was explained and participants were then given the opportunity to ask questions. The interviews were opened with the primary open-ended question (Appendix C – Interview Script). The interview then proceeded according to the participants' response. Sub-questions and/or follow-up questions were asked throughout the interview, but only in response to statements and topics identified by participants in response to the original interview question. Interviews lasted 45-90 minutes. All interviews were digitally audio-recorded with participant approval and notes were taken during the interview to supplement the audio recordings.

Data analysis. All interviews were sent to a professional transcription service for transcribing one week following the completion of the interviews. The transcribed interviews were returned to the participant for member checking, a process where the participants were given two weeks to read over the interview transcript and make any edits or add any additional information.

The initial exploration and analysis of the interview data began by obtaining “a general sense of the data, memoing ideas, and thinking about the organization of the data” (Creswell, 2005, p.237). The researcher reviewed the interview transcriptions and took initial notes. After the initial read through, the researcher read the interview

transcriptions three more times and coded the data by hand, first dividing the data into segments that could be understood in broad themes (Creswell, 2005). These broad themes were eventually broken down into more detailed themes in the third and fourth read-through that were identified as a common theme across multiple participants. The researcher used the identified themes and segments to respond to the research questions outlined in Chapter One. In addition, the researcher used Sargent and Schlossberg's (1988) theory of adult transitions to aid in the analysis and understanding of the themes and ideas present in the participants' responses regarding transitions.

Strategies employed to ensure protection of human participants and soundness of findings. Participants in this research were protected through the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at AU. The research protocol, recruitment documents and procedures, interview questions, and inquiry methods were submitted and approved by the Institutional Review Board to ensure they would not be harmful to participants prior to initiation of data collection. In addition, participants were asked to read through and sign an informed consent form (Appendix B – Informed Consent Form) that outlined their rights within this research and the procedures of the study. Also, participants were each assigned a pseudonym to protect their identity.

Within any research, there is a need to ensure findings and interpretations are accurate and trustworthy. During the data collection process, member checking was used to establish the accuracy of the information. Member checking allows the researcher to ask participants to check the accuracy of the account shared (Creswell, 2005). Member checking was completed during the interview process, where the researcher summarized

or restated ideas and statements shared by the participants to ensure accuracy. This gave the participants the opportunity to hear their disclosed information repeated back to them, and make any changes if they felt it misrepresented the concepts and ideas they were attempting to share. The researcher also returned the transcribed one-on-one interviews to the participants to review and check for accurate representation of their answers. This provided the participants an additional opportunity to review their disclosed information, check for accurate representation of their thoughts, as well as the opportunity clarify any points that lacked clarity during the interviews.

In addition to member checking, the researcher also used thick, rich descriptions during the analysis process and the results writing process. According to Creswell and Miller (2000), rich descriptions provide a context for the participants and the information, and thus enable the reader to “make decisions about the applicability of the findings to other or similar contexts” (p.129). The use of thick, rich descriptions offered additional credibility to the research.

Another important component of determining accuracy and truthfulness of the findings is having an understanding of “the perspectives of those involved in the phenomenon of interest” (Merriam, 1998, p.203). Creswell and Miller (2000) encourages this process through reflexivity, where “researchers report on their personal beliefs, values, and biases that may shape their inquiry . . . [so as to] allow readers to understand their positions, and then to bracket or suspend those researcher biases as the study proceeds” (p. 127). The next section will outline the researcher’s potential biases and values relevant to this study.

Personal disclosure. As Creswell (2009) explains, “the role of the researchers as the primary data collection instrument necessitate the identification of personal values, assumptions, and biases at the outset of the study” (p. 196). The researcher has worked as an academic advisor graduate assistant for a year and a half during her time in a higher education administration graduate program at AU. In this position, the researcher has directly interacted with student veterans and heard accounts of issues and challenges they face when transitioning into and navigating the college experience. The researcher feels these experiences have provided (a) a greater appreciation for the experiences military personal have and the effects they have on their civilian lives, (b) a basis for understanding the experiences and challenges student veterans may face as they integrate into the role of a student after being in the role of a soldier, and (c) a personal interest in the contemporary student veteran student population and a desire to learn more about their experiences in college.

Outside of advising experiences, the researcher has little background knowledge on military culture or the experiences of a soldier. Therefore, before conducting research, the researcher attempted to gain knowledge on military culture by reading the memoirs of soldiers returned from the Iraq and Afghanistan conflicts (Flick, 2005). These readings allowed the researcher to read first hand accounts of soldiers’ experiences in war. The memoirs offered a good foundation to build on regarding military culture and experiences from research participants. The researcher challenged herself to learn about military culture and experiences, so that she would have a solid understanding of who the

participants of the study were, their backgrounds within the military, and how this would affect their college experiences.

The researcher also recognized that despite the value she placed on the opportunities outlined above, the diversity of opinions about war and military culture needed to be acknowledged. The researcher aimed to inquire without judging the different perspectives of the participants. Therefore, the researcher aimed to develop questions and responses, which indicated a neutral position towards military culture and war, and allowed participants to speak comfortably and openly about a range of experiences and perspectives. The researcher worked to maintain a neutral position in all stages of the study, by utilizing tactics such as allowing the participants to select the interview location, encouraging participants to skip interview questions if they desired, and allowing the participants the opportunity to ask questions about the researcher.

Summary

In summary, this is a qualitative study of contemporary student veterans and their transitional experiences from military to college. The study incorporates an ethnographic approach, and the research design sought for meaning around this particular topic through the use of (a) purposeful sampling, (b) one-on-one interviews utilizing open-ended questions and follow-up questions to collect detail rich data, (c) intentional coding and analysis of the data, and (d) member checking and reflexivity to increase the trustworthiness of research findings.

Chapter Four: Results

This study explored the nature of cotemporary student veteran experiences as they transition from military life to college life. This chapter begins with a summary of research and analysis methods, followed by an introduction of the study participants, and finally the presentation of collected data. The chapter is organized according to the specific research question and sub-questions. The researcher found that contemporary student veteran experiences during the transition process could be categorized into two general topics: (a) the factors that positively affected their transitions, and (b) the factors that posed challenges to the transition process. More specific themes were identified in each of these topics. The section outlines the details of each theme as well as provides the data supporting the identified themes and findings.

Research Methods Summary

The purpose of this study was to answer the following primary research question.

- What is the nature of contemporary student veterans' experiences as they transition from military life to college life?

In the process of examining the contemporary student veteran transition experience, the research also sought to find answers to the following secondary questions:

- What factors had positive effects on the contemporary student veteran transition process?
- What factors posed challenges to the contemporary student veteran transition process?

In order to answer these research questions, data was collected through a series of one-on-one interviews ranging in length from 45-90 minutes. In order to examine the specific aspects of contemporary student veterans' transition from military life to college life, interview questions were written in the context of Sargent and Schlossberg's (1988) adult transition theory. Specifically incorporating the concept of the 4 S's in the interview questions allowed for a more in-depth and structured discussion about transition experiences, specifically the factors that positively impacted and those that posed challenges during the transition process from military life to college life (Appendix C – Interview Script).

During data analysis, topics and subsequent themes emerged specific to the research questions of this study. Findings were analyzed and organized into specific topics and themes related to the two secondary research questions: (a) factors that had positive effects on the transition process, and (b) factors that posed challenges during the transition process. Each topic will be discussed in detail and additional themes that emerged during the analysis process within each topic will be examined within the context of the participants' discussions and direct quotes. These topics and themes will then be connected to Schlossberg's adult transition theory in Chapter Five.

Additionally, many participants shared their thoughts on what resources and knowledge they wished to have had during their transition to college campuses and into the role of a student. This resulted in the participants offering suggestions to higher education institutions in order to promote awareness of the needs of this student population and how higher education institutions can best serve them. Although this

information was not part of the original research questions, it provides valuable insight for those seeking to understand the unique needs of the contemporary student veteran population. This data will have valuable implications on future practice. These suggestions will be discussed in Chapter Five.

Participants

The research design of this study was a qualitative study where participants from Anonymous University (AU) and Anonymous Community College (ACC) were interviewed in a one-on-one format. The researcher collected data from a total of eleven participants, all of which were full time contemporary student veterans at either AU or ACC. Although all participants can be identified as veterans who served in the Afghanistan and/or Iraq wars post September 11, 2001, it is important to recognize the differences in veterans' experiences and backgrounds. During his interview one participant, Conan, agreed:

That's why it's hard to be identified as, "Oh, he's a veteran." That means like 6 trillion things because everybody's military experience has been completely different. The only thing we have in common is that we, you know, used to be in the military.

What Conan points out is that every contemporary student veteran's experience is different. Not only do their transitions into college and their college careers vary, but so do their previous personal and military experiences. Therefore, this section will provide demographic data, as well as a brief summary of the military experiences of each of the participants. This will help the reader to better understand the context in which the comments were made by each participant and allow better understanding of the diversity of the contemporary student veteran population.

Table 1 – Participant Demographics

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Ethnicity	Marital/Partner Status	Number of Dependents	Institution	Student Standing
Matt	36	Male	Caucasian	Married	4	AU	Post-Bacc
Alex	44	Male	Caucasian	Married	3	AU	Post-Bacc
Stephanie	33	Female	Caucasian	Married	0	AU	Undergraduate
Conan	30	Male	Caucasian	Married	0	AU	Post-Bacc
Peter	25	Male	Caucasian	Divorced	0	AU	Undergraduate
Bert	21	Male	Caucasian	Married	1	ACC/AU	Undergraduate
Ian	28	Male	Caucasian	Married	4	ACC/AU	Professional
Brice	32	Male	Caucasian	Married	0	ACC	Undergraduate
Ben	29	Male	Caucasian	Single	0	AU	Undergraduate
Casey	23	Male	Caucasian	Engaged	0	ACC	Undergraduate
John	30	Male	Hispanic	Married	4	ACC	Undergraduate

Matt. Matt is originally from Texas, but moved to the Northwest after high school in 1993 for a change of scenery and to attend school. In 2000, he joined the U.S. Army as a means to pay off his student loans and to pursue traveling and medical training. Matt was stationed in Germany before being deployed to Iraq in 2004, where he served as a medic. When he returned home from his deployment he received training in Physical Therapy in Texas and Oklahoma. Matt then was temporarily released from the Army to come to AU to join the ROTC program in order to earn the rank of officer. He began school at AU in the Fall of 2006. Matt completed the ROTC program in 2008 and then joined the U.S. National Guard while he finished his degree in General Science with a Pre-Med option. Matt, his wife, and child are awaiting his next orders from the U.S. National Guard.

Alex. Alex flew F-15's for 14 years and recently retired from a 20-year career in the U.S. Air Force. He has been deployed and relocated many times, spending time in Saudi Arabia, Alaska, Kosovo, Las Vegas, Virginia, and Baghdad. He has a previous degree from AU and decided to return to the Northwest with his wife to raise his children. He is studying to become a teacher.

Stephanie. Stephanie attended the University of Colorado, Boulder before joining the U.S. Navy in March of 2005, where she served as a fire controlman. She was stationed in Norfolk, Virginia where she met and married her husband. She was honorably discharged in 2007. However, her husband is still serving in the U.S. Navy and chose to participate in the ROTC program at AU because he previously attended school here. Stephanie also chose to go back to school at AU to pursue Pre-Med.

Conan. Conan graduated with a degree in Political Science at University of Washington before he joined the U.S. Army in 2001. He was deployed twice to Iraq where he served as a tank platoon leader, as well as second in command of a company for the U.S. Army. After his active duty was complete, Conan joined the U.S. National Guard for a year and was based out of the Northwest. At this time he began school at AU to complete his prerequisites for medical school and earn another degree in Biochemistry. Conan's wife also is attending AU.

