Assimilation of Women Student Veterans: Perceived Interactions with Race, Ethnicity, and Gender Expression

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Dedications

This study is dedicated to the twelve participants who willingly and transparently shared their stories of service, sacrifice, and success with me. Without their participation, I could not have completed this project. My highest priority was to take care of their stories and to amplify their voices. Thank you to Emma, Sloane, Hannah, Meg, Addie, Charlotte, Zoe, Allison, Evelyn, Josie, August, and Quinn.

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Table of Contents

Abstract

This phenomenological case study aimed to explore the transition of women student veterans from the military to higher education. As of 2021, women represented nearly 20% of the United States military; as of 2020, women veterans represent about 27% of veterans pursuing degrees on our campuses (Gorbulja-Maldonado, 2021). This study aimed to gain a deeper understanding of how a group of women student veterans describes their transition into higher education and how the hyper-masculine culture of the United States military informed their perceptions of their race, ethnicity, and gender expression.

The individual transitions of twelve women student veterans were discussed and analyzed using individual interviews. The theoretical foundation for analyzing the interview data was Schlossberg's Theory of Transitions, Diamond's Military Adaptive Transition Theory, and Culver's Gender Identity Development of Women in the Military Theory. Additionally, this study relies on Intersectionality as a lens to best understand the transition of women student veterans. Intersectionality provides a framework for educators to see students as complex individuals with intersecting identities from which they operate in and out of academic spaces.

Two main research questions guided this study: 1) How does the culture of the United States military inform a Woman Student Veteran (WSV)'s transition into American higher education? and 2) How is the identity development of a WSV impacted by their perceived interactions with race, ethnicity, and gender expression? Six main themes were found within the data set, along with relevant subthemes. For the first research question, three main themes emerged relating to the academic habits of the participants: a) Strong Academically, b) Adaptability, and c) Veteran Status (Hesitant vs Not

Hesitant). For the second question, three main themes emerged relating to their perceptions of their relationship with their femininity and race. Those themes are a) Renegotiating a Sense of Service to Self, b) Relationship with Femininity, and c) Campus Engagement.

The findings of this study provide higher education administrators, staff, and faculty with an in-depth understanding of how the hypermasculine culture of the United States military informs how women student veterans transition to academic spaces. This study adds to the growing body of literature around women students, women student veterans, and the use of the intersectional lens of student support.

Keywords: women, student veteran, intersectionality, transition

List of Tables

List of Figures

Chapter One: Introduction

Overview

This phenomenological case study examined the experiences of Women Student Veterans during their time in college. Through in-depth interviews, Women Student Veterans (WSV) were asked to describe their assimilation process from the military to higher education. This chapter provides background on the history of women in the military and women veterans in higher education. The significance of this study is also identified through a theoretical, empirical, and practical lens. Finally, this chapter will introduce the primary and secondary research questions that guided the data collection. This section outlines the necessary background information for this study. It provides a brief history of women's service in the United States military and a survey of WSV in Higher education in the United States. Finally, this chapter will introduce the concept of intersectionality as it relates to the women student veteran population.

History of Women in the Military

The number of women veterans in the United States (US) military is rapidly expanding; today, women represent almost 20% of the active-duty armed forces, Reserve and National Guard, and 10% of the total veteran population. It is estimated that in twenty years, women will make up around 16% of all living veterans (Gorbulja-Maldonado, 2021). In 2015, 1st Lt. Shaye Haver and Capt. Kristen Griest earned their Ranger tabs, becoming the first two women to complete the U.S. Army's Ranger School at Fort Benning, Georgia, and Defense Secretary Ash Carter reaffirmed Defense Secretary Leon Panetta's commitment and permitted all women to apply for combat positions beginning January 1, 2016. This shift allowed women to fill 220,000 military combat positions (Silva, 2017). The presence of women in the military has been relied upon since our nation's inception, yet only in the last ten years have women been able to reach milestones only laid out for male service members.

Women Student Veterans in Higher Education

Data collected by student affairs and government officials shows how many veterans enroll in higher education institutions after completing their military service. Since 2009, the Post-9/11 GI Bill has provided student veterans and their dependents with educational benefits (Radford et al., 2024). A recent United States Census Bureau report shows that more than half (54%) of the 2.7 million eligible veterans had taken advantage of the military education benefits by 2020 (Radford et al., 2024). A 2020 report stated that nearly 900,000 students were enrolled in institutions using their education benefits around the US (Johnson et al., 2020). While the body of research and data is still growing around women veterans, women veterans represent about 27% of veterans pursuing degrees on our campuses (Gorbulja-Maldonado, 2021). This report also states more women used their benefits and completed their degrees at higher rates than their male colleagues. This financial aid data shows that women veterans are enrolling in higher education institutions at increasing rates, either while they are active service members or after transitioning out of the military.

Intersectionality

Dill and Zambrana (2009) defined Intersectionality as "an innovative and emerging field of study that provides a critical analytic lens to interrogate racial, ethnic, class, physical ability, age, sexuality, and gender disparities and to contest existing ways of looking at these structures of inequality" (p. vii). Intersectionality gives researchers and practitioners a lens through which to view student populations like women veterans.

Another modern trend in the study of intersectionality and its relationship with identity theory is the use of Critical Race Theory (CRT), Latino critical theory (LatCrit), and queer theory. Research continues to emerge around societal structures and dynamics that produce and perpetuate

marginalization and oppression (e.g., racism, heterosexism, ableism). The Multiple Dimensions of Identity (MMDI) model within the framework of Intersectionality states that the more integrated an identity is to an individual, the more salient it will be to that person's core self. MMDI is another model to consider how social structures, like the military, inform an individual's experience with intersecting social identities.

Problem Statement

Previous research has focused on veterans' assimilations from the military into higher education (Diamond et al., 2012). In-depth research on women veterans and their assimilation into higher education has been produced recently (Gorbulja-Maldonado et al., 2021; Torres & Renn, 2009). Research focusing on intersectionality and identity development of college students has also been published (Dill and Zambrana, 2009; Torres et al., 2009). A gap in research emerges when these topics are presented together. This study investigated how WSV's assimilation from the military to higher education is impacted by their perceived interactions with their race, ethnicity, and gender expression. Other studies have investigated how women develop their gender identity in the military (Machtan, 2019) and how WSV perceives campus student services (Atkinson, 2019); this study is unique in its examination of intersectionality and the experience of WSV. This study aimed to gain insight into the phenomena of assimilation within the women student veteran population in higher education.

Purpose Statement

The primary purpose of this study was to explore and dissect how a group of WSV's assimilation from the military to higher education was impacted by their perceived interactions with their race, ethnicity, and gender expression. The secondary purpose of this study was to contribute to the body of research on WSV and to bring attention to how intersectionality contributes to identity development for

WSV. This study aimed to give practitioners a deeper understanding of how WSV make meaning of their identities as veterans and students using their own words. Using an intersectional lens, individual interviews explored how aspects of their identity, like race, ethnicity, and gender expression, informed their assimilation and integration into higher education. With the insight gained from this study, higher education practitioners are equipped to better serve WSV because of their more profound understanding of how these women discuss the military culture compared to Western higher education. In short, this study illuminates the lived experiences of WSV and how their intersecting identities informed their assimilation process.

Research Questions

In order to add to the body of research on WSV and their assimilation into higher education, two research questions were developed. These questions aim to identify themes within the assimilation experiences of the study participants.

This paper will answer the following research questions:

1) How does the culture of the United States military inform a woman student veteran's transition into higher education?
2) How is the identity development of a woman student veteran impacted by their perceived interactions with race, ethnicity, and gender expression?

Significance of Study

The following section contains possible contributions to higher education and the existing literature on WSV. This study explored how WSV make meaning of their assimilation into higher education using the elements of intersectionality, specifically race, ethnicity, and gender expression. While dedicated literature explored women student veterans' gender identity (Machtan et al., 2019)

and studies around women student veterans' transition into higher education have been published (Atkinson et al., 2019), there exists a gap in literature combining these elements. This study will bring attention to the unique experiences of WSV. Using interviews and restorying of their assimilation processes, this study gives practitioners more significant insight into how WSV forms their identities as veterans and students.

Research Plan

This section will outline and describe the research plan for this study. Information on the role of the researcher, theoretical frameworks, limitations of the study, and definitions of key terms are included in the following sections. The research questions for this study were addressed using a phenomenological case study design. Participants of this study were undergraduate and graduate students in higher education institutions in the southeastern United States.

Role of Researcher

As my career in higher education progressed, I developed a sense of devotion and urgency to learn more about WSV. In my work with students in functional areas like Residence Life, Admissions, and Career Services, I recognized how student veterans come to higher education seeking opportunities for growth, change, and ways to capitalize on their military service.

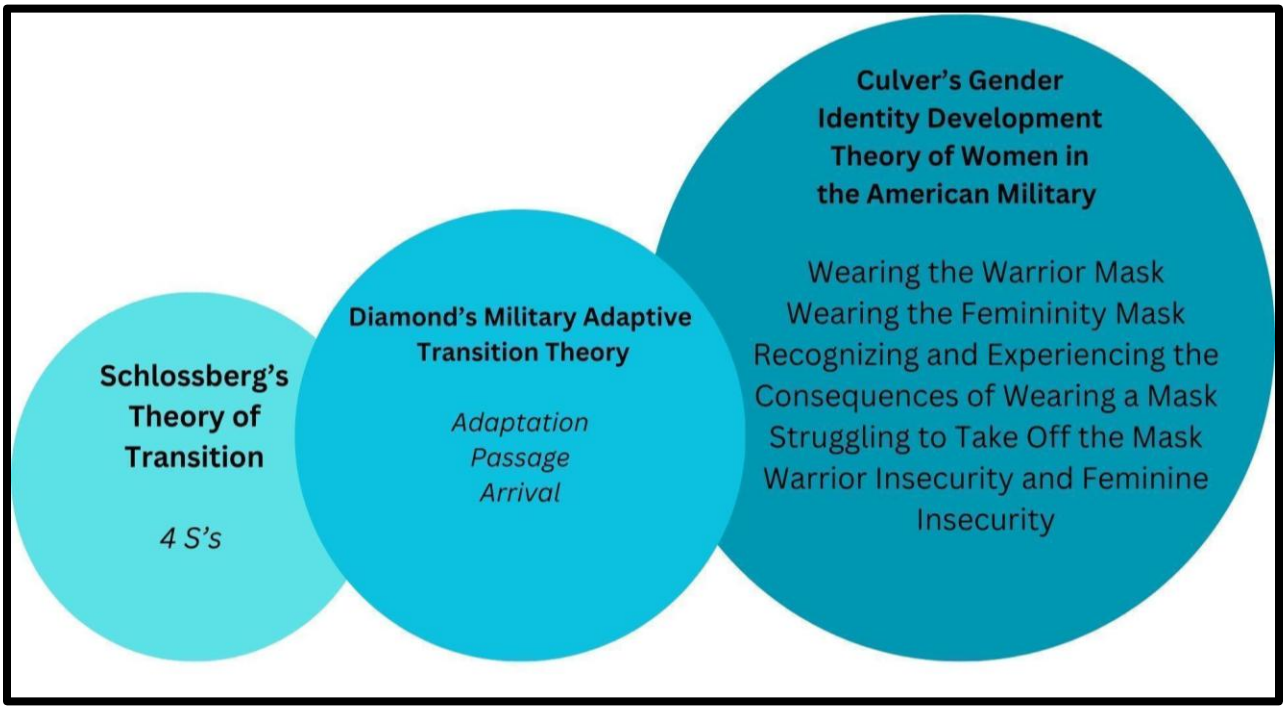
Over the last decade, I have developed my sense of purpose and identified my "why" behind service to historically excluded and overlooked groups like WSV. This study is the culmination of the past decade of my life and the beginning of my service to WSV. With my tools within reach, my role in this study is to amplify the participants' voices and give my colleagues in student affairs tools to remove systemic barriers their students face on campus.

Theoretical Framework

Theoretical Significance

Using Schlossberg's Theory of Transitions (Patton, 2016 et al.), Diamond's Adaptive Military Transition Theory (2012), and Culver's proposed Gender Identity Development of Women in the American Military (2013), this study sought to describe the assimilation phenomena within a sample of WSV. One of the earliest examinations into the relationship between a woman veteran and her gender and sexuality was Herbert's book "*Camouflage Isn't Only for Combat: Gender, Sexuality, and Women in the Military*" (1998). Herbert's text is often cited in more modern literature that examines WSVs and their assimilation into higher education. Culver's proposed Gender Identity Development of Women in the American Military (2013) references *Camouflage*. In Culver's four-phase theory, Herbert's findings show that women employ strategies to feel more or less feminine, depending on the circumstance (Culver, 2013). Diamond used Schlossberg's Adult Transition Theory (Patton et al., 2016) to design the Adaptive Military Transition Theory. This foundational transition theory for student veterans was presented in a linear model and included three phases: Adaptation, Passage, and Arrival (Diamond, 2012, p. 113). This study used Schlossberg, Diamond, and Culver as part of its' two-pronged theoretical underpinning. The following section will outline the other theories used as the foundation for this study.

Figure 1
Schlossberg, Diamond, and Culver Frameworks



Note: This figure shows the relationship between Schlossberg, Diamond, and Culver's Theories of Transition.

Intersectional identity theories represent the second set of theories used within this study. Downing and Roush (1985) wrote on Feminist Identity Development for Women, presented in 5 stages: passive acceptance, revelation, embeddedness-emanation, synthesis, and active commitment. Culver's theory references Downing and Roush's theory and other literature, such as Atkinson's (2019) phenomenological case study of WSV. It is important to note that Downing and Roush's theory was derived from Cross's (1971) theory of Black identity development. Using identity theories such as Cross (1971) and Downing and Roush (1985) are critical to this study because of their direct attention to the parts of a woman's identity, like race, that inform her perception of her femininity.

Limitations of the Study

Certain limitations arose during data collection and analysis as this study develops. One of the first limitations is a minor or non-diverse sample size of participants. A small, homogenous sample may not yield a robust, diverse sample of participants. Other limitations of this study related to the researcher's background. As a non-veteran, limitations potentially were created when relating to the participant's experience. For example, during interviews there were times when the researcher asked the participant to explain an acronym that was used or further explain a cultural experience within the military that may not translate seamlessly into civilian experience. While this limitation did not prevent the study from continuing, there were possible repercussions in the rapport with participants.

Definition of Terms

Assimilation: Assimilation is the process by which immigrants become part of the culture of their new country (Suh et al., 2023.) In this context, WSV are assimilating from the culture of the United States military to Higher education in the United States.

Dependent(s): A person who has a relationship to the military sponsor and is entitled to certain benefits by virtue of that relationship. Certain family members, primarily a spouse, child, stepchild, or legally adopted child, are automatically entitled to dependency status. Other family members may become military dependents under certain conditions and after a special review (Stuttgart Law Center, 2018.)

Military-Connected Student (MCS): As defined by Molina & Morse (2015), this term encompasses students who are National Guard members, reservists, active-duty personnel, and veterans.

Woman Student Veteran (WSV): A student veteran who identifies as a woman.

Summary

This chapter introduced this phenomenological case study of WSV and their assimilation into higher education. The history of women in the United States military and the history of WSV in higher education is growing, which served as the impotence for this study. Additionally, the theoretical foundation for this study is shown in Figure 1. Schlossberg, Diamond, and Culver's theories of transition all served as a foundation for this case study. Two research questions were developed to highlight women's assimilation experiences and identify how their perceived interactions with race, ethnicity, and gender expression informed their identity as students. This study explored the lived experiences of WSV and how their intersecting identities informed their assimilation process into higher education.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

The existing body of research on student veterans has primarily focused on the increased student veteran population on college campuses (Vacchi D. et al., 2017) and the needs of student veterans and military-connected students (Wheeler et al., 2012). Additionally, there is a growing body of research focused on WSV. This body of research includes topics from the transition of women into the military (Helms, 2008), the mental and physical health needs of WSV (Diramio, 2015), as well as the theoretical identity development of WSV (Diamond, 2012; Culver, 2013; Sorenson, 2018). As a result of the available research and the topic of this study, the review of literature was framed using the following research questions:

1. How does the culture of the United States military inform a woman student veteran's transition into higher education?
2. How is the identity development of a woman student veteran impacted by their perceived interactions with race, ethnicity, and gender expression?

This literature review was conducted to provide a foundational understanding of the history of women in the military and a brief history of the student veteran population in higher education. Additionally, this literature review provides an in-depth definition of Intersectionality (Dill & Zambrana, 2009) and its relationship with WSV. This chapter concludes with a survey of relevant theories of identity development, such as Schlossberg's Theory of Transitions (Patton et al., 2016), Diamond's Adaptive Military Transition Theory (2012), and Culver's proposed Gender Identity Development of Women in the American Military (2013).

Search terms were WSV, student veterans, assimilation, gender expression, women in the military, student veterans in higher education, and student veteran services. Sources included resources from adult education, sociology, gender studies, and history.

History of Women in the Military

Revolutionary War-Civil War

For over 200 years, women have served in some capacity in the United States military. As early as the Revolutionary War, there are documented instances of women serving in not only traditionally feminine roles like nurses, cooks, and seamstresses (DeSimone, 2023) but also in traditional roles, particularly in combat, reserved only for men. There are documented cases of women disguising themselves as men in the Revolutionary War so they could fight alongside men in combat (Michals, 2015). During the Civil War, while women continued to serve in domestic roles, the number of women serving as nurses grew, with notable historical names like Clara Barton and Dorothea Dix coming to the forefront of American history (Devilbiss, 1990). As the nineteenth century ended, women were permitted to serve in the United States military in auxiliary roles, called auxiliary nurses, outside the military hierarchy (Devilbiss, 1990). These positions carried no military rank or military benefits and were not paid equally as male soldiers with the same qualifications.

World War I

With the onset of America's entrance into World War I in 1917, women were granted more freedoms within the military structure. The U. S. Army Navy Corps (ANC), established in 1901, eventually saw over 3,000 nurses deployed to serve in hospitals in France (*Women in WWI*, n.d.). The U. S. Navy also allowed women to enlist as "Yeoman" during the war; the number of "Yeoman (F)" peaked at 12,000 (*Women in WWI*, n.d.). General John J. "Black Jack" Pershing (U.S. National Park Service, 2022)

campaigned to create the Signal Corps Female Telephone Operators Unit to improve communications on the Western front between the Allied Forces. This unit of women, who were bilingual in French and English, worked as telephone switchboard operators on the Western Front (Cobbs, E., 2019). This group was nicknamed the "Hello Girls." At the war's end, the Hello Girls did not receive veteran status or benefits; however, in 1977, President Jimmy Carter signed legislation (Peters & Woolley, 1977) granting the few surviving Hello Girls veteran status (Cobbs, E., 2019).

World War II

In 1948, the Women's Armed Services Integration Act was signed into law. This legislation established the Women's Army Corps (WACS) in the Army. It authorized the enlistment and appointment of women in the Regular Air Force, Regular Navy, and Marine Corps, in the Reserve components of the Army, Navy, Air Force, and Marine Corps, and for other purposes (Public Law 625, 1948). During this conflict, all branches of the military formed units for women, which included Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service (WAVES) in the Navy, the Women's Reserve (SPARS) in the Coast Guard, and the Marine Corps Women's Reserve (DeSimone, 2023).

An important note is that all units in the United States Military were segregated by race until July 1948 (Executive Order 9981, 1948). After WACS was established, the War Department maintained that women of color, in particular black women, would be permitted to enlist into segregated units and be assigned to segregated facilities on Army bases (Cross, N., 2023). Once black enlisted soldiers completed basic training, they were often assigned traditionally female and menial tasks such as cooking, baking, clearing, and laundry (Cross, N., 2023). In December 1944, the 688th Central Postal Directory Battalion was formed. The 688th was the only all-black female unit to serve in Europe during the war and was tasked with clearing a large backlog of mail sent overseas to soldiers. The 688th worked around the clock and sorted six airplane hangars full of mail in three months. By 1946, members of the

688th returned to the United States, and in 2022, a Congressional Gold Medal was awarded to the 688th Central Postal Directory Battalion (Cross, N., 2023).

1970-Present

Women continued serving and volunteering in all military branches throughout the Korean and Vietnam Wars. Women were not permitted to hold positions in combat at this time, yet they served as military police officers, engineers, and nurses in combat zones (Korean War Legacy Project, 2021). In 1975, President Gerald Ford signed Public Law 94-106 for women to be admitted to all-male military colleges. In 1976, 119 women entered West Point, 81 entered the U.S. Naval Academy, and 157 entered the U.S. Air Force Academy (Silva, 2017). The military landscape shifted in 1976 when the first cohort of women entered the service academies, often to the chagrin of their male counterparts. Jacob Henry writes, “Upon arrival, the women of West Point met a similar range of opinions in the minds of their peers. Lt. Col. Carol Barkalow, a member of the first graduating class of women, remembered that while most male cadets abided by the new dynamics, a “vocal minority sometimes made it hell” (Henry, n.d.).

In the 21st century, legislative and systemic progress was made for women in the United States military. In 2013, Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta lifted the ban prohibiting women from serving in combat. By 2016, women were permitted to serve in all military positions, including combat and special forces (Silva,2017). Since 2015, 100 women have graduated from the US Army Ranger School (Britzky, 2022). It is estimated that in twenty years, women will make up around 16% of all living veterans (Gorbulja-Maldonado, 2021).

Student Veterans in Higher Education

History of Pre-9/11 Veteran Benefits

1862-1917

The 1862 Morrill Land-Grant Act catalyzed agricultural and technical education and began military education programs at "A&M" colleges (Called to Serve, 2013). The "M" in "A&M" came to stand for mechanics, mining, and military education, while the "A" developed into agriculture-based programs of study. The Morrill Land-Grant Act provided states with dedicated land to establish secondary education institutions offering agricultural and mechanical training programs (Called to Serve, 2013).

1916, the United States government established the Reserve Officers' Training Corps (ROTC). ROTC programs provided Reserve Army commissions to male students who completed prescribed military study programs at colleges and universities, including some Land-Grant Act institutions. A decade later, the United States Navy created its training program, the NROTC. All military branches, except the Coast Guard, now have Officer Training Corps programs. To give an idea of the impact of Officer Training Corp programs, a 2023 report from the U.S. Government Accountability Office reported the population of ROTC-commissioned officers totaled more than 94,000, an average of more than 8,500 officers a year in the 2011-2021 academic years (GAO, 2023).

With the United States' entrance into World War I, higher education institutions experienced a dramatic drop in enrollment of male students due to the compulsory draft (Called to Serve, 2013). As a result of low enrollment, the Student Army Training Corps (SATC), which began in 1918, established training units at 525 universities and colleges that enlisted more than 140,000 male students into the

U.S. Army (Wigmore, 1922). In a 1922 American Association of University Professors Bulletin, J.H. Wigmore noted the benefits of the SATC:

> From the military perspective of preserving our nation's independence, the SATC provided a reservoir of more than 25,000 trained officer material… From the civic point of view, viz., the preservation of the institutions of higher education, the SATC saved more than 500 educational institutions from being disorganized by the second draft" (p. 61). SATC and ROTC programs were the foundation for veteran benefits, like the GI Bill, which is still in place today.

1944-2008

Following World War II, the Servicemen's Readjustment Act, also known as the GI Bill, was signed into law (Servicemen's Readjustment Act, 1945). This law provided service members and their dependents with federal money to attend higher education and training programs to re-enter the saturated job market. The GI Bill was widely popular among recipients; out of 14 million eligible veterans, 2.2 million became students (Kiester, 1994). The GI Bill opened doors for students to attend academic institutions they would have never had access to without military service. Thelin and Gasman (2011) note how women were underrepresented as recipients of the GI Bill scholarship. *Called to Serve* notes how the passing of the GI Bill impacted college campuses:

> The influx of veterans changed the physical appearance of college campuses and affected campuses' social cultures…The postwar students who enrolled under the GI Bill -veterans of battle..- resisted many college traditions established during the interwar period (Called to Serve, 2013, p. 14).

As World War II veterans brought a new demographic of students to college campuses, student affairs administrators faced the challenge of meeting student veterans' needs and understanding how their time in the military impacted their time as students. *Called to Serve* remarks on how their military service did not always translate into their academic life. During their service, they were trained to be mature and make decisive decisions, but this behavior did not always carry over into civilian life (*Called to Serve,* 2013, p.16). Despite governmental financial support, veterans using the GI Bill were not exempt from obstacles in their assimilation into higher education.

In 1984, Rep. G.V. "Sonny" Montgomery (D-Miss.) led a significant effort to overhaul the GI Bill. The legislation, known as the Montgomery GI Bill, may be used while on active duty after serving 24 months or more or after separation. It requires a $1,200 buy-in, deducted from military pay, and includes a $600 buy-up option to enhance the benefit (American Legion, n.d.). The Montgomery GI Bill's purpose was to provide funds for education to assist in the readjustment of service members to civilian life, to enhance our Nation's competitiveness through the development of a more highly educated and productive workforce, and to provide for vocational readjustment and to restore lost educational opportunities to those service men and women who served on active duty after June 30, 1985 (Cornell Law, n.d.). Another change with the Montgomery GI Bill was that the monthly stipend was paid directly to the student. As of the 2007-2008 academic year (before the Post-9/11 GI Bill went into effect), the Montgomery GI Bill covered "approximately 73 percent of the cost of tuition, fees, room and board at public four-year college, and covered much less of the cost at a private nonprofit four-year college: 31 percent when using the 2007-2008 College Board estimate average cost of $32,207" (McBain, 2008, p. 4).