Peter. Peter was deployed to Iraq during Operation Iraqi Freedom in June, 2007. He served as his platoon's heavy machine gunner. Peter previously attended AU while serving in the U.S. National Guard. He was then deployed for 10 months, before returning to complete his degree. Peter still has two years of service in the National Guard. He was a junior when he was deployed. He returned to school after returning home from Iraq, and is now in his senior year at AU studying International Business and Economics. He recently completed a term abroad in Austria, but is originally from the Northwest.

Bert. Bert joined the U.S. National Guard in 2006, immediately after high school as a means to pay for his college education. He was deployed to Iraq right after his basic training in 2006, where he served in chemical operations. He returned home in July 2008 and started school. He is dual enrolled at ACC and AU studying to become a pharmacist. He and his wife are originally from the Northwest and they have a 2-year-old daughter. Bert is currently with the National Guard.

Ian. Ian joined the U.S. Marine Corps after high school in the summer of 1999. Shortly after September 11, 2001 he was deployed and was part of the first 500 ground troops in Afghanistan. He completed his enlistment in 2003 and moved back to the Northwest with his wife. Both Ian and his wife are originally from the Northwest, and they have three children. Ian began his studies in the Fall of 2004 at ACC, but since has transferred to AU where he is currently a professional student.

Brice. Brice was deployed to Iraq in 2005 where he served as a prison guard through the U.S. Air Force. After deployment, Brice returned to an U.S. Air Force base in California to complete his enlistment. In 2007 Brice completed his time in the military, and he and his wife moved to the Northwest to be near family. He began school at ACC that fall studying Business Supervisory Management and Diesel Technology. His wife also attends AU.

Ben. Ben is originally from the Northwest. He joined the U.S. Army right out of high school at the age of 17 in 1997. Ben participated in training and education in the U.S. Army. In 2001 he took a temporary leave from the Army to start school. He studied Chinese in New York. After the completion of his enlistment, he joined the U.S.

National Guard, was in ROTC, and studied Pre-Med at Boise State. In 2004 he was deployed to Kuwait and Iraq where he served as a sniper and counter ID operations. After returning from deployment in 2005, he transferred to the National Guard unit in the Northwest. In the summer of 2007 he returned to school at AU to study Business Entrepreneurship. Ben is still part of the National Guard and participates in training in human intelligence in the summers and weekends.

Casey. Casey joined the U.S. Army following high school. He was deployed to Iraq in 2006 where he served as a combat engineer. He was honorably discharged from the army in December of 2007. He worked a series of jobs before deciding to go to school at ACC and study to become a physical therapist. Casey is originally from the Northwest. He and his fiancé are planning to get married in the summer of 2010.

John. John is originally from Laredo, Texas. He joined the U.S. Navy as a welder in 1998 right out of high school. He transferred into the security force and participated in training at Blackwater and at a SWAT school in Miami, where he learned reconnaissance work and what it was like to be tortured. He was then deployed to Iraq where his company was ambushed in April of 2005. John was injured and sent back to a base in South Texas for physical therapy. He was honorably discharged in 2006. John then went to Tulsa, Oklahoma to complete a Master's degree in Welding Technology. This is where he met and married his wife. They then moved back to the Northwest to be close to his wife's family. With welding jobs on the decline, John decided to go back to school at ACC to study Criminal Justice.

Nature of Contemporary Student Veteran Transitions

The primary research question of this study sought to examine the nature of contemporary student veteran transitions from military life to college life. Working through transitions processes consists of a series of reactions to events and non-events over time, where individuals move from “moving in,” “moving through,” and “moving out” of the transition. When moving across the phases of a transition, individuals evaluate each transition, determine the positive or negative effects, and look for resources to help manage the change (DiRamio, et al., 2008). Throughout the interviews, participants shared their stories and experiences transitioning from the military to the campuses of ACC and AU. These discussions were analyzed and organized into specific topics and themes related to the two secondary research questions: (a) factors that had positive effects on the transition process, and (b) factors that posed challenges during the transition process. Each topic will be discussed in detail and additional themes that emerged during the analysis process within each topic will be examined within the context of the participants’ discussions and complimented by the support from direct quotes.

Positive factors. Sargent and Schlossberg (1988) defined a transition as any event or non-event that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles. Therefore, it can be anticipated that any transition poses a number of challenges, as it requires adjustment to a significant change. For many contemporary student veterans, the changes resulting from transitions are drastic because it involves leaving one distinct culture (the military) and entering another (college). However, as the participating

contemporary student veterans transitioned from military life to college life, not all transition processes were negative or challenging. Many participants discussed and recognized factors that helped to make their transitions from military life to college life more positive. These factors included: (a) taking time off, (b) having positive support systems in place, (c) gaining new perceptions of college, and (d) utilizing the skills they learned in the military.

Taking time off. One common finding among the participants was the benefit of taking “time off” prior to entering college. For many participants, this involved taking three months to a year to either not work or not go back to school. This period of time was most commonly used to become reacquainted with family, friends, and civilian life. The participants shared a number of positive effects of having taken time off in their transition process, such as having the chance to process the experiences they had in the military, time to decompress, time to get over lingering issues of sleep deprivation or memory triggers, and to spend time with friends and family. One of the participants, Conan, stated:

So when you're in Iraq you're bombarded by that situation, but it's hard to take the long view when you're sitting in it. And so I needed time to come back and assimilate things that I'd seen in Iraq, what I knew before I went, what I was seeing now, and kind of make a more cohesive picture out of everything.

Conan demonstrates how time between the conclusion of his military service and beginning college was beneficial for him to reflect upon and understand his experiences in the military. This allowed him enough time and distance away from his past

experiences before jumping into the transition of becoming a student. Another participant, Brice similarly stated:

I took a while off after I left the military and, basically, did nothing. And I think that helps immensely. . . . Yeah, decompress, recharge my batteries and get my mind right. If I just went straight into school, I think I would have been overwhelmed. I think I definitely would not have been able to cope with the deadlines, the stress that's associated with school.

Brice felt that not taking time off to “recharge” before entering college would have been detrimental to his experience as a student. Brice explained further in his interview that he needed time to adjust to the culture shock he felt transitioning out of the military and into civilian life. If he had added the culture shock of becoming a student on top of his transition back into civilian life, he felt that it would have been too much for him to handle right away. His time off allowed him to “recharge” and be mentally ready for the transition into college life.

For Brice, the culture shock of returning home was minimal. However, culture shock was felt in various ways among each participant. For example, Ben experienced a more substantial example of culture shock, as well as memory triggers when he returned home after his deployment. He shared that he would “hit the deck” upon hearing loud noises, and he also dealt with sleep deprivation. He made the choice to take time off and resolve these challenges before entering college:

I didn't really want to be in school and have to go through stuff like that. When I got back it was December 2005. And so, I basically took 2006 off and just did some army stuff, tried to transition back into normal life. Basically just trying to adjust for that year. And then by 2007, I was like, “All right, I'm ready.” I'm not jumpy at stuff anymore. I'm totally cool.

Although transitioning back into civilian life was challenging for Ben, as was for many other participants, they still attributed taking time off as something that positively affected their transitions into college. They entered college feeling more mentally prepared. When asked what he would have done in hindsight to the transition into college life a more positive one, Bert, who did not take time off prior to entering college, stated:

Probably not gone straight to school. . . . It would have allowed me a lot more time to stay at home with my family. I just basically hit the ground running. As soon I got here, I started school. It was unrealistic thinking to believe that I could do that without any hiccoughs or speed bumps.

While Bert talks about “hiccoughs” and “speed bumps,” referring to the challenges he faced in his transition into college life, he agrees with those that have taken time off before entering college that time off would have helped to make his transition more smooth and positive.

Support systems. While not all participants were able to take “time off” between the conclusion of their time in the military and the beginning of college, all shared that they put great efforts into establishing a strong support system once they returned from the military. These support systems often took the form of a spouse, immediate family, or close friends and were formed or restructured once out of the military, because each veteran is stripped of the support they relied on during their time in the service. Participants expressed that these newly established support systems had positive effects on their transition process into college. Participants valued having someone to confide in, from whom they could seek advice or help in completing required tasks and overcome the challenges associated with fulfilling the student role.

Bert discussed the process of reestablishing his support system once he returned home from Iraq; “I actually have a wife and daughter. That was my new support system, because I’ve actually been away from them for a year. Setting up that support system was vital.” Bert expresses the sentiment shared by many of the participants. Structuring a support system once leaving the military is a crucial step, as each veteran appeared to experience a sudden loss of their primary support system, which consisted of fellow soldiers. This reestablished support system not only benefitted contemporary student veterans as they transitioned into civilian life, but these systems proved “vital” within the transition process into the role of a student.

Conan shared that upon initially entering AU, he felt lost and alienated on campus. He felt that he possessed a different perspective on education than other students and was having a difficult time finding his place among younger and less experienced students. However, when asked of available resources and support systems, Conan stated,

My wife’s my best friend, and so I always had someone to talk to and to hang out with. And so, even if I felt out of place here [AU], I never felt out of place in the world because my wife is there, and I could just go home and talk to her.

Conan’s wife enabled him to continue at AU and eventually establish his place on campus. Many participants, like Conan, identified their spouses as their primary support system as they took on the student role. The spouses often provided a safe environment to share thoughts, challenges, and successes as they worked through the transition process and into their new role as students.

In John's case, his wife and wife's family helped him navigate through his new role as a student; "they pretty much pointed me in the direction of my goals. But they know more of what to do in college, how to set your classes up and what you need to take." John went on to share that he had never gone to college before, and therefore did not know what to expect. His wife, as well as his wife's family, all attended college and were able to share their experiences with him. They knew some of the experiences to be expected as he worked through the transition of becoming a student and pointed him in the right direction. As demonstrated by John, several participants received academic support from spouses and family members who have been in or are currently in a student role. As was exemplified by this group of participants, depending on the individual's background and prior experiences, there are numerous sources of support, as well as need for specific types of support to make the transition from military life to college life more positive.

Gaining perspective. The experiences and resources individuals bring with them to the transition process affect the transition process and its outcomes. In the case of contemporary student veterans, many of them felt they brought unique perspectives and skills to the college environment as a result of their time in the military. These perspectives served as positive resources and were beneficial in the process of transitioning from military to college life.

Matt and John elaborated on how their life-changing experiences in the military have formed their unique outlook on how they approach being a student, as well as how they view education. When asked whether he feels he has a different outlook on being a

student due to his experiences, Matt stated, “My perception is certainly different. I believe that I have gained a sense of importance to life out of the military that non-veteran students don’t comprehend.” Matt’s statement exemplifies how veterans’ experiences in the military, often in combat situations, have resulted in the formation of a new perspective on life for many of the participants. Similarly, John elaborated on how his perceptions of school and education have changed as a result of his military experiences,

I've seen so much horror, I've done so much terror, literally, and I just want to relax, just want to enjoy this world. . . . College is necessary, that's how I see it. I'm there because I want to be there, I want to do something with my life. I understand that the world is not a comforting place. I fended for myself when I was 17 and I know the hardest, what the world can give us. Now, I'm more like “I've got to be here, I want to be here.” It's sweeter to me than to them.

This was a recurring theme among the participants. Having served in the military, especially in combat situations, had a profound impact on how they perceived life, education, and being a student.

Another theme that emerged across multiple participants was the concept that hard work leads to success and positive results. Due to their experiences in the military, there appeared to be a higher sense of motivation and self-accountability among participants in their student roles. Ian stated,

I had not done exceptionally well in high school. Coming back into college, I was a straight A student. It was a big turnaround for me. I put it straight on the military a big part of it, as well as realizing that it really mattered and I was paying for it. I was going to get out of it what I put in.