Post 9/11 Veteran Benefits

On June 30, 2008, the Post-9/11 Veterans Education Assistance Act became law. The new GI Bill – cast as a GI Bill for the 21st century – provides many changes and improvements to the Montgomery GI Bill (American Legion, n.d.). The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) calls this bill "Chapter 33." Chapter 33 was the most generous bill; it divided monies between tuition and fees at public or private institutions. It provided a monthly housing stipend and an annual book stipend of up to $1,000 (Called to Serve, 2013). While Chapter 33 provided more funding, there were increased limitations in the range of educational programs to which the funding could be applied. Additional changes were made to the bill in 2011, including expanding the use of educational funds to non-degree college programs (Called to Serve, 2013). Since being signed into law, Chapter 33 has been revised several times to fill in the educational gaps of student veterans. The most recent amendments were approved in 2020, which included changes to the number of months of entitlement charged to an individual and improvements to the federal work-study allowance program (Public Law 116-154, 2020.) In a report from the VA, in the 2023 calendar year, 549,775 students received Post-9/11 GI Bill funds, totaling almost $4.2 billion of aid. Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits comprised 96% of funds allocated to students and institutions (Report, VA, 2024).

The Yellow Ribbon program was included in Chapter 33 as an additional incentive for higher education institutions to support student veterans. Yellow Ribbon requires participating institutions to match 50 percent of outstanding tuition after initial GI Bill payments are made (Called to Serve, 2013). Your school's agreement with us states how much it will contribute and how much we'll match. The amount of assistance from the Yellow Ribbon program makes up all or part of the difference between what the Post-9/11 GI Bill will pay and the unmet tuition and fees (VA, 2024). Students participating in

the Yellow Ribbon program essentially receive a scholarship from their institution, and the VA matches that amount up to the total cost of tuition and fees. According to a report from the VA, in the 2023 calendar year, 31,580 students participated in the Yellow Ribbon program, totaling almost $166 million in aid. The Yellow Ribbon program made up 4% of funds allocated to students (Report, VA, 2024).

Gender Identity Development

Models of feminist theory and gender identity development have been proposed and accepted by scholars and researchers. This section will survey relevant gender identity and feminist theories relevant to gendered systems, such as the United States military. It is important to note that other intersecting identity theories not mentioned in this section pertain to identity elements such as race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and ability status.

Goffman's (1977) gender identity theory noted an individual's sense of self is built upon their sense of self-who and what they are-in terms of masculinity and femininity. This self-identification process happens through behavior changes through the life of individual discoveries about gender and sexuality, whether well or badly grounded, are selectively assimilated to normative understandings regarding masculinity-femininity-sometimes quite rapidly-and thus empowered can have a self-fulfilling effect on objective gender behavior (Goffman, 1977). Downing and Roush (1985) proposed a Gender Identity Development partially derived from Cross' (1971) theory of Black identity development. Downing and Roush's theory has five stages of feminist identity development: passive acceptance, revelation, embeddedness-emanation, synthesis, and active commitment (Downing & Roush, 1985). Stage 1, Passive Acceptance, is marked by women expressing passive acceptance of traditional sex roles and discrimination and a belief that men are considered superior. In Stage 2, Revelation, women

experience a series of crises that question gender roles and the negative perception of men. Stage 3, Embeddedness-Emanation, happens when women seek connection with other women and strengthen their identity as women. Additionally, women begin to act cautiously in their interactions with all men. Stage 4, Synthesis, occurs as women develop an authentic and positive association with their femininity and evaluate men individually. The final stage, Active Commitment, is marked by an outward commitment to create a nonsexist world. In this final stage, women see men as equal but not the same as women (Downing & Roush, 1985). The stages of Downing and Roush's theory of gender identity can be viewed below:

Table 1

Downing and Roush's Gender Identity Development Theory

Stage	Markers
Passive Acceptance	Women express passive acceptance of traditional sex roles and discrimination and a belief that men are considered superior.
Revelation	Women experience a series of crises that result in questioning of gender roles and the negative perception of men.
Embeddedness-Emanation	Women seek connection with other women and begin to strengthen their identity as women.
Synthesis	Women develop an authentic and positive association with their femininity, and they evaluate men on an individual basis.
Active Commitment	Women embrace an outward commitment to create a nonsexist world. In this final stage, women see men as equal but not the same as women.

Note. This table lists and explains the stages of Downing & Roush's Gender Identity Development Theory

Military Socialization & Masculinity

The following section provides an overview of research conducted on the gendered structure of the United States military and its impact on women service members. Marshelle Machtan's 2019 doctoral dissertation focuses on the Gender Identity of Women in the U.S. Army. Machtan (2019) states,

> Furthermore, this study sought to connect these coping strategies that allowed for transcendence in the identity development matrix with a balanced military identity that represents an acceptance of true self: A feminine woman and professional soldier (p. 10).

Other studies (Brownson, 2014; Willis-Frazier, 2024; Coan, 2020) investigated how the United States military impacted women veterans' fight for gender equality. Brownson (2014) focused on the experiences of female Marines and their relationship with sexuality, physical fitness, and military leadership. Willis-Frazier (2024) investigated perceptions of gender equality and gender diversity in the military, respectively. A question posed by Willis-Frazier (2024) was, "How do women leaders overcome experienced challenges when working within top leadership positions in the U.S. military? (p. 10)." Strategies for overcoming gender-based challenges while in leadership roles rested on a foundation of maturity, professionalism, and reporting all instances of unfair treatment (Willis-Frazier, 2024). Brownson (2014) echoed how these strategies could positively impact women in leadership roles by asserting that when the values, traits, and principles of the Marine Corps are seen, women are more likely to inspire their peers and earn respect as an equivalent (p. 784).

While Brownson (2014) presented an argument for women in the military to conform to their male counterparts, a participant in this study shared advice she was given by another enlisted woman Marine:

> Close your eyes and picture the perfect Marine. He's about 5'11'' chiseled chin…'Okay, well, of course, that's everyone's vision of a perfect Marine. You will never fit that stereotype. So, just stop trying. Don't ever try to be that. Just be yourself (Brownson, 2014, p. 784).

The sentiment from this quote is echoed in Willis-Frazier's (2024) analysis of women leaders in the military. The group of leaders from this study told of the gender-based bias and criticism they faced in their roles and highlighted the importance of resilience. When faced with negative, gender, and race-based criticism of her leadership choices, one participant was offered advice similar to the previous quote. Her mentor directed her to hold to her beliefs, and she did not alter her approach to confronting her male subordinate. To further emphasize how the critique she received was biased, she points out how "their only issue with my approach is based on my gender and race as they never criticized any males, white or black, for having the same approach" (Willis-Frazier, 2024, p. 110).

DeGroot (2001) demonstrated how masculinity is embedded into the culture of the military, and women in the military often are pushed into losing aspects of their femininity. DeGroot (2001) argued that women in the military are left to negotiate two main obstacles when confronted with opposition to their service, specifically in combat roles. First, there is a widespread belief that women should not fight, and second, there is an overwhelming doubt that women are unable to fight (DeGroot, 2001). The masculine culture of the military has generated a view that women cannot possibly be effective in combat roles. Statistics tell a different story: Since 2015, 144 women have graduated from the US Army's Ranger School, which includes a grueling course designed to test candidates' physical strength and endurance (Moore, 2024). Molly Murphy, a recent Ranger School graduate, was asked about her time at Ranger School. Her experience echoes the advice given by Brownson (2014). Murphy said, "Males and females bring such different things to the table, and I was able to do well in Ranger School

by using that, rather than trying to oppose it" (Moore, 2024). Earlier sections in this literature review show how women have fought against embedded masculinity since the inception of the United States military. The following sections will provide an overview of the literature on how women develop their identity while serving in the armed forces.

Identity Development of Women in the Military

For women in service, a double bind exists as they assimilate into the hypermasculine military structure. Helms (2008) illustrated this predicament by explaining that women are put in a position where they do not need to perform too well but work twice or three times as hard to be considered competent. A participant in Willis-Frazier (2024) reported the same experience, as she felt she had to work twice as hard to prove she belonged in her leadership role. The gender double-bind women veterans face has researched impacts on their gender identity development.

Cowley and Sandhoff (2017) demonstrated how masculinity is embedded into the culture of the military, and women in the military often are pushed into losing aspects of their femininity. Most of the participants in Cowley and Sandhoff's (2017) study viewed themselves as "tomboys" and overwhelmingly reported that "masculinity and military service go together." Women who have seen themselves as "tomboys" during adolescence potentially have differing expectations of their time in the military. Cowley and Sandhoff (2017) remarked how their participants believed they shared men's mental, social, and physical characteristics, so they had more confidence in their ability to join the military. Kelly, a member of the study who did not identify herself as a "tomboy," confirmed this expectation of how their military service would go; Kelly noted that:

> When people heard I joined the Army, they were shocked. I don't like being outdoors and I don't like getting dirty... once you get over the initial, "Hey, we are not going to date," then it's a really cool, comfortable relationship because you are not competing for anything (Cowley & Sandhoff, 2017, p. 226).

Those quoted and referenced all expressed a certain amount of disdain for emphasizing their femininity. However, some members of this same study saw a way to balance their masculinity with their femininity. Irene, another participant in a combat zone, made a point to tell the researchers how she maintained this balance while deployed. Irene made sure to keep her nails looking decent but not painted. She also kept her hair within regulation but wanted to ensure it looked nice. Irene wanted her unit to know she was a girl, and she expressed how nice it was for them to recognize her femininity, even in Iraq (Cowley & Sandhoff, 2017). These acts of making meaning with a "tomboy" personality and not caring too much about your nails and hair while also devoting attention to traditionally feminine traits is an example of how the gender double-bind manifests in women veterans. The following sections of this literature review will provide a connection between the assimilation of women veterans as they become women student veterans.

Assimilation of WSV

Thus far, this literature review has established the masculine culture of the military and provided insight into the socialization and gender identity development processes of women in the military. This study aimed to understand how WSV assimilates into higher education and to determine how this process interacts with their race, ethnicity, and gender expression. Higher education practitioners must understand how women veterans view their private sector integration and veteran

status. The following section provides a literature review of works devoted to the assimilation of women veterans within the private sector and higher education.

Private Sector

Hirudyaraj and Clay (2019) published a qualitative study to understand the experiences of women veterans transitioning into the private employment sector. The research questions of this study focused on the intersection of women's gender identity and veteran status, as well as their perceptions of their gender as it relates to their desired career outcomes in the private sector. A common theme in the data was participants reporting they were neither woman enough nor veteran enough (Hirudyaraj & Clay, 2019). Participants of the Hirudyaraj & Clay (2019) study also felt pressure to conform and perform a particular image of femininity to be successful in the private sector. One participant said,

> I was told I was a little bit rough around the edges when you are expected to be, as a woman, a little bit soft around the edges. I had to soften it up a little bit (Hirudyaraj & Clay, 2019, p. 14).

Another relevant finding was a theme of embedded masculinity within the military culture that study participants reflected upon; they reported feeling invisible as veterans because of their gender (Hirudyaraj & Clay, 2019). A 2021 study from the Rochester Institute of Technology supports Hirudyaraj & Clay. This study found a similar theme of participants reporting not feeling woman enough and not veteran enough. Additionally, the Rochester Institute of Technology (2021) concluded that the intersectionality of two marginalized identities (woman and veteran identity) within the private sector left women veterans feeling disregarded, underutilized, and restricted from growing in their careers.

Women veterans' employment and integration into the private sector is an under-researched topic within the body of research. Floyd's 2020 dissertation titled "Reintegration of female non-

commissioned officer veterans into the private business sector" is a critical study on integration into the private sector. This study examined the lived experiences of female Non-Commissioned Officers (NCO) veterans' transition and private-sector reintegration (Floyd, 2020). Floyd (2020) found several challenges to the reintegration process: (a) ineffective transition and reintegration programs, (b) consistent inability to translate military management skills and experience to private-sector employment, and (c) lack of gender-specific resources. Floyd (2020) and Hirudyaraj & Clay (2019) give insight into the experiences of women veterans entering the private sector and echo some of the same obstacles around a lack of understanding of their needs, both as women and veterans.

Higher Education

Transitioning to Higher education

Heitzman and Somers (2015) focused on the college choice and persistence experience of 51 WSV. The authors presented the students' stories, and a female veteran persistence model based on transitional theory. Recommendations for higher education institutions were included based on the student's interview responses. Recommendations for services that would impact a woman veteran's college choice, and her persistence rate included increased visibility of other women veterans, alignment with choice of military service, and assistance with housing.

Sorenson's (2018) dissertation explored the everyday experiences of women veterans while transitioning into college. Specifically, Sorenson asks what experiences with coursework, faculty, staff/administration, and student services impact female veterans transitioning into and through college. Like this study, the theoretical foundation for research is Schlossberg, Chickering, and Diamond. The individual (internal) variables identified in the study are gender, exposure to combat, officer versus enlisted, and length of service. Sorenson focused solely on the experience of women veterans with the

above variables to add to the existing body of research. Sorenson's study revealed that female veterans utilize strategies such as time management, connecting with their instructors, and family support to succeed in college (Sorenson, 2018). A theme from this study is participants expressing the importance of connecting with faculty and staff. This connection with instructors aided the participants in finding solutions with coursework and forming a bond with someone at the university when they could not connect with traditional students.