This demonstrates the perception that Ian felt accountable for his success, and that hard work is rewarded with desired outcomes. This sense of accountability is also apparent in Brice's statement discussing the differences between himself and traditional students:

I definitely think that I take my education more seriously than your average student. The Air Force just taught me to perform a good work ethic and to try my best to do things fully . . . put everything into it that I possibly can, and gain everything from it that I can.

Despite their differences, the participants shared the feeling that their experience in the military has had a strong influence on how they approach education, often in a positive manner.

Military skills. In addition to gaining overall positive and empowering perspectives on school and the student role, participants shared a number of specific qualities and skills gained from their time in the military that have had a positive impact on their transition process. One such characteristic was discipline. As discussed in Chapter Two, a high level of discipline is required in the military. It is prescribed at the time of enlistment and is perfected through repetitive drills, which makes disciplined actions into habits. Discipline is important during one's time in the military because it minimizes confusion and consequences in battle, and offers military personnel a register of patterned actions on which they can rely in a time of battle or crisis (Burk, 1999). Participants felt that the skills they obtained in discipline during their time in the military were directly responsible for their abilities to succeed as a student. Bert explained the benefit of this trait simply, "I'd say it's a lot easier for me to study. Just more mental discipline." Many participants shared his sentiment. Brice stated,

I think another thing that the military taught me was discipline. And just knowing that it's for my own benefit, and that you're gonna get out of it what you put into it. So you know I'm only benefiting myself more by getting the most out of it that I possibly can.

Brice illustrates that his discipline allowed him to accomplish tasks, and served as a motivator. He felt that discipline allowed him to make the most out of his experiences as a student and maximize the benefits of his college education. Ian elaborated on Brice's experiences by sharing,

The Marine Corps is really big on what they call their core values. It's honor, courage, and commitment. I think the commitment and the discipline that I learned was a big thing when it came to, okay, I have to really buckle down on studying and doing the things I need to be successful, and knowing that I could do it.

Ian demonstrated how time in the military gave him the ability to recognize what was expected of him, and applied the self-discipline acquired in the military to accomplish tasks. Taking on the role of a college student is very different from the times of battle or crises many participants experienced during their time in the military. However, the transition into the role of a student still presents challenges and stresses. During challenging times, participants were able to rely upon the skills in discipline they learned during their services and minimize confusion and challenges while transitioning into new roles.

Discipline also allowed participants to influence their transitional process and provide structure to their experiences as college students. Peter felt that personal discipline allowed him to approach his education with more organization; "I find that I'm a lot more structured and earlier to start on things than other students. There is a lot less stress and, more over, a lot easier at times." Peter demonstrated the positive effect

structure can have on the transition process. He felt he experienced considerably less stress than his peers and felt the course work was easy for him to accomplish. As participants were asked to explore the concept of discipline and structure further, it became apparent that discipline and structure were not only skills, but also values from military culture that they retained in their new role as students. John shared how he felt the need to provide structure to his life in order to maximize his time in school,

I just schedule myself out. When I first started I was like, "Okay I've got class this day and this day." And then in between I'd be like, "Okay." So now I sit down and I write every day what I need to do: do this test until 9:00; I need to read this chapter for this day. So I pretty much treat it like a job, not as education.

John continued to share that this quality helped him get through day-to-day tasks and responsibilities as a student, and that structure was a valuable characteristic to his success as a student. Alex shared how discipline and structure lead to other positive actions as a student,

I'd say stuff like organizational skills, being prepared, instead of being reactive, trying to be proactive. I'd kind of say that would probably be the big stuff for the military. And other stuff, like having a bigger picture on, "I really do need to study," and, "It helps if you study."

In addition to discipline and structure, participants felt that their time in the military resulted in high levels of commitment and the ability to form clear and concrete goals. When asked how having served in the military differentiates them from other students, many identified a noticeable difference in the level of commitment to their role as students. Brice, who had attended a community college prior to entering the military, describes the difference in his level of commitment,

I did attend a community college right out of high school and I definitely was not prepared, just not very motivated. And the second time around, after the military, it was much different. I was much more committed.

In addition to Brice, many other participants stated that their ability to commit to a goal or task was an attribute that they gained from their time in the military. Conan explains why veterans may have a higher level of commitment to education by stating,

Once you've grown up a little bit and you've seen a little bit of the world, and you know what you want – that's the most important thing. And when you know what you want, you can make a plan to get it and you can execute your plan with enthusiasm. And it makes everything easy. . . . And it's not because I'm super smart. It's because I work hard and I know what I want and why I'm doing it.

Many participants expressed that they had a more clear purpose and goal for attending school, making it easier to commit to schoolwork and fulfilling their role of a student.

When asked about how he views school and education currently, Ian stated,

I think it is very different. You look at a typical student who comes in as a freshman and kind of blows off freshman year often times. I never went through that, because I knew kind of what I wanted to do and got down to it and did it.

Some participants attributed this quality to their experiences in the military, while others stated the quality is a result of older age and maturity.

Another quality or skill that many veterans identified as a strength was adaptability. Ian describes how adaptability is a quality embedded in military culture:

A slogan you always say in the Marine Corps, is “adapt and overcome.” You may have heard of the little saying that the plan only goes until the first bullet flies. It’s the same way with school, being able to really adapt quickly and fully I think has really helped me, especially now where maybe you have six or seven instructors for one class and you have to really adapt quick.

The concept of “adapt and overcome” was a strength that several participants identified as a positive skill during their transition into student roles. This concept keeps the individual accountable for overcoming difficulties in classroom settings, which may contribute to the strong work ethic and clear goals of the veteran student population. One participant stated that he was less likely to make excuses when the responsibility was his to adapt to new challenges and difficult situations. Ben described this attitude by stating, “I’m very adaptable. I just basically accept what I see and what’s happening and what’s in front of me,” demonstrating that having the ability to view a challenge and a need to adapt encourages the use of time and energy in searching for solutions rather than focusing on the challenge or problem.

Discipline, structure, having clear and concrete goals, and the ability to adapt and overcome, all proved to be positive characteristics that supported the participants in their transition process from military life to college life. These characteristics are present in the veteran student experience due to the lessons learned and skills adopted from military culture and ideals. When combined, discipline, structure, clear goals, and adaptability allowed participants to endure challenging and difficult situations in the military. These skills allowed participants to survive and overcome times of crisis and battle. When applied to the transition process from military life to college life, these skills transferred and were applied to the numerous challenges posed in their transition process into new roles. They allowed participants to experience higher levels of confidence when faced with the challenges and stressors associated with the transition. Bert summarized this effect by stating, “It is kind of a feeling of like, well, I’ve been through worse. If I went

through that, I can definitely do this.” In addition, Ian elaborated by connecting his military training experiences to his transition into the role of student,

Boot camp really pushes you well beyond the limits you think you have and makes you understand that you can do a lot more than you think. When I came back to school, it was even if I think this is hard, I know I can do more than I actually can, so it was not as much of an issue. . . . I think I know that I have the confidence that I can do it.

Ian expressed that his time in the military and the skills he gained helped him have a higher level of confidence in his abilities to succeed in college. When asked how her military experiences have helped shape her college experience, Stephanie shared,

I think that the one thing that being in the military does teach you is that you can really withstand a lot more than I think people give themselves credit for. . . . And so to me, I kind of have taken that attitude with school, and it’s, like, “You know what, I want to be a doctor, so I’m gonna get straight As, and I’m gonna be involved in clubs. I’m gonna do this program and volunteer at the hospital.” And yes, my days are really busy, but I can handle it.

Confidence in their abilities to overcome the challenges presented during the transition process from military life to college life proved to be a valuable skill gained as a result of their time in the military. Participants expressed that they knew they had discipline, structure, accountability, clear goals, and the ability to adapt due to the training and experiences they had while in the military, and they could put these skills to good use in their transitions into the role of a student. This set of unique skills derived from their military experiences in combination with the associated confidence played a significant role in their successful transition into their new roles as students.

Summary of positive factors. As the contemporary student veteran participants of this study transitioned from military life to college life, they identified numerous positive,

encouraging, and empowering aspects of the transition process. Many participants discussed and recognized factors that enabled their transition from military life to college life successful. These factors included: (a) taking time off, (b) having good support systems in place, (c) gaining new perceptions of college, and (d) utilizing the skills they learned in the military.

Factors that pose challenges. Transitions have the ability to change relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles. The more a transition changes these factors, the more an individual will be affected positively and/or negatively (Sargent & Schlossberg, 1988). Being part of the military culture involves integration and assimilation into (a) unique relationships with superiors and other soldiers, (b) routines and structures of discipline, (c) unique assumptions and beliefs in the cause/purpose of war, and (d) the role of a soldier. Therefore, it can be anticipated that the transition out of military life, to civilian life, and to college life will result in substantial culture shock and present a need to adjust and redefine relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles. For many participants, this change and redefining process of the transition from military life to college life proved to be challenging. Factors that posed challenges in the transition process from military to college consisted of: (a) emotional adjustment, (b) restructuring support systems, (c) finding resources, (d) environmental adjustments, and (e) redefining identity.

Emotional adjustment. The transition from military life to civilian life is physically a quick process. One day you are in the military, and the next day you are not. It is the same in physically transitioning into the role of a student. One day you are not a

student and the next day you are. However, the emotional transition is an extremely complex and fragile process that requires significant time. Participants expressed that transitioning out of military life, as well as transitioning into student life involved a significant emotional adjustment. Ben shared the feelings he experienced after returning home from his deployment in Iraq:

It was definitely difficult at first. I suppose the best way to put it would be culture shock you know. There is a big transition, just in general, from military to civilian life.

Actually, I think it was almost five days without sleep and I had to go to the doctor and everything. I couldn't sleep. . . . But just because of stuff like that I didn't really want to be in school and have to go through stuff like that... Because when I first got back it felt like everything was a dream that I was going to wake up from. I really felt like I was going to wake up and be back in Iraq at any time. Like this, nothing seemed real.

Similarly for Ben, the reality of being home and part of civilian life took time to sink in. The world he experienced in the military was vastly different from the world he currently functions in as a student at AU. Ben was one of the participants who chose to take time off between his time in the military and in college. He felt that the emotional adjustment he experienced during that time would have had a negative effect on his abilities as a student. Sharing similarly strong emotions, Brice shared his opinion that,

I think when I came back from Iraq, especially, I was angry. And I felt like I was required to jump through a lot of hoops that I didn't want to. I wasn't interested in playing their [the military's] game any longer. And I think that if I had not taken the time off, that would have transferred over to civilian life. And I would have felt – and I don't think it would have been entirely accurate that I jump through hoops and do things that I didn't necessarily want to do that were required for me to. But the perception would have been there.

Brice spoke about the anger he felt from his time in the military spilling over into civilian life. Brice was also a participant who chose to take time off before entering college to allow for emotional adjustment.

While taking time off had a positive influence on the transition process, it is important to recognize the challenge posed by the emotional readjustment itself. For Conan, despite having taken time off, the emotional adjustment process continued into his student experiences.

I definitely went through kind of a year-long feeling out of place here [AU] combined with being sad about the state of the world and feeling like I wasn't doing well in school, that I didn't belong here. That was all I think the function of just being bummed out about what I'd seen and having all these, you know, deep and depressing thoughts about the world. . . . I don't think that was it was really a function of this place [AU]. I think it was just something I brought with me here.

For Conan, it took him over a year to make sense of the experiences he had in the military and to treat them separately from his time and experiences as a student. He had completed his time in the military, and the role he knew as an officer was gone. However, he had not fully adjusted into the role of a student resulting in a period of time where he felt out of place at AU. Many participants expressed similar challenges regarding emotional adjustment and coping with the culture shock of transitioning out of military life, to civilian life, to student life.