Scholarly resources like Greer (2020) and Baechtold and De Sawal (2009) dissected the assimilation experience of women veterans in higher education. Tomika Greer (2020) gave education practitioners key insights into two concerns regarding the transition of WSV as they assimilate into secondary education. Greer (2020) listed cultural differences between military and civilian organizational cultures and the impact of military service on the identity development of female veterans, including their occupational gender identity, as two obstacles WSVs face as they assimilate into higher education. Greer proposes that adult educators should strive to help new female veterans achieve six learning and development goals listed below:

Table 2

Learning and Development Goals of WSVs proposed by Greer (2020)

Goal 1: Recognize Gendered Differences Between Military Culture and Civilian Culture.
Goal 2: Acknowledge Elements of the Military Culture that Register as a Loss.
Goal 3: Identify Elements of Civilian Culture that Register as a Gain.

Goal 4: Establish a New Identity that Reconciles Experiences in Both Cultural Contexts.
Goal 5: Develop Interpersonal Relational Strategies to Reestablish Personal Relationships
Goal 6: Develop Interpersonal Relational Strategies to Engage with New Colleagues.

Note: Greer (2020) proposed six learning and development goals of WSVs.

The goals suggested in Greer's study mirror the common obstacles in Sorenson (2018) and Hirudyaraj & Clay (2019). A common theme within Greer's goals is personal agency. Keeling et al. (2018) remark on an opportunity for the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) within the United States military. As Keeling et al. write, "Additions to TAP should aim to improve veterans' agency over transition planning and highlight the important role of identity" (Keeling et al., p, 68). Greer (2020) underscores the importance of student affairs professionals developing personal agency with WSVs transitioning into higher education. Increased personal agency can empower these women to adapt to cultural differences outside of the military and build relationships within their new identity as students (Greer, 2020).

Baechtold and De Sawal (2009) explored the specific needs of women veterans: mental health, sexual assault, and gender identity development. While the topics of mental health, military sexual trauma (MST), and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) are not the focus of this study, Baechtold and De Sawal (2009) delve into how these specific obstacles may influence the assimilation of WSV. These studies noted the importance of practitioners working to understand how women veterans filter and process meaning-making experiences related to identity formation. A key challenge for practitioners to aid WSVs in their assimilation is to understand and value the experiences of women veterans so they

can be helped to define their sense of self in relation to the college campus and their civilian status (Baechtold & De Sawal, 2009). A common assimilation need of WSV assimilating into higher education is to redefine who she is as a civilian, a veteran, a female, and a student (Baechtold & De Sawal, 2009). As noted by Cowley and Sandhoff (2017), masculinity is woven into the societal fabric of the military, which can cause women to consider how their role as female veterans may be rewarded differently than their male counterparts. The next section of this literature review will dissect elements of identity development within the population of WSV.

Kimberly Helms Turner's 2008 dissertation provided insight into six women cadet's transition into The United States Military Academy at West Point. Helms' study spanned three periods: prior to entrance, during the first week of classes, and at the end of the first semester; the focus areas of this study are to explore identity and self-reflection. While examining the lives of women veterans, Helms illustrated how crucial it is to understand how women in the military make meaning of their transition and interpret their transition into institutions like West Point. Helms' study provided a unique perspective of WSVs actively experiencing the transition to higher education institutions, specifically at military service academies.

This section provided contextual information around the concept of assimilation for WSV in the private sector and higher education. A common theme in WSV assimilation is the need to develop interpersonal relationships with other WSVs, connect with faculty and staff, and establish their identity as civilians and veterans. Forming an identity that incorporates both the civilian and veteran components can be challenging for some WSVs; the following section describes this phenomenon of identity development dissonance.

Identity Development Dissonance

Tamara Hullender's (2016) doctoral dissertation titled "Cover and Concealment: Women Student Veteran and Identity Development" sought to examine the lived experiences of WSV as they negotiated multiple dimensions of intersecting ideas. Hullender's participants presented identity dissonance as their varying identities intersected, such as civilian, woman, and veteran. Participants felt they could no longer identify as civilians and seemed unable to embrace the label of veteran (Hullender, 2016) entirely. Additionally, participants in this study remarked on the dissonance between the skills needed to succeed in the military and those needed to succeed in higher education.

This added layer of dissonance informed their ability to find community on campus; one participant remarked, "It's also hard to connect…I mean, we served - but I don't feel like them. You have an instant respect, but you don't have an instant camaraderie. So, yeah, it is kind of isolating at times" (Hullender, 2016, p. 142). Even with an established touchpoint, like military service, she felt as if she was not able to meet expectations of those who shared a common experience. Another participant in Hullender's study made an interesting connection between the focus the military has on the future and how many of her peers focused on the past; she remarked how often she was asked, "How did you get here?" once she became a student. This participant was self-described as a "young Black girl from Detroit" (Hullender, 2016, p.126). As she reflected on her identity as a woman of color in the military, she noted the differing emphases on the future and past caused her to reflect on her military service and prompted an internal conversation about her identity. Hullender (2016) noted that this participant sees herself as an overcomer and connected her identity on campus with "where she came from."

Sexual Orientation

Another aspect of identity dissonance explored by Hullender (2016) is a few participants' connections of their sexuality to their military service. Two members of the study's sample identified as lesbian and gay, respectively. They both noted that their sexual orientation was not an issue for them while they served. Danielle, one of these participants, reflected on how her time in the military informed her identity as a lesbian. She credits the diverse environment of the military and camaraderie with another queer woman service member with the tools she needed to understand how to live authentically and to come out to her family (Hullender, 2016).

Aaron Blaskyak's 2024 dissertation titled, "Queering the Nation or Nationalizing Queerness?: How LGB-Identified Soldiers Experience Belonging and Service Post-DADT" investigated the forms of belonging and inclusion of members of the military who identified as a sexual minority. Blaskyak asked two main research questions: (1) What are the experiences of inclusion and acceptance of LGB-identified soldiers within the context of military service? How might these overlap or diverge from those experiences in queer community spaces? (2) To what extent can military service confer forms of respect and respectability for some LGB soldiers? How do these soldiers understand and balance their multiple situated identities (Blaskyak, 2024)? This section will specifically focus on the first research question for this study and literature review.

LBG service members (as Blaskyak uses the term) were asked about ways in which they conformed and expanded normative gender roles within their respective units. As a sample, their ability to conform to and be accepted into the military system was never seen as a cause for outright concern (Blaskyak, 2024), like the participants in Hullender (2016). Common ways in which these service

members found acceptance was through framing the military as a family and using terms like "brotherly" bonding; additionally, participants voiced the significance of competition to bond them to their peers (Blaskyak, 2024). Blaskyak explains the connection between performing military masculinity and its progression into the exclusion of some sects of service members:

> Through the nexus of conformities, we can start to see the emergence of hierarchies around gender-embodied practices. This is one way that military masculinity is depicted as achievable by all, just not equally. However, within this hierarchy of military, masculinity often seems supreme. As a consequence, being able to do both gender and military masculinity in normative, sanctioned ways renders one the ultimate soldier. This ideal [ability to perform both masculinity and femininity] privileges cisgender, male, white, and heterosexual bodies and exposes those who fall outside of these ideals more disposable (Blaskyak, 2024, p.102).

While this study does not focus on the assimilation of women veterans, it is essential to consider how historically marginalized groups can fit in or outside of the system of the military. Hullender (2016) and Blaskyak (2024) provide a firm foundation for further research for service members who are under the queer identity umbrella.

Elements of Student Veteran Support

Atkinson (2019) further explored the lived experiences of WSV in a college setting and discussed their experiences and perceptions of campus veteran support (e.g., student veteran center and campus support staff). Using Vacchi's (2011, 2013) model of Student Veteran Support, discussed in detail in this literature review, Atkinson analyzed her participants' perceptions of campus support staff. Two key support staff identified were the campus resource officer (student veteran center on campus) and the

VA school certifying official (Atkinson, 2019). Taylor et al. (2016) remarked on the importance of a well-equipped veteran's service office because these offices and centers provide dedicated, consistent support and aid for student veterans. More information on the importance of these student services is found in the following sections.

Student Veteran Center

The student veteran center provided instances of support and assistance to WSV and found the center to be welcoming and comfortable. For example, one participant from Atkinson (2019) noted that: "The veterans' center is great. I have found a friend group through the veterans' center, a job obviously, kind of a community" (Atkinson, 2019, p.140). Other participants remarked on the center's inclusivity of women veterans [when describing the student veteran center as a "boys club" or listening to "locker room talk." "If they do say something sexually suggestive of women, I'll kind of spin it and say, 'Hey, if it were in my perspective, then it would be this for a man…I don't think they quite get it from a woman's perspective until we say something..." (Atkinson, 2019, p.142). These quotes describe how a student veteran center can be a helpful resource, and a stumbling block for some WSV who seek to find community.

Called to Serve (2013) discussed the importance of a dedicated lounge or center for student veterans. Dedicating a place for veterans to network, study, and de-stress can ensure they access veteran-specific resources in a "safe" space. Cari Stevenson and Michael Le Buhn echo these suggestions in their 2020 study, in which they interviewed student veterans to gain insight into what services they would want to see on their campus. A participant made the following comment:

> It would be helpful to have a Veteran Center—a lounge. There's no place to do homework here because of PTSD. I need a safe place where I know only vets can be in there. It would mean I could feel safe. Know the culture is the same (Stevenson & Le Buhn, 2020, p.18).

An added benefit of student veteran centers is the "one-stop-shop" nature of these offices. Kirchner (2015) and Glasser, Powers, and Zywiak (2009) noted student veterans need a structure to replace their military chain of command. This chain of command and inherent routine does not follow them to higher education. Student veteran centers give MCS a place to establish a routine and form a community with peers looking for the same connection. Griffin and Gilbert (2015) support the "one-stop-shop" benefit of a student veteran center. With the help of an experienced staff member, students in their study said they were expecting to go through a series of steps to file paperwork and get their benefits processed, but instead, the Student Veterans Center took care of all their needs. All staff members assigned to assist MCS housed in the student veteran center enforced the chain of command structure the students were used to in the military.

VA School Certifying Official

A school certifying official is a university-appointed official required to verify enrollment and process federal payments for any student who receives VA educational benefits. School certifying officials are vital members of a student veterans' support team on campus. A critical role of the school certifying official is to work with faculty members to enroll student veterans as early as possible and for the official(s) themselves to delay the certification process as late into the semester as possible (Vacchi, 2012). Participants noted how influential, both positively and negatively, their school certifying official was during their transition into higher education. One participant agreed the VA school certifying official was helpful in processing benefits. She took a course at a nearby two-year institution and had a

“seamless” transfer of her benefits between the two institutions” (Atkison, 2019, p.134). Another participant expressed difficulty forming a relationship with her VA Certifying Official, “I feel like she hates us [women veterans], like hates working with us, hates talking to us” (Atkison, 2019, p.136). The VA school certifying official directly impacts a student veterans’ transition into higher education and is integral to their educational experience.

Intersectionality of WSV

Intersectionality Defined

Dill and Zambrana (2009) define Intersectionality as "an innovative and emerging field of study that provides a critical analytic lens to interrogate racial, ethnic, class, physical ability, age, sexuality, and gender disparities and to contest existing ways of looking at these structures of inequality” (p. 1). Intersectionality gives researchers and practitioners a lens through which to view student populations like women veterans. When practitioners in student affairs view women veterans as complex, multifaceted individuals whose roles and identities are constantly interacting with one another, we begin to understand better how to serve them. Torres et al. (2009) explained how working with an intersectionality-informed lens benefits students,

> It is important to note that intersectionality provides a lens both for investigating identity development and for bringing a focus on identity (e.g., dynamics of race, class, gender) to a full range of questions relevant to student development, such as retention, student involvement, campus community, and equity (p. 588).

Researchers, practitioners, and administrators must view WSV as people with competing and intersecting identities transitioning into higher education and a culture entirely different from the

military. The following sections discuss other elements and frameworks within intersectionality and will discuss existing literature that explores intersectionality within the WSV population.

Other Elements of Intersectionality

Another modern trend in the study of intersectionality and its relationship with identity theory is the use of Critical Race Theory (CRT), Latino critical theory (LatCrit), and queer theory. Torres et al. (2009) dissect how three approaches foreground both marginalized populations (e.g., by race, ethnicity, disability, or sexuality) as well as the societal structures and dynamics that produce and perpetuate marginalization and oppression (e.g., racism, heterosexism, and ableism).

Jones and McEwen (2000) introduced Multiple Dimensions of Identity (MMDI) as a model which distinguishes between social identities (e.g., race, class, gender, religion) and a personal identity, depicted as a "core sense of self" (personal characteristics and attributes that the individual claims). MMDI proposes that the more an individual integrates a social identity, like gender or veteran status, into their core self, the more salient that identity will be for them. Social and contextual influences are also discussed in the MMDI model; Systems like family, current events, and cultural influences, contribute to the salience of social identities (Torres et al., 2009).

Torres et al. (2009) further explore the connection between CRT, LatCrit, Queer theory, and MMDI. Contexts and social identities are patterned by larger structures of power and oppression that interact with individual identities in both particular and systematic ways (Torres et al., 2009, p. 587). In other words, multiple social identities are embedded in and connected to larger systems of power and oppression. Additionally, MMDI states individuals with majority and minority identities intersect, creating a complex experience for populations like WSV.

Intersectionality within Women Student Veteran Population

Consistent with Culver (2013), Iverson et al. (2016) discussed how women veterans shift their identities from the military environment into the campus environment (Atkinson, 2019). Iverson (2016) illustrated this shift using a tightrope metaphor. As stated in Culver (2013) and Herbert (1998), women are expected to navigate a delicate boundary between "too feminine" and "too masculine," thus creating a gender tightrope on which they exist while in the military. Participants in Iverson (2016) further explain this tightrope analogy with experiences on both ends of the spectrum of femininity:

> This is gonna sound awful, but attractive women do better in the military than the unattractive ones. We, like we do better militarily. In large part because it is such a male-dominated environment. If you're a woman, you walk into a large group of men, you don't even need to open your mouth. You have their attention already (Elaine, p. 8-9).

Elaine's experience shows how delicate the identity shift of femininity is for women veterans. Compared to another participant, Muriel, who described her time in the military as unsavory because of an inherent favoritism towards males (Iverson, 2016). Both Elaine and Muriel demonstrated how their varying degree of femininity met the gender tightrope found in Iverson (2016).

This study sought to understand how a WSV's relationship with their gender expression informs how they relate to the culture of higher education. This shift from the military and civilian campus environment is just one example of how complex female student veterans' identities can be. This new way of focusing on the whole student brings the field full circle from a two-dimensional student to a fully three-dimensional, developing person in an ever-changing context (Torres et al., 2009).

Torres et al. (2009) explained the importance of viewing students with an intersectionality-informed lens, "It is important to note that intersectionality provides a lens both for investigating

identity development and for bringing a focus on identity (e.g., dynamics of race, class, gender) to a full range of questions relevant to student development, such as retention, student involvement, campus community, and equity" (Torres et al., 2009, p.588). WSV are complex, multifaceted individuals whose roles and identities constantly interact; incorporating this view into educational practices will allow for WSV to be served equitably.

Military Culture and Structural Inequalities

In *Called to Serve*, authors Susan Iverson and Rachel Anderson provided an overview of the status of historically marginalized populations, such as women, people of color, and LGBTQIIA+ identifying people, within the veteran community. They also discussed institutional barriers in the military and higher education that may produce different outcomes along different dimensions of identity, benefiting some and disadvantaging others (Hamrick & Rumann, 2013). A critical aspect of their analysis revolved around the existing structure of the US military, which is structured to privilege masculinity, whiteness, and heterosexuality. While this is a growing subject of research, there have been contributions from authors Herbert (1998), Prividera & Howard (2008), and Robinson, Kurpius & Lucart (2000). In *Called to Serve*, we learn how the US military and its military academics have a long, established history of being "single-sex institutions" (Robinson et al., 2000) and while women have gained access to military representation, they continue to be kept separate from some roles (like combat) that are typically categorized as masculine or defined in terms of men (Herbert, 1998). Segal (1993) added that cultural and media representations of masculine warriors and the public dialogue of war further reinforce the ideal of men as the type of service member to serve in combat and women as non-combatant service members. It is worth noting that since *Called to Serve* was published, the ban on women in combat was lifted, and women began integrating roles in combat in January 2016 (Moore,

2020). As of October 2019, 1,055 had entered combat specialties, while 653 women had completed training and served in combat roles (Moore, 2020).

Even with these institutional obstacles removed, women are trained to conform to the image of a man. They are socialized within the US military culture to see the archetypal military service member as male and white. Herbert (1998) found that some women in the US military play down their more feminine traits with their appearance to avoid any penalties associated with being too feminine or too masculine. Some women adopt a more gender-neutral appearance, noting that "it is more difficult to attack that which we cannot see" (Herbert, 1998, p. 73). One participant in Atkinson's (2019) study, a person of color, remarked on how racial identity informed some of her military service. She said, "Sometimes, as a person of color, I felt uncomfortable, but that was only when things came up that way" (Atkinson, 2019, p. 127). This participant further explained how her racial identity intersected with her gender identity within the student veteran center. For this participant and other WSV of color, feelings of difference are more salient, as noted in the quote below:

> For the most part, most of the time I'm in there [student veteran center], I'm usually the only Black person there... till this semester I saw one Black guy in there one time, and I was sitting there, and I was like wow. I thought I was going to be the only one (Atkinson, 2019, p. 143.)

This phenomenon is echoed in Hendricks Thomas and Hunter's 2019 text called Invisible Veterans: What Happens When Military Women Become Civilians Again. Hendricks Thomas and Hunter (2019) describe three critical milestones for women and their acclimation to their service: accession training, a midcareer institutional betrayal, and experiences after separation that reinforce previous experiences of 'otherness.' In between those "milestone" events are dozens of daily reminders to women service members that they are part of an institution designed by men: "unisex" uniforms made for men that poorly fit women, mandatory pre-deployment pregnancy tests, and other persistent

reminders of being an outsider. While these measures are in place to ensure service members are deployable, Herbert (1998) noted how these measures impacted her military service:

> In my military service I observed that women were frequently ridiculed for not wearing their uniforms properly. Such women were viewed as not being serious soldiers and as being more concerned about their appearance than about doing their job. Thus, though women may highlight femininity as a means of being viewed more favorably, such a strategy may have negative repercussions as well (Herbert, 1998, ch. 4, para. 14)."

Masculinity is built into the fabric of the US military. Understanding this fundamental structure of the system where women veterans are coming out is paramount to knowing their challenges and potential obstacles to development.

Theory

As stated in Chapter 1, this study sought to describe the assimilation phenomena within a sample of WSV. The theoretical foundations for the identity development of WSV and within this study are rooted in Schlossberg's Theory of Transitions (Patton et al., 2016), Diamond's (2012) Military Adaptive Transition Theory, and Culver's (2013) proposed Gender Identity Development of Women in the American Military theory. Additional identity theories have been developed for student veterans, including Wert's (2016) Veteran Transition Success Model, Vacchi's (2011, 2013) Model for Student Veteran Support, and Phillips and Lincoln's (2017) Veteran Critical Theory. Downing and Roush's (1985) Model of Feminist Identity Development is a theoretical cornerstone when evaluating the experience of a woman student veteran. The following section provides the theoretical foundation for this study.

Schlossberg's Theory of Transitions

Situation

Student veterans are classified as nontraditional students for several reasons beyond their military service. Sullivan and Yoon (2020) showed how student veterans' nontraditional identity is layered: only 15% are traditionally college-aged, while most are between the ages of 24 and 40, and nearly half are married and have children. Furthermore, women veterans have some additional layers and identities that contribute to the complexity of their situation. Heitzman and Somers (2015) conducted a study with 51 women veterans and reported these statistics about their participants: Nearly 80 percent of participants were Caucasian/white; 6 percent were Hispanic or Latina; and 3 percent each were Asian, black, and African American. Nearly half of the sample (47 percent) was single; 38 percent were married, and 12 percent were divorced. Sixty-five percent of participants had dependents. Women veterans are a diverse group and often have multiple influences on their decision to assimilate into higher education (and civilian) culture.

Support

As women veterans transition into higher education, they leave the built-in network of support the military provides. These women may have support from their family and friends, but they will need support as they begin college careers. An Office of Veterans and Military Service (OVMS) is a common place for this support. In their 2013 handbook *Called to Serve*, Hamrick, Rumann, and Associates stress the importance of an OVMS on campuses:

> The protracted transition of leaving the security and camaraderie of military service and moving first into the civilian world and then enrolling or re-enrolling into college represents a

> challenging and serious commitment for many student veterans…OVMSs can help provide a "bridge" for moving into the college environment (p.171).

Additional support from an OVMS tailored to women veterans will aid in retention and provide a community for these students.

Self

As women veterans transition into college, they are exposed to student groups, faculty members, and academic coursework designed to help them understand who they are and what they want from college. Their sense of Self becomes more layered when you consider how different identities intersect with their veteran identity. For example, the experience of a woman veteran who is a woman of color and a caregiver contributes to a more nuanced sense of self. These nuanced aspects of a women student veteran's identity were explored further in this paper. Saunders et al. (2021) published a thematic analysis of their examination into the gendered and racialized experiences of Women of Color Student Veterans (WOCSVs) and the impact of their intersecting identities on the transition through higher education. Their study revealed four themes present in the transitions of the WOCSVS they interviewed: (a) suppressed and redemanded identity, (b) fighting for visibility, (c) marginalized academic identity, and (d) no belonging (Saunders et al., 2016). One participant from this study reflected on her status as WOCSV, saying her fellow students did not see her as a Marine, and they "see a Black woman" (Saunders et al., 2016, p.268).

Strategies

Veteran students, as a whole entity, are a group that may lack strategies that keep them from successfully navigating the transition into higher education. Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD),

Military Sexual Trauma (MST), and physical disabilities, both visible and invisible, are all barriers for women veterans (Sullivan & Yoon, 2020). In Schlossberg's theory, this "S" refers to the different coping mechanisms students employ to overcome barriers and achieve success as students. With women veterans, their "strategies" are impacted by their support system, sense of self, and situation.

Diamond's Military Adaptive Transition Theory

Purpose and Background

Diamond's (2012) theory posed two questions about student veterans: (1) How do military students describe their transition experience from the military to higher education? Moreover, (2) What is the transitional process that military students exhibit when acclimating to an academic environment? Diamond used a questionnaire designed around Schlossberg's Adult Transition Theory to give practitioners a structure to categorize participants (Diamond, 2012). With the questionnaire and individual interviews, the study sought to develop a new student development theory specifically designed for student veterans.

Findings and Takeaways

Diamond (2012) developed a transition theory for student veterans through data gathering and analysis. Her theory is designed to explain the process of assimilation from the military to higher education and to illustrate the unique challenges these students face in their transition. The Adaptive Military Transition Theory is a linear model broken up into three phases: Adaptation, Passage, and Arrival (Diamond, 2012). She explains the linear structure of theory,

The individual's progression through the phases is represented by the height of the phase and the length of the arch; the higher the arch, the more intensity and focus was spent at that phase. The

time the individual spent in each phase is represented by the width of the arc (Diamond, 2012). Veterans experience a steep yet quick learning curve in the Adaptation phase. Adaptation is represented by the shock of leaving the military and entering higher education. The Passage phase is more ambiguous because it can be challenging to move away from. In the Passage phase, student veterans learn new routines, experience their first round of exams, and maybe even form relationships outside their military circles (Diamond, 2012). In the final stage, Arrival, the student veterans fully integrate and accept their new identity and life as a student. They can plan for their future and foresee what comes next (Diamond, 2012). The Adaptive Military Transition Theory was designed for practitioners to know more about the transitional barriers and process of student veterans. This theory acts as a foundational insight into the experience of women veterans.

Culver's Proposed Gender Identity Development of Women in the Military

Background

Culver (2013) developed a proposed Gender Identity Development of Women in the Military theory, combining Edwards and Jones's (2009) Grounded Theory of College Men's Gender Identity Development with the researched experiences of women in the military. The framework of Culver's theory is similar to Diamond's (2012) phases of development.

Phases

In phase one, when women feel the need to put on a mask, they identify their insecurities regarding living up to the masculine ideals of the military (Culver, 2013). Women fall into two identity categories in this phase: *warrior insecurity* and *feminine insecurity*. Pulling from Herbert (1998), women in this phase can feel insecure because of their femininity and question their capacity for violence and

their ability to perform the needed physical tasks. Women in this phase begin to identify ways they can compensate for the insecurities they have identified (Culver, 2013).

Similar to phase one, two identities are present in women: *wearing the warrior and femininity masks*. Women who wear the warrior mask feel equipped to overcome their insecurities from phase one, using strategies emphasizing their masculinity (Herbert, 1998). Strategies include wearing less makeup, maintaining short haircuts, and drinking. Women who "*wear the feminine mask*" feel insecure about their ability to perform on par with their male or warrior women counterparts and often implement strategies that match their perception of a woman in civilian society. These women wear dresses and makeup and participate in activities that emphasize their femininity (Herbert, 1998).

The third phase, *recognizing and experiencing the consequences of wearing a mask*, begins when women begin to understand the implications of wearing a mask and adapt their gender identity to meet society's expectations (Culver, 2013). As women reshape their gender identity, a personal definition of a warrior, woman, and woman-warrior is developed (Edwards & Jones, 2009). In the final phase, *struggling to take off the mask*, women acknowledge specific aspects of their true selves covered by the mask and begin to transcend external expectations of gender identity (Edwards & Jones, 2009). Culver (2013) noted this phase can occur at differing times, based on the period of history when a woman served in the military. As an example,

> Some senior women of the military may be in this stage because, as Herbert (1998) stated, they are significantly less likely to employ strategies associated with wearing either a warrior mask or a femininity mask. Junior women in the military may not experience this phase until they leave

the military and experience dissonance between their true identity and the strategies they implemented while in the military (Culver, 2013, p. 69).