Restructuring support systems. Many participants discussed the challenges associated with making emotional adjustments in conjunction with the need to form new support systems. As discussed previously, these new support systems often took the form of a spouse, immediate family, or close friends and were formed or restructured

once out of the military. Veterans are often stripped of the sole support system they had established with their fellow soldiers during their time of service. As discussed in Chapter Two, cohesion and “esprit de corps” are highly important concepts in military culture. Military cohesion is the feeling of identity and comradeship that soldiers feel for one another. Esprit de corps refers to the commitment and pride soldiers take in the larger military establishment (Burk, 1999). Due to this component of military culture and the cohesion they strive to achieve during challenging times of battle and crisis, soldiers form strong bonds with one another. However, once returning home from deployment and/or completing their time in the military, participants shared that the support system they had during their service was disbanded. Ben described his relationships and experiences he had with his fellow soldiers during his time in Iraq,

When I got back a lot of the guys that I served with all went back and did their own thing . . . those were the people I felt closest to, they became like my family, and to me there was like nothing else in existence because almost every day I was over there, I thought I was going to die. . . . Anything outside of Iraq didn't exist because I didn't think I was ever going to see that again. So those people were just like all you had. And then you get back and they are gone. You don't have that anymore so you are basically like, you feel very alone in the world.

Ben demonstrates that cohesion and esprit de corps goes beyond comradeship between soldiers. Those with whom he served became his family, his reality, and his sole support system. In order to cope with the difficulties of war, he relied solely on those with whom he served, because the realities of the civilian world did not exist in his mind. Therefore, when he returned home, he not only faced the emotional adjustment to his new reality of civilian life, but he also faced the reality of his absent support system. Numerous other

participants shared this same experience. Conan elaborated on the nature of this change by stating,

When we were in Iraq, we were our own support structure. I sat and talked with my friends every night over dinner in Iraq. And if people had problems they would just say, you know, they had problems, and people were very supportive of it. But coming here, where they're not here anymore.

During their time in the military, participants were surrounded by their fellow soldiers at all times. Being separated from the support system they were accustomed to during their time in the military, and being in a foreign environment full of strangers presented challenges for many of the participants. When asked about his experiences with other students on campus, Bert shared,

The first few weeks were very difficult for the transition. . . . For a year I had a very close-knit support system that was just gone. That made it difficult, being surrounded by strangers instead of people I knew.

Once returning home, participants were challenged to redefine and reestablish their support systems. As discussed earlier, these support systems usually took the form of spouses, immediate family, and/or close friends. This is because participants sought out those who were familiar, close, and trustworthy when looking for new support. As Bert expressed, being around strangers initially felt extremely uncomfortable for many veterans transitioning back into civilian life and college life. In their attempt to reestablish their support systems, participants did not immediately seek new friends or connections. They turned to those they knew prior to or during their time in the military. For some participants, reestablishing a support system presented even more challenges when participants found themselves in new places without those who were familiar.

Stephanie moved to the Northwest with her husband. She completed her time in the Navy while her husband was still serving. This led to a disconnect between their experiences and Stephanie was required to seek out additional support systems consisting of individuals who shared her current experiences and role as a student. Unfortunately, she is not originally from the area and moved to the Northwest with her husband. When asked about the nature of her support systems, she shared,

I didn't have a support system at all. I kind of had to build it from the ground up. And now, I have lots of friends, but none of them have been in the military before, so a lot of the issues that I had, they couldn't really relate to.

Given time, Stephanie was able to establish a new support system of friends in the area. However, she shared that her experiences in the military still separated her from her civilian friends. They had not experienced that same things she had experienced during her time in the Navy, and she states that there will always be a part of her life to which they cannot relate. This disconnect between veteran and non-veteran students will be explored further in a following section.

Most participants were in agreement when they identified the dissolution of past support systems and the need to create new support systems as one of the most challenging areas of their transition process out of the military and into a student role. For many participants, this process involved adjusting to life without the support to which they were accustomed, feeling isolated at times, and rebuilding a support system as part of the transitional process.

Finding resources. An important part of the positive transition process is having the resources necessary to cope and adapt to changes. As the participants transitioned

into the role of student, many expressed the lack of knowledge and ability to find resources to begin their college journeys. This proved to be challenging for many as they felt they did not know what they needed to know in order to be successful in college.

Stephanie explained,

I kind of felt like it was up to me, like I kind of had to figure it out. And, actually, at the time, I didn't realize that there are support services that you can use. . . . I didn't realize that there were actually people here that could have given me a list and said, "OK, this is what you need to do now." So I probably would have utilized them had I realized that they were there, but I just didn't know.

Stephanie felt that she would have benefited from additional support resources when getting started with college. Her statement, "I kinda felt like it was up to me" indicates that she felt alone in the pursuit of the knowledge she needed to get started. Without proper resources, many participants felt they missed out on important information and opportunities. When asked about the process of getting started at ACC, John shared,

If I would have known my registration dates, that would have been really key because a lot of the classes were taken that I wanted to take; they're like "You're too late," because you have to wait for an orientation. And while I was waiting, everybody else was filling up the classes. So if I would have known you need to do this ASAP to get the classes, then that would have been way helpful, because I was scraping for classes -- anything. And taking stuff that I'm not even meant to because I have to take more than 12 credits to get my GI benefits.

John ended up registering for classes that he did not intend to take, because he was unaware of the process of orientation requirements for registration and missed the opportunity to sign up for classes at the appropriate time. The lack of knowledge and the difficulty with the process of finding resources was frustrating to many participants because they felt it was detrimental to their transition into college. A lack of resources

could make any transition challenging. However, for this particular student population, the effects of this deficit were amplified. As discussed above, this group of student veteran participants had very clear goals and a strong desire to accomplish tasks successfully during their time as a student. A lack of resources and knowledge led to feelings of frustration of falling behind or not knowing how to meet their goals. Casey expresses the frustration experienced by stating,

When I first came here I didn't know how to do the whole -- what I had to do and with registration and admission and advisors and all that. I still don't really know about all that, as far as speaking to an advisor, asking what general education -- I don't even know what classes I have to take next semester as far as from a general requirements. I don't know what classes I should sign up for or anything like that.

Contemporary student veterans are a unique student population in that they do not come to school with the same expectations or circumstances as traditional students. Many of the participants of this study were transfer students (having completed previous course work at another university), started at a different time of the school year (i.e., summer term or winter term instead of the traditional fall term start), and were non-traditional in the sense that they were older than average and have numerous other responsibilities. All of these characteristics contributed to the participants getting lost as they navigated the world of higher education. Many did not have the opportunity to go through the traditional orientation programs at ACC or AU and/or were unfamiliar with the educational structure of ACC or AU. As a result, many participants possessed an insufficient knowledge base regarding available support services. These unique circumstances collectively contributed to the challenges many participants faced in the initial process of getting started in their institutions.

Transitioning out of micro-management. Numerous factors during the transition process have both positive and negative effects. As discussed previously, the military culture of discipline had positive effects on the transition into the role of student as it resulted in structure, concrete goals, adaptability, and confidence. At the same time, the military culture of discipline also presented challenges to all participants. Discipline in the military is most often prescribed by their officers in command (Burk, 1999) and takes the form of micro-management, where soldiers are told what to do, as well as given a daily routine. In the transition out of military life, the daily routine changes, as well as the chain of command. Alex elaborated on this major change by stating,

You know, in the military, you either do what you're told or you tell people to do what you want them to do, depending on the rank structure, so it's really cut-and-dry. Out here in the real world, it's not.

Once in the college environment, participants suddenly were in charge of their own daily routines. Alex went on to share that one of his greatest struggles after a 20-year career in the Air Force was choosing what to wear everyday. For 20 years, his daily uniform was laid out for him. As a civilian, he had to learn how to pick out clothing for himself for the first time in a long time. This is just one small example of the challenge of transitioning out of a culture of discipline and micro-management. These challenges then affected the transition into college life, where all of a sudden, participants were in charge of dictating what they did during their time in college and how they wanted to do it. Bert shared,

The only thing I had to worry about [in the military] was my mission. I come back here, I have to cook my own food, clean my own clothes, map out my homework, when I'm going to do it. It's hard to transition. Even though I was able to prioritize school before the deployment, after a year

of having only two things to focus on, and really just one for the most part, and then coming back to complete freedom and complete responsibility was difficult.

Not only was this lack of micro-management a challenge within the transition process because participants no longer had a chain of command to follow, but it was also difficult because they had to retrain their thinking process. What may appear as freedom from an extremely structured and controlled environment often was experienced as an overwhelming increase in responsibility and need for thought. As Stephanie shares,

So in the military, the officers, they kind of run the show, and we're just the cogs in the machine. And so it benefits you to not really be a free thinker in the military. You actually go less crazy if you just do what they say. . . . And then transitioning into being a student, it's totally the opposite. You are in charge of your performance. You're kind of the master of your domain, and it's hard when someone else has been the master of your domain for so long. . . . I think I did kind of need a couple of little jumpstarts and be like, "OK, you have to take initiative here. You're in charge now." It also took a while to become a habit again to be responsible for yourself and be accountable to yourself again.

As they transitioned into the role of students, many participants shared similar thoughts with Stephanie. It was difficult to become the "master of your domain" again. Both ACC and AU are institutions, as is the case in most or many higher education institutions, that expect the student to be independent and in charge of their own learning. This is in great contrast with their experience in the military. Participants were challenged to restructure their thought processes and to rely on themselves to establish a sense of direction and purpose in their new roles.

Environmental adjustment. As discussed above, participants of this study experienced challenges in the form of emotional adjustment. They had to overcome lingering emotions from military experiences, cope with the loss of primary support

systems, and adapt to a new way of thinking and learning. However, once in college, the transition process continued to present challenges as students adjusted to the physical environment associated with being on a college campus. After serving in the military, and with the majority of participants having been deployed into combat situations, adjusting to a new physical environment posed challenges. Participants struggled with (a) big crowds and associated memory triggers, and (b) interactions with other college students.

Crowds and memory triggers. A big component of transitioning into student life for many participants, was adjusting to the big crowds present on college campuses. This was an environmental adaptation that was challenging and uncomfortable for numerous participants. As Peter shared,

Social interaction within class, especially big classes can be difficult. Bigger crowds can be overwhelming and can cause me to be nervous and uncomfortable. Concentration can be affected as the mind wanders and thinks about other events and other things.

In Peter's case, the environmental adjustment to a large crowd in a confined classroom space was challenging as it had negative effects on his ability to concentrate in the classroom. For many participants, this challenge was extremely difficult to overcome. In his adjustment to his physical surroundings on AU's campus, Ben shared,

I remember several times I really felt uncomfortable being in a crowd. I did not want to be there. I just forced myself to. I just felt like those things where things I was going to have to do if I was going to adapt and live back here, again, you know? You know, nobody wants to live in fear of being uncomfortable all the time. So, if I was going to adapt, I needed to just force myself to be comfortable with those things.

Ben identified the need to be able to function in crowds again because he knew it was going to be part of his student experience. Ben's experience was shared by multiple participants. John shared that his training in the Navy was in security, reconnaissance, and human intelligence. Therefore, during his time in the military he was trained to enter a crowded space, assess who was friend or foe, and determine how to best handle a crisis in that environment. John brought that training directly to his student experiences. When in big crowds, he found himself going through the same assessment process. He felt the need to sit in the back of a classroom so he can see everyone in the room and know how best to act in a crisis. However, he shared that he recognized this as unnecessary and distracting thought to his college experience: "another one is being in a public place feeling edgy -- you got all these people crowding around you, you got guys that bump you in the back and it's just really hard to contain myself." John and many other participants still have to remind themselves that they are not in the military anymore and that they are surrounded by peers rather than enemies. In sharing his experiences in large crowds, Matt shared,

I didn't like things being behind me. And if I was in a room, like there was this one therapy room that had two doors, right. And so you would have people coming in both doors. It would drive me crazy, right because you're just constantly looking, looking and there's so much movement. You're on campus, even people coming in late to classes and things like that. And so I dealt with that continually.