Findings and Takeaways

Culver's proposed Gender Identity Development of Women in the Military (2013) theory is non-linear, and one woman can experience the first two phases many times as they process their career within the military. For this study, Culver's theory is foundational because of its focus on women veterans' identity development and relation to their gender expression and identity. It is important to note that since this theory was proposed, the ban on women serving in combat roles has been lifted. Atkinson (2019) and Machtan (2019) were among the other researchers who used Culver's theory as a guidepost for further research on the experiences of WSV.

Downing and Roush

Downing and Roush (1985) presented a model for Feminist Identity Development for Women in 5 stages: passive acceptance, revelation, embeddedness-emanation, synthesis, and active commitment. This theory is derived, in part, from Cross' (1971) theory of Black identity development theory; Downing and Roush (1985) developed their theory with the understanding that women in society must acknowledge their own biases, prejudices, and experiences as women to achieve an authentic feminist identity. Intersectional identity theories, like Downing and Roush, are included in this study because of their attention to aspects of a woman's identity, like race, that impact her view of her femininity. Downing and Roush (1985) also provided implications of their feminist theory for men. They state those implications, "...males who are familiar with this model may be more understanding and supportive of the feelings and needs of women…" and "...this theory may have some relevance for the development

of gender consciousness of males…" (p.707). The feminist identity theory from Downing and Roush served as a foundational theory for Culver (2013) and Atkinson (2019).

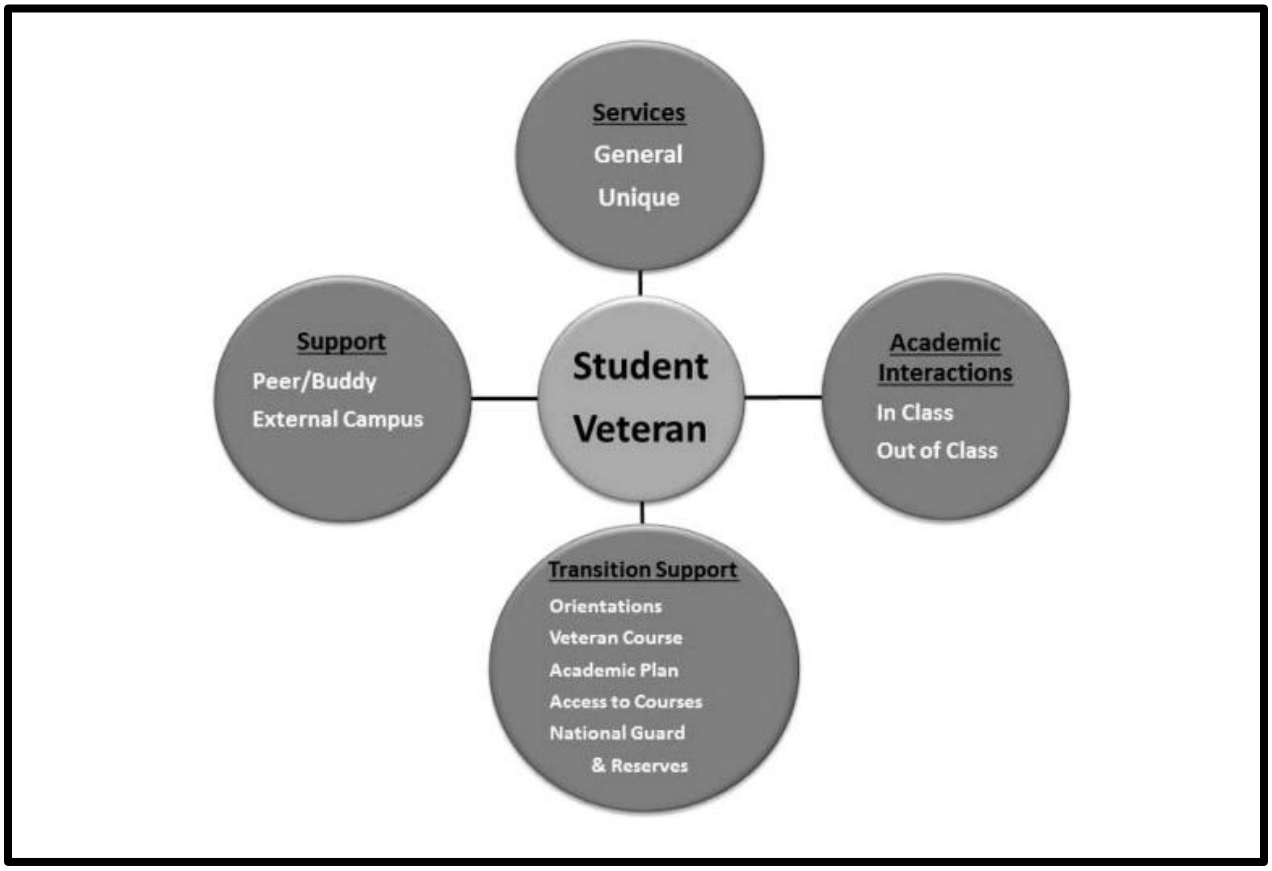
Other Student Veteran Support Theories

Additional transition and identity development theories for student veterans have been developed, including Wert's (2016) Veteran Transition Success Model, Vacchi's (2011, 2013) Model for Student Veteran Support, and Phillips and Lincoln's (2017) Veteran Critical Theory. Wert's veteran transition framework is presented as a pyramid, similar to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (Vanderbilt, University, n.d.), with the foundational needs being Basic Needs (Accamando, 2017). DiRamio et al. (2008) illustrate the parallels between Maslow's and Wert's theories in the figure below.

Vacchi (2011, 2013) identified a student veteran-centered model where success strategies and practices are established from a holistic lens. An additional element of Vacchi's model is that it focuses on the individual student rather than the population as a larger sample. A center circle with four cornerstones represents his model to support the student veteran (Vacchi et al., 2017). The figure below illustrates this vertical model of student veteran support.

Figure 2

Vacchi's Model for Student Veteran Support



Note: Visual representation of *Vacchi's Model for Student Veteran Support (2011, 2013).*

While Phillips & Lincoln (2017) adapted a veteran critical theory to understand issues from a student-veteran lens, these student-veteran-centered theories are relevant to this study because of their insight into the transitional patterns of student veterans. Additionally, these theories act as roadmaps for future researchers. As Phillips & Lincoln (2017) stated,

> The [article] defines the need for a critical theory (Veteran Critical Theory), explains the tenets for this new theory, and discusses how these tenets could be used by administrators, faculty,

student affairs professionals, and students in the higher education community (Phillips & Lincoln, 2017, p. 656).

Summary

The number of women veterans in the United States (US) military is rapidly expanding; today, women represent almost 20% of the active-duty armed forces, Reserve and National Guard, and 10% of the total veteran population. It is estimated that in twenty years, women will make up around 16% of all living veterans (Gorbulja-Maldonado, 2021). The presence of women in the military has been relied upon since our nation's inception, yet only in the last ten years have women been able to reach milestones only laid out for male service members. The two guiding research questions for this study are: How does the culture of the United States military inform a woman student veteran's transition into higher education? How is the identity development of a woman student veteran impacted by their perceived interactions with race, ethnicity, and gender expression? A literature review was conducted to lay an academic foundation for this phenomenological case study.

This literature review provided a foundational understanding of the history of women in the military and a brief history of the student veteran population in higher education. Additionally, this literature review provided an in-depth definition of Intersectionality (Dill & Zambrana, 2009) and its relationship with WSVs. This chapter concluded with a survey of relevant theories of identity development, such as Schlossberg's Theory of Transitions (Patton, 2016 et al.), Diamond's Adaptive Military Transition Theory (2012), and Culver's proposed Gender Identity Development of Women in the American Military (2013). By providing an overview of the history of women in the military and of the student veteran population, the concept of intersectionality can be introduced and conceptualized. With an intersectional lens, student affairs practitioners can apply transitional theories like Schlossberg's

Theory of Transitions (Patton, 2016 et al.), Diamond's Adaptive Military Transition Theory (2012), and Culver's proposed Gender Identity Development of Women in the American Military (2013). An overview of the research methodology processes used in this study was provided in Chapter 3.

CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

Introduction

The primary purpose of this study was to gain insight into the phenomena of assimilation within the women student veteran population in higher education. The secondary purpose of this study was to investigate how Women Student Veterans' assimilation from the military to higher education was impacted by their perceived interactions with their race, ethnicity, and gender expression. This chapter presents the research design for this study and provides the reader with evidence of the study's trustworthiness.

Restatement of Problem and Research Questions

This phenomenological case study examined the experiences of women student veterans during their time in college. To add to the body of research on women student veterans and their assimilation into higher education, two research questions were developed. These questions aim to identify themes within the assimilation experiences of the study participants.

This study sought to answer the following research questions:

1) How does the culture of the United States military inform a woman student veteran's transition into higher education?
2) How is the identity development of a woman student veteran impacted by their perceived interactions with race, ethnicity, and gender expression?

The participants can share their assimilation experiences into higher education using a phenomenological case study design. This qualitative research design was conducted through semi-structured interviews with female student veterans at a large public institution in the south.

Research Design

A phenomenological case study of women student veterans was used in this study. Cresswell (2018) describes the nature of phenomenological research as a design of inquiry in which the researcher describes the lived experience of individuals about a phenomenon as described by participants. The culmination of phenomenological research is often a narrative combining restored telling of a participant's experience.

Case studies are bound by time and activity, and researchers collect detailed information over a sustained period (Cresswell, 2018). Three major foundational approaches of case study research designs were Merriam, Yin, and Stake. In a 2015 article from *The Qualitative Report*, Bedrettin Yazan compares all three approaches. From a Yinian perspective, researchers control the criteria to determine the validity and reliability of data through well-defined and well-structured data analysis procedures (Yazan, 2015). Yin also suggested that case study researchers need highly structured analytic guidelines and principles to analyze qualitative and quantitative data. Stakes' approach to case study research is guided by the researcher's intuition and impressions (Yazan, 2015). The Stakian approach described two data analysis methods: Categorical Aggregation and Direct Interpretation. Stake says, "Each researcher needs, through experience and reflection, to find the forms of analysis that work for him or her" (Stake, 1995, p. 77). Merriam's approach to case study research is characterized by the meaning-making process of a Case. Yazan (2015) defined a case as "a thing, a single entity, a unit around which there are boundaries" (Yazan, 2015, p. 27). It can be a person, a program, a group, a specific policy, and so on (Merriam, 1998). Stake and Merriam's definitions of qualitative case study are similar in their descriptions; these approaches include terms like complexity, intensive, and holistic.

Yazan (2015) compared Yin, Stake, and Merriam as a tool for researchers conducting case studies. All three approaches to case study design contain different techniques and strategies to fit the

project's needs best. For example, while all three approaches list interviews as a data-gathering method, Merriam's approach relies heavily on effective interviewing and careful observation of participants (Yazan, 2015). This contrasts Yin and Stake, whose emphasis on data collection in a case study is a mixed-method approach, with the researcher's attention divided between interviews, documents, and physical artifacts. This project used the Merriam data collection method in its interview process. Merriam (1998) highlighted the following aspects of interviews as critical areas of focus for researchers: ensuring asking good questions, knowing which questions to avoid, utilizing question probes, following the interview protocol, beginning the interview, creating rapport between interviewer and participant, and evaluating interview data.

Population and Sample

This section describes the population and sample for this case study. Specifically, this section discusses the population from which the individual participants were recruited. This section also discusses the sampling procedure employed for this study.

Population

The population of this study is women student veterans at a two- and four-year institutions. The desired sample size for this study was 4-8 participants who would participate in semi-structured interviews. Using the Participant Interest Form in Appendix D, 26 WSV indicated their interest in moving forward with an interview. Data collection took place over three weeks, and interviews were scheduled with 12 participants. Recruitment and data collection procedures are discussed in the following sections.

Sampling Procedure

This study used criterion sampling to review and study all population members who met the criteria of importance (Patton, 2015). The main point of criterion sampling is to identify participants who meet the study's criteria and will offer information-rich data. The essential criterion for this study is that participants are students at higher education institutions and are women veterans using federal military benefits. Using criterion sampling ensured that all sample members met the essential criteria and identified participants for future studies (Patton, 2015).

Additionally, a maximal variation sampling framework was used in this study. The MV technique strives to collect as many different perspectives and experiences within the same population as possible to maximize the research findings (Daniel, 2019). Daniel (2019) noted the importance of the researcher recruiting diverse individuals with the added tool of a participant screening tool. This screening tool, like the Microsoft form with this study, ensured that multiple diverse viewpoints are included and helps the researcher verify that participants know the phenomena being examined (Daniel, 2019).

Recruitment and Instrumentation

The participants for this study were recruited via email. The researcher will contact all eligible women veterans receiving veteran benefits via institutional email (Appendix A). An online interest form was created using Microsoft Forms (Appendix D). Contact information and primary participant data was collected using this form.

Role of the Researcher

The role as a researcher was to observe, ask meaningful questions (Merriam, 1998), and listen for common themes from the participants. Data collection was possible using semi-structured interview, purposeful questions, and a carefully selected study sample. Additionally, the ongoing collaboration with participants allowed maximization of the data that was collected, decoded, and discussed.

Trustworthiness

In order to achieve trustworthiness, the researcher employed the following verification techniques described by Cresswell (2018): member checking, peer examination, and clarification of researcher bias. The researcher achieved validity primarily through rich, thick, detailed descriptions, enabling those interested in transferability to do so quickly (Merriam, 1998). Offering such descriptions of the research setting gives the readers a feeling of familiarity with it and increases their feelings of validation (Cresswell, 2018). Member checking is when the interview participants and the researcher have an ongoing review of data interpretations and continued conversations to ensure they have restoried or interpreted their words truthfully (Cresswell, 2018). After conducting the interviews, the completed transcripts were sent to the participants to review. This allowed for clarification, approval, and agreement from the study members. Additionally, the researcher contacted participants via email with specific questions or needed information or clarification.

With peer examination and continual articulation of any researcher bias, credibility was maintained with all participants and broader academic community. Fellow doctoral students provided feedback and serve as data examiners. This peer review process allows researchers external to the study to ask questions and further interpret the data (Cresswell, 2018). Reflexivity has been established as a core tenet of qualitative research (Creswell, 2018). With bias checking, the researcher was able to understand how culture, history, and work history could have influenced the interpretation of the findings.

Data Collection Procedures

Qualitative Interviews

All participants completed a semi-structured interview with the researcher. These interviews were conducted using Microsoft Teams. All interviews were recorded to create an interview transcription, and to provide clarity for both researcher and participant. Before the interview, all participants completed an informed consent form. Following the interview, the researcher analyzed the transcription and corrected the participants' answers. The complete list of interview questions can be found in the Appendices, a sample of interview questions is listed below:

1. How would you explain your transition to higher education?
2. What factors of your veteran identity have been enjoyable and challenging during your transition?

Interview Protocol

Following Merriam's (1998) interview process, an interview protocol was created for all participant interviews. The interview protocol began with introducing the researcher and the study. Following the introduction, the interview questions began, and all interviews will end with a conclusion and a wrap-up with the participant. The complete interview protocol can be found in Appendix B.

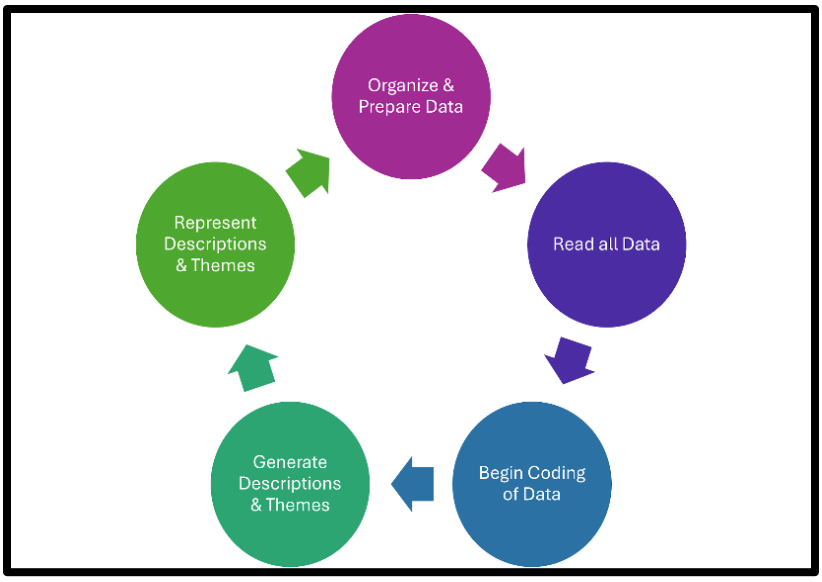
Data Analysis Procedures

Individual Interview Data Analysis Plan

Following the steps outlined by Cresswell (2018), a five-step approach was used to analyze interviews. Those steps are outlined in the figure below:

Figure 3

Five-Step Approach to Interview Analysis



Note: This figure shows the 5-step process used in this study to analyze qualitative interviews.

The first step in the data analysis process was to Organize and Prepare Data. This step included transcribing interviews and typing any notes recorded during interviews. The following two steps required me to read the data thoroughly and begin coding. In step 2, each interview was read to understand what was shared (Cresswell, 2018). As anticipated, this section flowed effortlessly into step 3, which is Coding. Coding is the process in which the data is organized into groups, using their actual words and phrases, called in vivo coding (Cresswell, 2018). In addition to in vivo coding, the researcher created and used a codebook, a table or record that contains a list of predetermined codes used for coding interview data (Cresswell, 2018). A codebook could take on multiple formats, and Cresswell (2018) provides an example of a template with the names of codes in one column, followed by their definitions in another column, and specific instances in which the code was found in the transcripts. Combining the in vivo coding technique with the tool of the codebook, the data was prepped for step 4.

Once the coding process was completed, the researcher generated the coded data into themes. This description came directly from the codes and represent my significant findings' categories. This step

was fundamental because it created a narrative description of the data. The final step in the data analysis process was to write in detail about the themes, using excerpts from the participants while connecting the findings with existing literature found in Chapter 2 of this study. The result of the data analysis process was a narrative representation of this phenomenological case study.

Table 3

Logic of Research Design

Research Question	**Corresponding Source of Information**	**Corresponding Data Analysis/Reporting Procedures**
RQ 1: How does the culture of the United States military inform a woman student veteran's transition into higher education?	Survey Questions 1-2, 5-7, 11-15, Demographic data of participants	Descriptive Statistics In Vivo Coding, Codebook, Theming of Data
RQ 2: How is the identity development of a woman student veteran impacted by their perceived interactions with race, ethnicity, and gender expression?	Survey Questions 2-10, Demographic data of participants	In Vivo Coding, Codebook, Theming of Data
Off-topic but relevant	Survey Questions 16	In Vivo Coding, Codebook, Theming of Data

Summary

The primary purpose of this study was to explore and dissect how a group of women student veterans' assimilation from the military to higher education was impacted by their perceived interactions with their race, ethnicity, and gender expression. The secondary purpose of this study was to contribute to the body of research on women student veterans and to bring attention to how intersectionality contributes to identity development for women student veterans. This chapter

examined the research methods used in this study. Additionally, this chapter outlined the structure and content of the semi-structured interviews and demonstrated the researcher's trustworthiness and methodology.

Chapter Four: Findings

Introduction

The purpose of this phenomenological case study examined the experiences of Women Student Veterans during their transition into higher education. The two main research questions of this study are as follows:

How does the culture of the United States military inform a Woman Student Veteran (WSV)'s transition into American higher education?

How is the identity development of a WSV impacted by their perceived interactions with race, ethnicity, and gender expression?

This chapter presents descriptions of the participants, the study's findings, and themes found within the data. Additionally, this chapter includes a detailed response to each research question, corresponding findings from participant interviews, and a chapter summary and conclusion.

Participant Information

Participant Recruitment

Twelve women student veterans participated in individual interviews for this study. They were recruited through in-person and virtual recruitment using LinkedIn and social media platforms. Using the Participant Interest Form in Appendix D, 26 WSVs indicated their interest in moving forward with an interview. Data collection took place over three weeks, and interviews were scheduled with 12 participants. Below is a brief description of each participant, along with their given pseudonym to protect their anonymity.

Participant Descriptions

Emma is a Marine Corps veteran living in the Southeastern United States. Emma served in active duty for five years in Aviation Intelligence. She is a 24-year-old, straight, White identifying woman pursuing her associate's degree in criminal justice with plans to attend a four-year institution and Law School.

Sloane is a Marine Corps veteran living in the Southeastern United States. Sloane was Medically Discharged from the Marine Corps after suffering an injury during basic training. She is attending a large, public, four-year institution majoring in Music Production, hoping to continue her work in the studio after graduation.

Hannah is a four-year Air Force veteran who worked in surveillance and administrative roles. She is a graduate student in a Master of Science in Nursing at an institution in the Southeastern United States. Hannah is a wife and a mother to one child she gave birth to while on active duty. As a recipient of her father's GI Bill benefits, Hannah feels she has an added layer of practical knowledge when encountering logistical hurdles relating to the GI Bill.

Meg is a 69-year-old Navy veteran who received an honorable discharge after her service and time in basic training. Meg identifies as a disabled senior citizen student and a proud member of the Lakota tribe. Meg credits her role as a mother to her success in her multiple degrees. She is currently enrolled as an undergraduate at a small public institution in the Southeast.

Addie is a former helicopter pilot in the Army and served for ten years with multiple deployments. Addie is a first-year medical student at a private institution, a wife, and a mother to a child she gave birth to while on active duty. Addie is 32 years old and identifies as white.

Charlotte is a 35-year-old Navy veteran who served four years as a member of the Riverine Expeditionary Squadron. She is a wife, mother, and full-time staff member in higher education. Charlotte

is currently enrolled as a graduate student in a teaching certificate program to complement her Doctor of Education degree.

Zoe is a 29-year-old, active-duty Air Force veteran who works in Intelligence and grew up as an "army brat." She is a second-year law student at a private institution and participated in Air Force ROTC as an undergraduate student. Zoe identifies as a Black woman who is a Christian.

Allison is a 23-year-old Reservist in the Army National Guard, working as a Human Resource Specialist. She is an undergraduate student at a large public institution in the Southeastern United States. Allison is a Black woman who describes herself as an artist, a daughter, and primarily an online student.

Evelyn is a first-year graduate student in a Master of Nursing program at a private institution in the South. She is a 31-year-old Hispanic lesbian, wife, daughter, and immigrant Army veteran; Evelyn has served in active duty since 2020 and is currently in the Army Reserves until 2027.

Josie is a student in a Doctor of Audiology program at a small institution in the southeast. She is a 45-year-old Retired Air Force veteran who served for 15 years in Security and Public Health positions. Josie has repeatedly deployed with the Army and Navy in her public health role.

August is a Retired Navy veteran who proudly served 22 years as a Paralegal. She is a New York City native and joined the Navy in 2002 after the September 11, 2001 terror attack. August is enrolled in a Master of Arts in Law program at a small religious institution in the Atlantic region. She also identifies as a member of the Muslim faith and Afro-Puerto Rican community.

Quinn is an active-duty Army veteran who has served 14 years as a Medical Lab Technician and a Healthcare recruiter. She is a Doctoral student at a private institution in the southeast and will transition out of the Army by spring 2026. Quinn describes herself as a non-denominational Christian and credits her success in her academic career to her faith. She describes her ethnic identity as Mixed, as her mother is Korean, and her father is White.

Participant Demographics

This study employed a multi-pronged theoretical approach, including Schlossberg's Theory of Transitions (Patton, 2016 et al.), Diamond's Adaptive Military Transition Theory (2012), and Culver's proposed Gender Identity Development of Women in the American Military (2013). This study seeks to describe the assimilation phenomena within a sample of WSV using an intersectional lens, so it is necessary to show the participant demographics. See the table below for a visual depiction of the identities as disclosed by the participants.

Table 4

Participant Demographics
UG=Undergraduate, G=Graduate

Pseudonym	**Branch of Service**	**Military Status**	**Years of Service**	**Rank upon Discharge**	**Degree Status**	**Ethnicity**	**Age**	**Sexual Identity**
Emma	Marine Corps	Honorably Discharged	5	E-5	UG	White	24	Straight
Sloane	Marine Corps	Medically Discharged	1	E-2	UG	Hispanic	NA	NA
Hannah	Air Force	Honorably Discharged	4	E-4	G	White	30	Straight

Meg	Navy	Honorably Discharged	1	E-3	UG	White	69	Straight
Addie	Navy	Honorably Discharged	10	LT/O-3	G	White	32	Straight
Charlotte	Navy	Honorably Discharged	5	E-3	G	White	35	Straight
Zoe	Air Force	Active Duty	7-Present	Captain	G	Black	29	Straight
Allison	Army	Reservist	3-Present	E-4 (SPC)	UG	Black	20	NA
Josie	Air Force	Retired	15	TSGT/E-6	G	White	45	Bisexual
August	Navy	Retired	20	LNC/ E-7	G	Afro-Puerto Rican	49	Straight
Evelyn	Army	Reservist	7	SGT	G	Hispanic	31	Lesbian
Quinn	Army	Active Duty	13	SSG	G	Mixed	39	Straight

While this study was not designed to interview and recruit enrolled in graduate programs exclusively, it is relevant to note that eight out of twelve participants are graduate students. Meg is also enrolled in an undergraduate program but has a master's level education. As noted in the participant descriptions, a wide range of graduate programs were represented in this study, including Law, Medicine, Audiology, Nursing, and Educational Leadership.

Organization of Data

Semi-structured individual interviews were conducted with each participant using Microsoft Teams. Each interview was 45-90 minutes and was recorded to create transcriptions. Following the interview, the researcher sent the transcript to the participants to gain their consent for the topics covered to proceed with data analysis. Using Cresswell's (2018) five-step data analysis process data was organized the codes into themes. Using in-vivo coding and a handwritten codebook with additional notes, the researcher created themes using the participants' words. Using direct quotes from the interviews allowed four main themes and five subthemes to be identified within the raw data. Those themes are shown below:

RQ1: How does the culture of the United States military inform a Woman Student Veteran (WSV)'s transition into American higher education?