Another challenge environmental adjustment that surfaced was memory triggers. Several participants shared instances where an experience on campus led to flashbacks or memories from times of combat or of their deployment. For many, these memory triggers were experienced in conjunction with adjusting to large crowds, where being

around others would make them anxious and tense. For others, classroom situations elicited flashbacks and resurgence of emotions. Bert shared an example,

On our first day actually, because it was chemistry, there was a practical experiment in the classroom. A hydrogen and oxygen mix . . . that created quite a loud boom and set me on edge that entire day, probably a couple of days, because I'd gone on missions. There was a lot of mortar attacks, so it just brought back a little bit of panic. I wanted to drop down and duck for cover. Literally panic. I'm breathing fast. My heart's beating. I've got my hands clenched on that desk.

Being in an environment that can trigger such a response made it difficult for some to remain focused in the classrooms. These responses were difficult to overcome as they were behaviors learned through repetition and conditioning during their time in the military. Participants shared that their concentration in class suffered, and their ability to gain information was compromised. The discomfort of being in large crowds contributed to additional challenges for some of the participants.

Connecting to other students in the college culture. Another challenge that was shared by a number of participants was the difficulty connecting with other students. This phenomenon was partially a result of the anxiety that many of the participants felt in crowds and around new people. As John shares,

It's a downfall though because my instinct will be "I don't like that guy." And he could be a great guy. I don't know that, but just from the instincts, it kind of taints how to see somebody. And it's wrong -- you shouldn't do that. Yeah, it's something we used for three years, and it's hard to beat out of it. So I tend to remind myself "I'm here at school -- relax."

In addition to the change in environment, John's statement exemplifies that there are thought processes and behaviors that had to be unlearned in order for veterans to function as students. However, part of the transition process into the college culture involved the

realization that functioning with individuals on a college campus significantly differs from interacting with individuals in the military. Many participants shared that they felt disconnected from other students because they felt other students did not understand their experiences in the military. When asked about the connection between his military experiences and experiences on campus, Peter shared,

I feel it also alienates you from other people because they don't have the understanding or experiences that you have. I don't really like talking about it. It makes me feel uncomfortable at times. What really makes me angry when people start to give their opinions about the war and most the time don't know what they are talking about or have it all wrong.

Many participants experienced a lack of understanding from other students, and participants felt other students would make uneducated assumptions and judgments about who the participants were as individuals and what they experienced in the military. Participants also felt frustrated with numerous accounts of intrusive and ignorant questions. Casey stated,

Relating to students is different. . . . Because a lot of people don't know much about the military, they'll ask questions that they don't think are very intrusive, sometimes. Last week actually, in math class the girl sitting next to us, she found out that I was in and she said, "Oh, did you have to kill anybody?" I was like, "Really?"

Casey then went on to share that he didn't reply to the girl's question because he felt it was insulting, as well as asking him to relive moments he would rather not share. Instead, he shared with the girl how she should not ask questions like that because they may make veterans feel angry and uncomfortable. Casey, and many other participants shared that connecting with other students in the college environment proved challenging as they felt misunderstood as individuals.

Another frustration shared by multiple participants was the stereotypes that were projected towards them associated with the military. Stephanie shared,

I think that sometimes it's a little bit hard because on college campuses . . . there's a lot of anti-war sentiment going around and a lot of kind of big, evil, "Military is bad, and they're over there in the Middle East doing all these terrible things." And so, that is hard to be around sometimes. . . . There's definitely preconceived notions about you if you've been in the military.

Stephanie went on to elaborate that this was hard because many times anti-war sentiments were shared along with anti-soldier sentiments. While many participants shared they did not fully agree with the wars, they did support their fellow soldiers and the hardships they are enduring to serve their country. Many participants felt personally insulted when other students shared anti-soldier opinions. These experiences lead to the participants feeling further disconnected from other students on campus and the college culture as a whole.

Participants expressed that they were unable to be themselves, as Ben stated, "Sometimes I think the veterans, they can't really voice their interests or their personalities because they feel like it's going to start this, they're just going to get stepped on and can't be themselves because it's too controversial."

It is important to note that not all relationships with other students resulted in negative experiences. Many participants shared that over time, they have come to make friends with many non-military students. However, all shared accounts of interactions with other students on campus that resulted in negative experiences due to a lack of understanding or assumptions made by peer students. These experiences limited the formation of relationships with other students, which lead to challenges with adjusting to

the environment of campus culture as they transitioned into college life. Many stated that it is easier to connect to fellow student veterans because of the shared understanding of the experiences they have had in the military.

Redefinition of identity. The final factor that posed a challenge for many participants during the transition from military life to college life was the process of redefining identity. During their time in the military, participants identified as a soldier, officer, or a commander. Once their service was completed, this part of their identity became less prominent as they were required to function under the role of a college student. Stephanie shared,

I felt like an outsider because not only was I not in the military anymore . . . but it was like losing identity. It was like losing a part of your identity. So coming here and being a student - and my husband, who is still in, he had his identity still, and I kind of had to redefine mine.

Stephanie illustrated the difficulty of coping with the loss of a predominant part of her identity established in the military. As she took on the new role as a student, her role in the military diminished and required her to work to redefine who she was and what she was doing.

When asked whether they felt they had transitioned fully into the role of a student, many participants shared that they felt they would never fully transition and identify with the role of a student. This is because many felt their past military experiences would always be a part of them, and because many recognized other important roles they took on in their lives following the military. For many of the participants, the transition into the new role of a student occurred simultaneously as they were also transitioning into other new roles. In order to make sense of their new and numerous roles, many

participants also recognized the need to “start over” in defining who they were not only as students, but as a whole individual. Ben shared, “It was like when I got down here [AU] I started a new life, and from then on, that’s all there is and those are the relationships I have. I didn’t really exist before I came here.”

In the process of redefining their identity as students, participants also had to recognize the existence of other roles they took on in their lives. When asked about the connection between the different roles in his life, Conan stated, “You know I am a soldier and I am a student and I am a husband. I’m all these things, and so whatever situation I’m in, I highlight the one that’s most relevant.” What Conan demonstrated is the coexistence of multiple identities in a veteran student’s life. As discussed previously, all of the participants of this study were non-traditional students to some extent. They came to school later in their lives, are older than average, many are married, and many have children or dependants. These other roles and identities, which often took priority over the student role, made the formation of an identity as a student challenging. The need to adjust to multiple roles and the process of incorporating the numerous roles in their new identity challenged the participants as they transitioned into college life. Bert shared,

I have a lot of responsibilities as a parent, a husband as well, that probably steer me that way. . . . I find it difficult, but probably more just because I’m still trying to balance family life, more than anything else.

Bert illustrated the importance of being able to balance the numerous new roles he was required to take on.

Other participants also shared their struggles in making sense of their multiple identities and responsibilities. Alex shared,

Other challenges are really just associated with, I think, me being older. You know, I have a family. I have kids. I have other responsibilities outside of school, and I commute. So all that just starts adding up to other things that I have to deal with, and that's just part of life.

This study identified that student veterans are often required to transition into numerous roles in addition to the role of a student simultaneously. The process of redefining their identity required them to balance their multiple roles in harmony and knowing when to prioritize one role over the other. Stephanie expressed her feelings regarding her coexisting identities and her student experiences in college,

I was aware that I was married now. And being in college before, you're kind of dating and single, and you're not really - that was kind of one of those other things that made me feel older than other people is that I had a spouse. So that, to me, was also kind of - just because before, you know, college - it was, like, I can remember being in college at that age and seeing people that were married, and I was, like, "Oh, they're so old. Whoa."

As the participants learned to manage many roles and identities, it is important to note that the non-traditional student status of the participants and their military experiences go hand-in-hand. For many, their military experience is what led them to be non-traditional students and therefore take on different roles than the traditional student.

Summary of factors that pose challenges. As discussed above, the transition out of military life, to civilian life, and to college life results in significant culture shock and presents a need to adjust and redefine relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles. For many participants, this change and redefining process of the transition from military life to college life proved to be challenging. Factors that posed challenges in the military to college transition process include: (a) emotional adjustment, (b) restructuring support systems, (c) finding resources, (d) environmental adjustments, and (e) redefining identity.

Summary

Throughout the interview process, participants shared a wide range of stories, opinions, and experiences relating to the process of transitioning from military life to college life. From the data collected, themes emerged addressing specific factors and experiences giving insight to the research questions. This enabled a detailed exploration of trends and the nature of the experiences contemporary student veterans deal with as they transition from military life to college life.

Findings pointed to the fact that past military experiences provided participating student veterans with a unique set of qualities and abilities that resulted in both advantages and challenges in their transition process into college. While the experiences of participants were different from one another, commonalities in successes, challenges, and emotions related the transition process were identified. The following chapter will provide a discussion of these results and the relationship to existing literature and the theoretical framework of this study. It will also address limitations and consider the implications for practice in college institutions and suggestions for future research.

Chapter Five: Summary and Discussion

The exploration of contemporary student veteran experiences transitioning from military life to college life revealed numerous complex and multifaceted contributing factors. The transition process for each participant involved factors that affected the transition process both in positive ways, as well as posed challenges. To assess the relevance of the findings related to the research questions, this final chapter will provide a brief review of the study, summarize the findings, and discuss the results within the context of the theoretical foundation of the research design, as well as outline the implications, limitations, and recommendations for future research.

Summary of Study

This study explores the nature of contemporary student veteran experiences during their transition from military life to college life. In addition, it identifies factors that positively affected the participants' transitions, as well as those that posed challenges. A qualitative approach was utilized in order to gain a broad and holistic understanding of the experiences veterans encounter during their transition phase. One-on-one interviews were conducted to collect narrative data that would aid to better understand the experiences, perceptions, and feelings of the participants as they transitioned into the role of a student. In order to find participants, purposeful sampling was performed with the help of academic advisors and faculty members at both ACC and AU who served as "gatekeepers" to this unique population at both institutions. Eleven participants were interviewed, each lasting 45-90 minutes. The collected narrative data was then transcribed and returned to the participants to be reviewed for accuracy. The

transcribed data was reviewed and analyzed to identify themes that emerged across participants.

Chapter four presented the findings in the form of identified themes in relation to the two secondary research questions. In response to the first question, aiming to identify the positive factors that affect participants' transitions from military life to college life, the following themes emerged: (a) taking time off, (b) support systems, (c) gaining new perspectives of college, and (d) utilizing skills gained in the military. In response to the second question, which was designed to identify the factors that lead to challenges during the transition process, the following themes emerged: (a) emotional adjustment, (b) redefining support systems, (c) finding resources, (d) transitioning out of micro-management, (e) environmental adjustment, and (f) redefining identity.

Discussion of the Results

The results of this study offer information that complements existing literature regarding this population. This study aimed to fill the existing gap in knowledge regarding the transitional experiences of contemporary student veterans. In order to strengthen the significance of the findings, to the results will be analyzed in the context of the theoretical framework of the research. This section will provide a brief overview of adult transition theory, discussed in detail in Chapter One. The results will then be analyzed and organized to demonstrate its relationship to each of the 4S's as outlined by Sargent and Schlossberg (1998) and draw parallels between theory and the data collected.

Defining transitions. Sargent and Schlossberg (1988) defined a transition as any event or non-event that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles.

Schlossberg believes transitions only exist when defined as such by the individual experiencing it. Transitions and changes can only occur when meaning and significance are associated with the experience (Evans et al., 1998). When an individual identifies a transition, it can exist as one of three types: (a) anticipated transitions, (b) unanticipated transitions, and (c) non-events. Anticipated transitions are expected events that predictably occur, while unanticipated transitions are unscheduled and unpredictable events. Non-events are anticipated events that never take place. All three types of transitions result in gains, losses, or alterations of roles (Goodman et al., 2006).

Participants of this study encountered various types of transitions as they finished their time in the military and either began or returned to college. Anticipated events were seen when participants knew when their enlistment in the military was scheduled to end, and they had made plans to begin school following the completion of their active duty. Unanticipated events were seen in participants when they experienced an unscheduled event, such as becoming injured during their time in the service and being honorably discharged. The injury was not predicted, and therefore the transition out of military life was not anticipated. Non-events were seen in participants that expected to reenlist in the military and were awaiting orders. However, when reenlistment did not occur, they were forced to explore alternative options. The decision to attend college could be a reaction to a non-event. While each participant experienced unique and individualized transitions from military life to student life, all participants experienced significant shifts in their relationships, routines, assumptions, and/or roles as a result of their unique transitions.

The 4S's. Working through a transition consists of a series of reactions to events and non-events over time, where individuals engage in the process of “moving in,” “moving through,” and “moving out” of the transition. When moving across the phases of a transition, individuals evaluate each transition, determine the positive or negative effects, and look for resources to help manage the change (DiRamio, et al., 2008). The amount of time spent in each one of these phases, or one’s ability to move from one phase to the next, is dependent on the resources available in the following categories: (a) situation, (b) self, (c) support, and (d) strategy (Sargent & Schlossberg, 1988). An individual’s ability to cope and the impact of the transition is directly correlated to the amount of resources an individual possesses in each one of these four categories (Evans et al., 1998). Furthermore, each area is impacted by the combination of assets and/or deficits individuals bring with them into a transition (Sargent & Schlossberg, 1988). As discussed in Chapter Four, participants of this study encountered many factors that positively affected their transition process, as well as many factors that posed challenges. Contemporary student veterans possess a unique set of resources due to their background and experiences in the military. These resources can serve as positive or challenging factors, and fall within the 4S’s of Sargent and Schlossberg’s (1988) adult transition theory.

Situation. *Situation* involves the individual identifying the type of transition he/she is working through, and includes determining whether the transition is positive or negative, and if it is anticipated or unanticipated (Sargent & Schlossberg, 1988). An individual’s *situation* can vary based on the trigger of the transition, the timing of the

transition, the elements of control one has over aspects of the transition, the extent of the change in one's role as a result of the transition, the duration of the transition, previous experiences, presence of concurrent stressors, and whether the situation is assessed as a positive or a negative by the individual (Goodman, Schlossberg, & Anderson, 2006). For the participants of this study, many possessed positive resources in the area of *situation* due to their unique perceptions resulting from their experiences from the military. Contemporary student veterans in this study expressed that these unique perspectives served as positive resources and were beneficial in the process of transitioning from the military to college life. One of the resources in the category of *situation* is one's ability to assess a situation and take responsibility for overcoming the task or challenge (Goodman et al., 2006). As participants assessed their transitional experiences into college life, they shared feeling a new sense of appreciation for life, as well as for their time in college. Due to their military experiences, they felt they had a better understanding of the importance and benefits of hard work as they worked to accomplish their goals. Participants also possessed positive resources in the area of *situation*, because they were able to perceive their time in college as benefitting their future and were able to rely on their sense of determination and accountability acquired in the military to motivate themselves as students. All participants viewed their transition into college and into the role of a student as beneficial and advantageous to their futures. This perspective, in combination with their disciplined work habits, enabled them to formulate concrete goals and take control of their own success and outcome in their roles as students. This outlook allowed participants to succeed in the completion of tasks

associated with the student role, and led to a successful and positive transition from the military to college life.

At the same time, numerous participants were presented with challenges related to the category of *situation* in the form of emotional and environmental changes that required adjustment. As many participants dealt with feelings of anger, frustration, discomfort, sadness, and alienation as a result of their military experiences, resources were lacking at times in the area of *situation* because participants were experiencing numerous challenges simultaneously that hindered quick adjustments as habits and reactions which they had acquired during their time in the military required significant amount of time to unlearn.

Transitions in one area can also stimulate other stresses and transitions (Goodman et al., 2006). For the participants, the emotional and environmental adjustments associated with the transition out of the military directly affected their transition into the role of a student. This stimulated other stressors as participants were challenged to overcome strong emotions, memory triggers, and disconnect due to the experiences, routines, and habits they had formed during their time in the military.

Self. Resources in the area of *self* are determined by a person's strengths and weaknesses, as well as previous experiences. Every individual has assets and deficits that have an effect on the transition process (Goodman et al., 2006). In addition to examining the situation at the time of the transition, what an individual brings to the transition is also important. Resources in the area of *self* are affected by personal and demographic characteristics, psychosocial resources, ego development, an individual's outlook on

optimism and self-efficacy, personal commitment and values, and spirituality and resiliency (Goodman et al., 2006). For the participants of this study, assets in the area of *self* were often found in the skills they gained from their previous military experiences. Due to their training in the military, participants utilized skills such as discipline, structure, accountability, and goal setting to effectively cope with the transition from military life to student life. These skills served as psychological resources in the area of *self* as they functioned as personality traits that enabled them to succeed during a time of crisis and change (Goodman et al., 2006). Participants were able to approach the transition process with confidence because their past military experiences had taught them to trust in their ability to adapt and overcome, as well as have confidence in the connection between hard work and positive outcomes. Participants possessed resilience, which allowed them to grow stronger in the face of adversity and bounce back from a challenging time of transition (Goodman et al., 2006).

However, deficits were also identified in the area of *self* as participants were challenged to redefine their identity as they left the role of a soldier and took on the role of a student. The participants' resilience was challenged, as many felt they had to "start over" in defining who they were as a civilian and as a student. They also had to recognize that the transition symbolized the beginning of a different stage in life and therefore required different values and roles (Goodman et al., 2006). For the participants, the most significant changes took the form of the numerous adjustments required as they took on multiple new roles in addition to the role of a student. Participants expressed the

challenges associated with having to redefine values, reform their identity, reset priorities, and balance the numerous roles.

Support. *Support* is determined by the interpersonal relationships one has that can either help or hinder a transition (Sargent & Schlossberg, 1988). *Support* can be a key resource in handling the stress of a transition or change. However, it can vary in size and shape and can be helpful or have negative influences (Goodman et al., 2006).

Participants expressed that they had positive support in the form of the support systems they established once they returned from the military. These support systems took the form of a spouse, immediate family, or close friends and were formed or restructured once out of the military out of necessity due to the loss of their former support system which they relied during their time of service. Participants expressed that these support systems then had a positive effect on their transition process into college. They valued having someone to confide in, seek advice from, and assist them with the completion of required tasks in the student role.

However, these support systems were not immediately available during the process of transitioning from military life, to civilian life, to student life. Upon their return from deployment and/or completing their time in the military, participants shared that the support system they knew during their service dispersed. In order to cope with the difficulties of war, many participants relied upon those with whom they served. Therefore, participants not only faced the emotional readjustment of the new reality of civilian life, but they also faced the culture shock of lacking their primary support system established during their time in the military. This posed challenges to the transition

process as participants experienced feelings of alienation and a need to restructure and redefine their interpersonal support systems after returning from the military and beginning school.

Strategy. *Strategy* includes having a plan of action to maximize personal strengths and skills necessary to effectively cope with a transition (Sargent & Schlossberg, 1988). Coping refers to the efforts made to deal with the life strains encountered during the transition process (Goodman et al., 2006). Participants of this study implemented techniques to positively manage and cope with the transition from military to college life. However, some coping strategies and behaviors presented challenges during the process. The main coping technique used by participants was taking time off between the completion of their time in the military before starting school. This period was utilized to become reacquainted with family, friends, and civilian life. The participants shared a number of positive effects of having time off in their transitions from military life, to civilian life, and to student life. This included the ability to process the experiences they had in the military, time to decompress, time to get over lingering issues of sleep deprivation, memory triggers, and establish a relationship with friends and family. Taking time off benefited many participants, because it helped to modify the situational context of the transition by allowing important adjustments to take place prior to jumping into the transition into college. Several participants identified the challenges affiliated with the transition, and made the decision to process their experiences and allow time to readjust to new environments and circumstances. (Goodman et al., 2006).

As was true in the previous areas of transition theory, participants faced challenges in the area of *strategy* as well. The concept of discipline was mentioned as a positive factor in the transition process previously. At the same time, with the transition out of the military, the participants' daily routines changed dramatically as the chain of command, which dictated their actions in the military, no longer applied. As participants attempted to cope with the changes associated with transitioning into college life, they had to unlearn the micro-managed nature of the military and learn how to be in charge of their own actions, as well as taking initiative in their plans and decision-making processes. This change was necessary in order to cope and adapt to the changes associated with transitioning from military to college life. This process was extremely challenging for many of the participants because it required them to restructure their coping techniques which relied heavily on micro-management and prescribed reactions and behaviors.

While the results presented above are presented very concretely, not all experiences fit within the confines of the 4S's as described in adult transition theory. Many participants experienced overlapping effects of their resources across the areas of situation, self, support, and strategy. For example, many of the participants were married and identified the presence of a spouse or a family as a positive resource in the process of establishing a new support system to replace the support system of fellow soldiers. This resource may appear to belong to the category of *support*, but the effect of having a spouse or a family serves as a positive resource in the other categories as well. One of the common findings among the participants was the challenges associated with the need

to redefine their identity after leaving the military. We found that the presence of a spouse or a family often served as a positive resource in the process of redefining their identity. Family members served as a constant that provided a foundation on which to build as soldiers incorporated new roles and responsibilities into their new identity.

As an additional example, in the area of *self*, many participants identified their confidence in their ability to “adapt and overcome” as a positive resource. At the same time, this idea/thought process provided equally positive resources in the area of *situation* as participants demonstrated the ability to view the challenges associated with transitioning from military life to college life as manageable tasks. Because of their confidence in their ability to adapt and overcome, participants stated that they were less likely to make excuses when posed with a challenge in school. Because of the idea of “adapt and overcome” instilled in military culture, participants used their energy and efforts to seek solutions instead of identifying the deficits. As a result, they viewed the challenge as a task that they were accountable for, and they were able to take responsibility for their own successes.

As illustrated here, it is important to acknowledge the complex nature of the transition process of contemporary student veterans. While adult transition theory helps to analyze transitional experiences, the factors affecting transitions from military life to college life need to be viewed holistically due to the fluid and overlapping nature of their effects on the transition process.

Summary of Findings

An exploration of the perspectives of contemporary student veterans on the transition from military to college life revealed connections between past military experiences and the transition process. Due to their time in the military, participants of this study brought with them many unique experiences, perspectives, skills, and challenges that directly affected the transition into college life and the roles they took on as students. These unique characteristics resulted in positive effects, while others presented challenges. With the intent to gain better understanding of the nature of contemporary student veteran experiences as they transition from military to college life, the study revealed that (a) taking time off, (b) support systems, (c) gaining new perspectives of college, and (d) utilizing skills gained in the military all had a positive effect on the transition process. In contrast, (a) emotional adjustment, (b) redefining support systems, (c) finding resources, (d) transitioning out of micro-management, (e) environmental adjustment, and (f) redefining identity posed challenges during the transition process respectively.

These beneficial and challenging factors reflected the available resources participants possessed within the 4S's of Sargent and Schlosberg's (1988) adult transition theory. The 4S's consist of situation, self, support, and strategy. While some resources were strongly developed in certain areas, other areas posed challenges due to the unique traits resulting from past military experiences. These findings help to further understand the contemporary student veteran population and their resources and commonly faced challenges as they transition from military to college life. The results also offer a

foundation of knowledge to promote positive change and improvement to existing policies, programs, and procedures implemented on college campuses to support this growing student population. These will be explored further in the subsequent sections.

Unanticipated Findings

Although this research sought to gain information and understanding of contemporary student veteran transitions by exploring the positive factors as well as challenges they experience, another set of information emerged during the analysis of the data. Many participants expressed, in hindsight, what they wished they had had to make their transitions more positive as they entered college. These discussions took the form of participants making suggestions to higher education institutions that may promote better understanding of the specific needs of this student population, and how higher education institutions can better serve them. While the research questions were not designed to seek this data, the open-ended nature of the interviews encouraged the participants to share their thoughts, and resulted in this unanticipated but important finding that addresses the need for improvement on current college campuses. This information also serves as a basis for improving current practice at institutions who aim to provide resources and support for this unique student population. The following section outlines these unanticipated findings.

The need for visible veteran resources. One of the challenges faced by participants as they transitioned into the college setting was the lack of resources regarding how to get started in their college careers. This information gap included knowing with whom they should speak, where to obtain information, and how to be

accountable for their college careers. As a result, participants expressed they would value clear and visible resources for students. One participant, Brice, who was able to access helpful resources on campus through the Veteran Affairs Office at ACC shared,

The Veterans' Affairs Office [at ACC] they've been a big help. And not that they've ever given me anything that they wouldn't give any other veteran, but just that they've been a big help. Specifically, it's – for me, it was help with the G.I. Bill and just how to get that started and what paperwork I needed to fill out.

Brice expressed how helpful it was to have someone or somewhere on campus that he knew would help him understand the process of getting started with college. Brice went to the Veterans' Affairs Office because he felt it would be a good place to start, and demonstrated how contemporary student veterans are willing to look for available resources. Therefore, it is essential for college campuses to have a Veterans' Affairs Office as well as veteran staff members or peers available to serve the student veteran population during their transition into and time at college. Conan shared,

If you are going to try and attempt these kinda things, one, you would have to have someone working in that office who was, themselves, a veteran. If you wanted to talk to people about veterans services, you should have a veteran of their war who can come and talk to them about it.

Conan emphasized the importance of having faculty and staff on hand that are veterans of the same war so they may share experiences and be able to relate to the contemporary student veteran population. This suggestion reflects the challenges many participants faced in connecting with non-veteran students and their hesitance to interact with them due to a number of negative experiences associated with misunderstanding and stereotyping. Ben elaborated on the benefit of this resource by stating,

I think another person that they know is a veteran would probably be more beneficial to talk to, whether they have credentials or a degree or not. It would help them get through issues more than even just going to a paid counselor. Not because the paid counselor doesn't have skills or anything, just because that veteran is going to be more comfortable talking with another veteran.

Being comfortable seeking resources was a common theme among participants.

With their unique set of experiences, it is helpful to seek information and resources from someone who can immediately understand their perspectives and what the challenges they are facing. Especially in the initial process of getting started in college, participants expressed the great benefit of having specific veteran affairs services, as well as personnel who are veterans of the same war to encourage the accessing of helpful resources, as well as slowly adjusting to new interactions and relationship formation in the college setting.

Student organizations and peer mentorship programs. Participants identified another benefit of connecting with other student veterans. As participants transitioned from military to college life, they faced challenges with leaving the culture and support system of the military and adjusting to the new role of student. According to the participants, connecting to fellow veterans who can share experiences, as well as provide guidance in the transition process, could support and assist student veterans during their time of change. Peter shared why it is easier for veterans to connect to other veterans,

Mainly because of experiences, you fought with them and went through the same things. You tend to put a lot of stock into those things, they seem a lot more like yourself with morals, the way you think, and experiences that they have endured.

Brice supported Peter's opinion by stating,

It is easy to connect with other veterans. One of the things I miss the most is the camaraderie. You establish good friendships and they're established easily and quickly because you're with people who you need to count on to protect your life. They are good relationships and that's instilled in every military member. Therefore, when you come into contact with each other in civilian life, it's very easy to establish rapport.

This sense of camaraderie and rapport among fellow veterans can benefit veterans working through numerous changes in the transition process from military to college life. Fellow veterans can serve as strong support systems as well as mentors during times of change. As a result, participants expressed that having a strong student veterans organization on college campuses could be a beneficial resource for many student veterans in getting started at college. Peter shared,

I think an active veterans organization in the college would make a difference. I think it would have helped me when I first got back and a lot of other veterans as they may feel lost or overwhelmed. If I had an organization with veterans that I could have talked to and had gotten advice, it would have been a big help.

Peter demonstrates how a student veteran organization would have provided a strong support system for him as he entered college. Part of this support would be putting student veterans in contact with other student veterans who have lived through the process of transitioning from military life to college life. Being able to learn from and feel supported by someone who has already lived through the process would be beneficial. Conan reiterates the importance of this type of support system by stating,

You need a student who could come and say, "Guys, I know it's tough. I know I came here four years ago, five years ago. Here are some of the problems that I had. If you're having these same problems, do realize it's normal. And if you need help, I'm here."

Not only does this type of support system provide guidance from those who have experienced a similar transition, but it eliminates the stress felt by many of the participants who felt that their familiar support system was stripped from them when they left the military. Although in a college setting, fellow veterans may be able to provide the type of trust and support to which many military personnel are accustomed.

Implications for Practice and Recommendations for Future Research

This study explored the transitional experiences of the contemporary student veteran population; a student population that is quickly expanding, but with limited current literature and research. This study intended to gain a broad and holistic understanding regarding the transitional experiences of contemporary student veterans as they move from military to college life. Given the anticipated and unanticipated results discussed above, this study provides valuable information regarding the student veterans of this study which higher education institutions may utilize in their efforts to improve the quality of services and resources provided for this student population. First, having a general understanding of the population's common transitional experiences and challenges can contribute to the revision and improvement of the services, policies, and support systems that higher education institutions offer. In addition, knowing the factors that positively affect the transition process as well as those which present challenges can allow institutions to anticipate this populations' strengths as well as areas in need of support. With the use of this knowledge, institutions may be able to formulate support systems that take advantage of this population's cultural strengths, as well as provide resources to help them cope with their commonly faced challenges. In addition, the

findings of this study point to numerous recommendations for future research. This study identified numerous themes regarding challenges and positive factors affecting the transition process for student veterans. Many of the recommendations point to further exploration of the specific factors identified in this study.

This study revealed the multifaceted nature of the transition process of contemporary student veterans. In the process, factors that positively affected the transition process from military to college life, as well as those factors that presented challenges were identified. It would be beneficial to gain a deeper understanding of the challenges and needs associated with each phase of transition, including the process of (a) transitioning out of the military, (b) transitioning back into civilian life, and then (c) transitioning into student life. Each stage of the transition from military life to college life has unique and distinct experiences and challenges, which require further exploration and analysis. Additional research in these specific stages of transition would greatly contribute to the field of knowledge regarding contemporary student veteran transitions, and further higher education's understanding of this growing student population.

In addition to exploring the series of transitions mentioned above, it is important to understand the type of support the military provides for individuals leaving the service and planning to attend college. Having an understanding of how the military facilitates this transition, and what type of support systems are in place may provide greater insight into the nature of the challenges faced by student veterans of today. Due to the multifaceted nature of this transition process, there is a likelihood that there are areas in

need of improvement both on the resources provided by college institutions, as well as resources and support services provided by the military.

Finally, the unanticipated suggestions from the participants regarding desired population-specific support systems and resources may serve as a foundation for institutions to reassess existing resources and to identify areas in need of improvement. It is important for each college institution working with student veterans to assess existing support services and resources through institution-specific research in order to maximize the efficacy of their services for student veterans, as well as formulate new organizations and resources according to the challenges experienced by student veterans at the specific institution. As participants suggested, support systems should take the form of veterans' affairs offices, college personnel hired to work with student veterans who are veterans themselves, as well as the formation of student veteran organizations to provide opportunities for the student veteran population to connect with one another and support each other in the transition process.

On the institution's part, this may require making available resources "more visible" as suggested by a number of the participants. In order to meet the needs of veteran students who often begin their college careers at non-traditional times of the year (not fall term), perhaps a smaller-scale orientation program can be established and implemented through the veterans' affairs office throughout the school year. These orientations could help incoming contemporary student veterans get started in their college journeys by providing them veteran-specific information, such as applying for and receiving G.I. Bill benefits, registering for classes, where to access resources such as

mental health services or disability access services, and how to connect with other veterans on campus. Providing veteran specific orientations as a form of “visible resources” could help eliminate frustrations or a lack of knowledge regarding access for contemporary student veterans as they transition from military to college life.

The next steps for exploring veteran-specific resources and their effectiveness on college campuses in aiding student veterans transition from military life to college life involve exploring the following questions:

- What types of transitional resources are provided by the military to veterans who are preparing to transition out of military and into college life? Do student veterans perceive these resources to be effective? How can college campuses supplement these resources?
- What resources are available to student veterans as they enter college? How frequently are these services utilized? Are they easily accessible/visible?
- Are faculty and staff working with student veterans well versed in the transitional experiences from military life to college life?
- What types of training programs are in place to educate faculty and staff on commonly experienced challenges of student veterans?
- What types of student organization and/or peer mentorship programs are present on college campuses to aid in connecting student veterans with one another?

Limitations

The research design of this study was greatly limited by the time constraints of a Master's program thesis. Given the timeline of a year to propose, conduct, analyze, and present research findings lead to limitations, particularly in the process of recruiting and identifying participants for the study.

As a result, participants were chosen on a first come first serve basis as they responded to the recruitment letters. Given more time and resources, random sampling from numerous institutions may have enabled the collection of data with greater variety of experiences and perspectives to be analyzed. In addition, a greater number of interviews with these participants and others would improve the strength of the findings as themes are identified in a larger sample of participants. As a result of the purposeful sampling method utilized, the findings of this study may not be truly representative of all contemporary student veterans at ACC and/or AU, or nationally.

Another limitation due to time constraints was the lack of a follow-up focus group to discuss results and findings. Having a focus group following the analysis and identification of themes would have enabled the participants to state whether the findings reflect their experiences, as well as have in-depth discussions regarding the meaning and experiences of participants related to the identified themes. However, this study did utilize member checking where the transcribed interviews were returned to participants to review and check for accurate representation of their answers. This allowed the participants to review their disclosed information, check for accurate representation of their thoughts, as well as the opportunity to clarify any points from the interviews.

Another limitation of this study was the decision to collect data from two separate college campuses (ACC and AU). While this allowed understanding of commonalities between contemporary student veteran experiences across the two campuses, this prevented the detailed exploration of the nature of the transitional experiences, including challenges and available resources specific to each institution. The collected data would provide greater specificity, and may have served a greater role to assess the quality of services and resources provided at each institution. In addition, expanding the study across more college campuses could have enabled analysis of results in the context of different institutional styles. This option was considered when developing the research design. However, this extensive study would have exceeded the time and resources allotted for the Master's thesis writing process.

In addition to the sampling methods, the interview strategy for this specific study presented limitations as well. In an attempt to gain a broad and holistic understanding of the transitional experiences of the participants, the interviews were conducted with the emphasis on a very open format. This decision was made with the intent of allowing the participants to verbalize and share their experiences without the confines of the interviewer's intent. As a result, the data returned a very broad range of stories and experiences regarding their transition process, which allowed the researcher to analyze and study the transition experiences of contemporary student veterans in a holistic manner. On the other hand, this approach limited the researcher's ability to seek information regarding specific aspects of the transition process.

Concluding Thoughts

It is the hope of this study to offer insight into the contemporary student veteran population and their experiences transitioning from military life to college life, encourage continuing research, and prompt higher education institutions to both assess their available resources and understand how to better serve and support this student population. This research aimed to explore the nature of this growing student population and bring light to the unique perspectives and experiences they bring to college campuses. In addition, understanding how these perspectives and experiences influence their transitions from military life to college can influence the actions, services, policies, and support systems higher education institutions offer to help foster positive transitions and college experiences for contemporary student veterans on college campuses.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: Recruitment Materials

The recruitment material for this study includes a series of emails. The first email will be sent to personnel at AU and ACC who work directly with student veterans requesting they forward the email to any student veteran who meets the participant criteria and may be interested in participating in this study. The second email includes the standardized email that the personnel are requested to forward, and information for participants and directly requests student participation.

First Email

To:

Subject: Requesting your help

Dear [insert name],

My name is Kate Normandin and I am a graduate student at Oregon State University. I am currently recruiting participants for my research study (my thesis) looking at contemporary student veteran experiences on college campuses. I am hoping you can forward an email about my study to any student veterans whom you may work with and think may be interested in participating in my study. To meet the requirements of this study, student veterans must be currently enrolled as students and have recently served in combat military positions post September 11, 2001. I have attached an email including all information interested students will need.

Thank you very much for your time and assistance. Please contact me with any further questions you may have regarding my research.

Sincerely,

Kate Normandin
OSU Graduate Student
College Student Services Administration
Kathleen.Normandin@oregonstate.edu
(541) 737-5770

Second Email: Participate in Student Veteran Research

To:

Subject: Participate in Student Veteran Research

Dear Student,

My name is Kate Normandin and I am a graduate student at Oregon State University. As part of my Masters degree program, I am beginning a research study (my thesis) looking at contemporary student veteran experiences on college campuses. This email has been forwarded to you because you are a contemporary student veteran who recently has served in a combat military position post September 11, 2001, and I would like to invite you to participate in my study.

The project would involve you participating in a one-on-one interview during the first few weeks of the Fall 2009 quarter to reflect upon your experiences as a college student and discuss your transitions from combat to college. Following the interview you will be asked to complete a brief demographic survey. Participation in this study will not exceed 5 hours in total.

If you think you may be interested in participating in my study, please contact me directly and we will schedule an interview at a time and location of your choice. Thank you for your time!

Sincerely,

Kate Normandin
OSU Graduate Student
College Student Services Administration
Kathleen.Normandin@oregonstate.edu
(541) 737-5770

APPENDIX B: Informed Consent Form


**ADULT EDUCATION AND HIGHER EDUCATION
LEADERSHIP**

Oregon State University, 402 Education Hall, Corvallis, Oregon 97331
Tel 541-737-4661 | Fax 541-737-8971 | soewebite@lists.orst.edu/

INFORMED CONSENT DOCUMENT

Project Title: Student Veteran Experiences in Higher Education
Principal Investigator: Tom Scheuermann, Adult Higher Education Faculty
Co-Investigator(s): Kathleen Normandin, Graduate Student in College Student Services Administration

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY?

You are being invited to take part in a research study designed to investigate the experiences of contemporary student veterans in higher education settings, and will explore your understanding and perceptions of your transitions and roles as a college student. The results of this study will be used to write a Master thesis in partial completion of a Masters of Science degree in College Student Services Administration at Oregon State University.

We are studying this because we want to better understand the expectations and experiences of contemporary student veterans. Specifically, we wish to gain information about student veteran transitions into and throughout college. This is becoming increasingly important as educators work to develop programs and services to aid student veteran in positive transitions and experiences on college campuses.

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THIS FORM?

This consent form gives you the information you will need to help you decide whether to be in the study or not. Please read the form carefully. You may ask any questions about the research, the possible risks and benefits, your rights as a volunteer, and anything else that is not clear. When all of your questions have been answered, you can decide if you want to be in this study or not.

WHY AM I BEING INVITED TO TAKE PART IN THIS STUDY?

You are being invited to take part in this study because you have indicated that you are a contemporary student veteran having served in combat post September 11, 2001, and are currently enrolled as a full time student at either [REDACTED] or

██████████ in the Fall 2009 quarter. Furthermore, that you are eighteen years of age or older and are willing to share of your personal experiences and perceptions as a student veteran and as a college student.

WHAT WILL HAPPEN DURING THIS STUDY AND HOW LONG WILL IT TAKE?

This study asks that you participate in a one-on-one interview with the researcher to discuss your experiences as a college student and as a student veteran. After the interview you will be asked to fill out a short demographic survey that should take no more than 10-minutes. Following the interview process, you may be invited to attend a focus group with the other participants of this study. The researcher will present general findings and you will be given the opportunity to provide feedback and additional information and discoveries.

If you agree to take part in this study, your estimated time commitment is no more than 4.0 hours over the course of the Fall 2009 quarter. No more than 2.0 hours for the first one-on-one interview and no more than 2.0 hours for the focus group (preparation time for each of these events are included in the approximated times). The one-on-one interview will be scheduled sometime during the first half of the Fall 2009 quarter and the focus group between week three and week 10 of the Fall 2009 quarter.

WHAT ARE THE RISKS OF THIS STUDY?

There are minimal risks involved in this study. The possible risks and/or discomforts associated with the procedures described in this study include possible discomfort or emotional distress in identifying, exploring, and describing experiences and/or concepts of self and discussing military and/or transition experiences that were negative or distressing. You will be able to decline to answer any question and strong effort will be made to avoid deeply personal topics.

WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF THIS STUDY?

We do not know if you will benefit from being in this study. However, we hope that, in the future, other people might benefit from this study because we will better understand the impact of military combat experiences on students' college experiences. Furthermore, we hope that you will enjoy the opportunity to speak about and reflect upon your college experience and find it helpful in understanding your individual roles and transitions.

WILL I BE PAID FOR PARTICIPATING?

You will not be paid for being in this research study. However, refreshments will be provided during the one-on-one interview sessions and during the focus group held sometime between weeks three and five of the Fall 2009 quarter.

WHO WILL SEE THE INFORMATION I GIVE?

The information you provide during this research study will be kept confidential to the extent permitted by law. Information that you provided will be shared with other participants during the focus group. The researcher can and will advise all participants to maintain confidentiality about information shared, but this cannot be guaranteed. To help protect your confidentiality, we will store all collected information in a confidential and locked location. Upon completion of the research study or after a period of no more than three years from the completion of this study, all collected data will be deleted electronically and paper materials destroyed. You will be assigned an identification code that will be used on all data forms in order to secure your privacy. If the results of this project are published, your identity will not be made public.

AUDIO RECORDING

One aspect of this study involves making an audio recording of your one-on-one interview as well as the focus group. These recordings will be transcribed by a professional, confidential transcription service. This will allow the researcher to revisit, review, and analyze information discussed during the course of the interview. Only the researcher and the transcription service will have access to the recording and transcriptions. Furthermore, all recordings will be destroyed upon completion of the research study or after a period of no more than five years from the completion of this study.

Audio recording is optional for this study. If you choose not to be recorded, the researcher will take notes. All while collecting information from you (either via recording and/or note taking) no identifying information about you will be used. You will only be referenced during this study through your assigned personal identification code.

____ I agree to be audio recorded (Please initial)

____ I opt not to be audio recorded (Please initial)

DO I HAVE A CHOICE TO BE IN THE STUDY?

If you decide to take part in the study, it should be because you really want to volunteer. You will not lose any benefits or rights you would normally have if you choose not to volunteer. You can stop at any time during the study and still keep the benefits and rights you had before volunteering. If you decide not to take part in this study, your decision will have no effect on the quality of care and services you receive.

You will not be treated differently if you decide to stop taking part in the study. You may elect to pass or decline to answer any question posed during the interview or focus group. If you choose to withdraw from this project before it ends, the researchers may keep information collected about you and this information may be included in study reports in a manner that doesn't personally identify you.

WHAT IF I HAVE QUESTIONS?

If you have any questions about this research project, please contact: Tom Scheuermann at (541) 737-5622 or tom.scheuermann@oregonstate.edu or Kathleen Normandin at (541) 737-5770 or kathleen.normandin@oregonstate.edu.

If you have questions about your rights as a participant, please contact the Oregon State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) Human Protections Administrator, at (541) 737-4933 or by email at IRB@oregonstate.edu.

Your signature indicates that this research study has been explained to you, that your questions have been answered, and that you agree to take part in this study. You will receive a copy of this form.

Participant's Name (printed):

(Signature of Participant)

(Date)

APPENDIX C: Interview Script

Project: Contemporary Student Veteran Experiences in Higher Education

Time of Interview:

Date:

Location:

Interviewer: Kate Normandin

Interviewee: Participant _____

Pseudo-name:

[Describe the project and tell interviewee about the purpose of the study, individuals, and sources of data being collected, what will be done with the data to protect the confidentiality of the interview, and how long the interview will take.]

[Have the interviewee read and sign the consent form.]

[Begin recording, turn on the tape recorder.]

Part One: What is the nature of contemporary student veteran experiences on college campuses as they transition from combat to college?

1. Tell me about your current college experiences.
 - a. Why did you decide to attend college?
 - b. Why did you decide to come to this institution?
 - c. How do you describe your experience at this institution?
 - d. Do you feel your military experiences have shaped your experiences as a college student? How so?
 - e. Do you feel your military experiences have prepared you for college? How so?
2. Tell me about your adjustments in coming to college.
 - a. What challenges do you face as you transition into being a college student?
 - b. As you transition into college life, do you feel you have had support? Why or why not?

Part Two: How do these experiences impact student veteran perceptions of marginality and/or mattering?

3. Tell me more about your transition from military life to college life.
 - a. Do you feel your military experience allows you to perceive college differently than other students? Why or why not?
 - b. How do faculty, staff, and/or students respond to your military experiences?
 - c. Do you know any other student veterans on campus? Do you connect with them?
 - d. Have there been any campus support services you have taken advantage of? Which services have been most useful to you?
 - e. What have you done/what do you feel you need to make your transition into college life positive?
4. Tell me about you being a student on campus
 - a. Do you feel you have adjusted fully to the role of being a student versus being a soldier? Why or why not?
 - b. Do you feel that you belong as part of the campus community? Why or why not?
 - c. At any point in time have you felt that you didn't belong on campus? If so, why do you think that is?
 - d. What does/would make you feel part of the campus community? Would these things help you transition more positively into your role as a college student?
5. Is there anything else about your experiences I have not asked that you wish to share?
6. Do you have any questions for me?

[End recording and turn off tape recorder.]

[Request for the participant to complete the brief demographic survey.]

[Thank the participant for their cooperation and participation in this interview. Assure them of the confidentiality of their responses. Discuss availability of meeting times for the focus groups and how and when they will be contacted in the future.]

APPENDIX D: Demographic Survey

Please answer the following questions to the best of your ability. As you complete this survey, please feel free to ask any questions you may have. Thank you!

Part One: Background demographics

Age:

Gender:

Race/Ethnicity:

Socio-Economic Status/Class:

Religious affiliation:

Marital/Partner Status:

Are you a parent?

How many dependants to you have?

Where are you from?

Part Two: Military service demographics

When did you serve?

What is your current military status?

Where were you stationed? Where were to deployed to? When?

How many tours?

How long where you there?

What was your position/role during your service?

Where you injured? If so, how?

Part Three: College student demographics

What is your academic standing (i.e., year in school)?

Are you a full-time or part-time student?

What is your major?

Is this your first time at college?

If you are returning to college, where are you returning from?

Do you live on campus?