Theme 1: Strong Academically

Theme 2: Adaptability

Theme 3: Veteran Status (Hesitant vs Not Hesitant)

RQ2: How is the identity development of a WSV impacted by her perceived interactions with race, ethnicity, and gender expression?

Theme 1: Renegotiate a Sense of Service to Self

Subtheme 1: Intersections with Race and Ethnicity

Subtheme 2: Higher education is not a mission or deployment

Theme 2: Relationship with Femininity

Subtheme 1: Regulations changed in 2021

Subtheme 2: Parenting during service and/or transition

Subtheme 3: Gender-based military stereotypes

Theme 3: Campus Engagement

Subtheme 1: Positive & Negative Engagement with Veteran Identity

Subtheme 2: Involvement on Campus

Thematic Analysis

The following section provides a thematic analysis of each emerging theme found in this study.

Research Question 1

Throughout the conversations, there were patterns around how the military culture is carried over into the participant's transition into higher education. The following sections describe how the participants showed their academic fortitude, proved to have above-average adaptability skills, and how they did or did not share their veteran status in educational spaces.

Theme 1: Strong Academically

When asked what the participants were most proud of, most of the participants were happy to report their academic success. Either in statistics, like Evelyn, Hannah, Emma, and August, who received

4.0 GPAs in their most recent semesters, or more broad terms, like Zoe and Josie, who felt they had achieved academic success because they have improved with each semester and have continued in their graduate programs. Each of these women credits their time in the military as a contributing factor in their academic success. Evelyn stated,

> I have no fear. I guess to fail. I have no fear to fail. And it's true. I don't. And I feel like the colleagues don't want to look bad in front of the professor. And I'm like, whoa, who the fuck cares? You know, it's like we're here to learn. You know going through combat or going through basic training and going through combat medic training, like I failed multiple times and I've had. Drill sergeants and people screaming at me and like, if I do like if I sound dumb or like if I fail a question at nursing school, they're not going to be screaming at me. I don't care. Like I've had it crazy, I'm good (personal communication, December 19, 2024).

Their time in the military informed their abilities to adapt to an academic environment, and most participants felt they were prepared to handle the stress of entering higher education. Hannah says,

> I think being in the military and being so time focused and being able to be diligent helps me a lot. Compared to the peers, and many of them were younger too, I just turned 30, which is not old, but a lot of them had just finished their bachelor's, so they were 22 and had never worked before. And they were going straight back into school. So I think I had a leg up in that sense.

August also reflected on how her time in the Navy helped her as a student,

> Because that's just the way that that's the nature of the military. And I think that that has helped me. As far as like you know, now that I'm in school like I can, I can change easily. Like I can if something happens, and we have to like shift gears. It's not difficult for me to do that (personal communication, December 13, 2024).

Another graduate student, Addie, reflected on how her time in the Navy helped her in an academic environment where she could make a mistake.

> In the end I don't see like a huge difference other than maybe the willingness to just kind of like throw myself into unknown situations without prior preparation. Like there's a lot of people that want to know, you know, what are steps 1- 8 before we do it, whereas I'm just kind of like, OK, throw me in it. We'll figure it out when we do it (personal communication, December 18, 2024).

The participants are all strong students who use their time in the military, no matter their job, branch, or length of service, to make their transition into higher education more manageable. The fast-paced, changing nature of the military informed how they embrace their role as students.

Theme 2: Adaptability

The second theme found within RQ1, which pairs with theme 1, is Adaptability. Each of the women shared at least one story of how they learned how to be adaptable because of their military service. As service members, they were programmed to complete a mission, no matter what, and to be ready for change. When Addie was asked what she was most proud of as a student, she talked about how her adaptability had been tested and how she learned that skill from the Navy. She said,

> It is broad, but just like adapting to this new environment and adapting to lots of new personalities that, like, are very different than the environment that I'm used to specifically, you know, being around a lot of like younger students and just kind of the anxieties that are all rampant in the class, and I think I try and bring a calming presence. Which I'm proud of because. I think people feel comfortable to kind of. I don't know. Come to me when they're struggling and we can kind of get through it together, which I'm proud of.

Emma echoed some of the same sentiments when she reflected on how her time as a Marine helped her during her transition into higher education. She said,

> I think something that was definitely a strength and advantageous in the aspect was the discipline in the Marine Corps instilled. In just the day-to-day routines, the flexibility for change, like the adaptability for different circumstances, especially working in the service industry before school and in school. The changing of schedules just that ability 'to hurry up and wait' for lack of better term. Like oh, I have to get this done once you get it done. You're kind of cool for a while. And then you're able to just pick things back up (personal communication, December 8, 2024).

Another Marine, Sloane, reported how the learned behavior of "improvise, adapt, and overcome have been the most helpful (personal communication, December 9, 2024)." when asked what about her time in the military was most helpful in her life as a student. Quinn, who is an active-duty Army health recruiter and doctoral student, reflected on how her experience differs from her non-veteran peers:

> I'm able to be very, very flexible…You know, you got to adapt. So that's probably something that I've taken for, not taken for granted. But I didn't really realize that was an actual skill."

Another doctoral student, Charlotte, echoed the same sentiment and credited her time in the Navy with how she can improvise, adapt, and overcome. Charlotte said, "I don't think there's a challenge that I've been given that I haven't been able to overcome. Not to sound cliche, but [I credit that] to the military. Really. I mean, you're put through a lot of stressful situations, and you have to manage them (personal communication, January 3, 2025).

This group of WSV demonstrated how their time in the military informed their ability to improvise, adapt, and overcome in higher education.

Theme 3: Veteran Status (Hesitant vs Not Hesitant to Share)

Not Hesitant to Share

The third theme in the participant's experience was how their inclination to share their veteran status varies. Some participants, like Hannah, Addie, and Evelyn, expressed not hesitating to share their veteran status in an academic space. Hannah explained that she willingly told her cohort members that she was in the Air Force and worked on an aircraft. Sometimes, her peers had questions, and she would answer them as they came up. She also mentioned that she met another Navy veteran in her cohort and formed a friendship with him on the first day. Addie reflected on how she disclosed her veteran status to her cohort in medical school,

> I think when it comes up naturally I will because I think a lot of times as students like oh, people are like, what did you do before? It's not necessarily the first thing I lead with, but as soon as it comes up, I'm forthright like, oh, yeah, I was in the military for 10 years, and because that's obviously a huge part of who I am.

Evelyn shared a similar experience with Hannah and Addie; she reflected on a time when she shared her veteran status with a patient during her clinical rotations. Evelyn discussed when she could share her story as a woman veteran with a male patient at the VA hospital. Evelyn said,

> Patients have asked me. They're like what did you do? And I would tell them I'm like, oh, I was a medic and they asked me like, what did that mean? I said, Wherever the men would go, like I would be there.

She used this interaction as a nursing student to show her veteran patients not only that women medics exist, but they also exist in combat positions. All three of these participants felt empowered within their academic environments to share their veteran status and to bring that aspect of their life experience into their role as a student.

Hesitant to Share

On the opposite end of the willingness to share veteran identity spectrum, some participants, like Meg, Josie, and Zoe, were not as willing to share their identity as a veteran. A second-year law student, Zoe discussed several instances when this information was revealed "against the will." She said she does not lead with her service because when she entered law school, she was "at a point when she was tired of service and there were things that we did that I wasn't proud of." As Zoe reflected more about her veteran identity and her hesitancy to share, she said:

> I think sometimes with veterans, their entire identity is a veteran, you know, they have the hats like the ones they give out at the VFW or something. And like they have it on the back of the car and like that has been very much not how I am like. I feel like I'm such a multi-faceted person that it's always just been a part of who I am, but it's never been fully who I am (personal communication, December 23, 2024).

While Zoe was proud of her service and officership, she felt that her service contributed to who she was, but she had many important things ahead of her that would also contribute to who she would become. the time with Zoe ended with her saying, "I'm humble enough to understand that the service has contributed to it [her character], but it also like didn't make it or break it. So like there are things that there are things I'm going to be doing after this that will be impactful."

Meg and Josie shared a unique perspective on why they dislike sharing their veteran identity in academic spaces. Both participants experienced painful, gender-based military sexual trauma (MST), and both expressed that "no one cares about the service." When asked how she engages with her professors or classmates, Josie said:

> No one wants to hear the cool veteran stories…You know, I've been to 38 countries. I've had the most crazy life. Nobody gives a shit." She goes on to talk about how this rejection of her veteran

identity impacts her: “I don't know where the disconnect is, it's just I feel so different and isolated from everyone else because I am different, the mind thinks differently. It goes in a different pattern in a different flow, and I try to act normal and human and relate to people. You know, relate to the humans, but I am different, and I do things differently and I don't know, it's just weird. I struggle with it every day (personal communication, December 31, 2024).

Her veteran identity and her experience in the military causes her to feel isolated from her academic peers every day. Meg had a similar experience with Josie regarding receiving the message that no one cares about her service. She said,

> In classes I will talk about it. Most people don’t want to know about it unfortunately. It’s just the truth. They just don't want to know about, even if I made it 20 years, they just don't want to know about it because the atmosphere is basically is like, ‘You're a woman (personal communication, December 16, 2024).’

Meg made a point in her interview to reflect on how her veteran status allows her to “engage and feel comfortable going to the area [on campus] for veterans.” She remarked that when she talks with her male veteran student peers, she finds comfort in that community and is viewed as “equal in their eyes, but we're not equal in other people's eyes.” Zoe, Meg, and Josie are hesitant to share their veteran identity because of how it makes them feel when that information is disclosed without their consent, like Zoe, or when it causes more isolation, like Meg and Josie. During her interview, Josie was moved to tears as she reflected on how the lack of engagement with her veteran identity shows up in her life:

> I definitely have pulled back and tried to avoid talking about it. Yeah, I don't know because. It's just like I said, it's a combination of no one cares and no one can relate, and it just makes me stand out more, it makes me more weird.

Each WSV had a different relationship with their inclination to share their veteran identity in an academic space. Each person differs in where they fall within the willingness to share their veteran identity spectrum, and their willingness can depend on factors within their service. Hannah, Addie, and Evelyn's time in the military prompted them to be more willing to share. At the same time, Zoe, Meg, and Josie try to actively distance themselves from their service while in an academic space.

Research Question 2

Theme 1: Renegotiate a Sense of Service to Self

Several themes emerged from the interviews with the participants, reflecting on their changed views of service and their role as students. The following sections will discuss what they shared about how their race, ethnicity, gender expression, and other elements of their life intersect with their transition into higher education and how participants are on their paths to view higher education differently than the mission-based pace of the military.

Subtheme 1: Intersections with Race and Ethnicity

The women of color interviewed graciously discussed how, if at all, their experience differs from that of their white peers. Allison and Zoe discussed their experience as one of the few black women they saw in their respective units and what that meant. When she arrived at boot camp, Allison realized that she had to discard every assumption about her experience in the Army because of how her male peers reacted to her ability to keep up and surpass them with physical challenges. She says, "He said, I can't believe you being your size, weight, your height like you're. You're a black woman, you don't do stuff like that…(personal communication, December 20, 2024)." Allison continued reflecting on her realization of what serving as a Black woman meant for her.

> I'm going to have to fight for the people that look like me just based off a representation, even if it's for one person to understand. That you look at me or somebody like me doesn't mean I'm

going to not do the job in the same reason while you're here. I'm going to carry the load even though I might need help, or the body might break down on me.

Zoe echoed this sentiment as she discussed what it means to mentor other Air Force ROTC women at a local HBCU. When asked what it means to her to be able to mentor other black women who are future Air Force officers, she said,

> I think it means so much to me because I've never worked for a black female officer in every organization I've been in. I've been the only one, the only black female officer in that. I think it means a lot just to have certain conversations of, like prepare yourself. Hopefully these things never happen, but if they do, you know there's a way to handle them to where you don't lose your credibility to where you don't let hurt, like manifesting your own heart to where you can't be an effective part of your unit. I think it means a lot because when I didn't have those things, I spent a lot of time alone thinking about, like, what did I do to deserve this. Like how do I navigate this and that can be a lonely place, you know? I think to be able to give that to someone before they start means a lot to me because I hope that they can think back on one or two of those or reach.

August, an Afro-Puerto Rican and Muslim woman, talked at length about her faith system and her decision not to request to wear a hijab with her uniform. She said, “I didn’t go out of the way to request to wear a hijab…I kept that more close and I don't think I wanted to force the issue or make the like commands have to choose (personal communication, January 2, 2025).” August mentioned how she never received any pushback from her colleagues for her practices, especially during the month of Ramadan, when she needed to close her office door to pray. She recounted to me her experience living in New York City during the bombing of the World Trade Center in 1993 (U.S. Department of State, 2019). Before that incident, she wore a hijab but chose to stop wearing it because it drew negative and

unwanted attention to her. Reflecting on her time in the Navy and when asked about her decision to continue not covering her hair, she said: “I think I made a conscious decision when I joined that I was going to conform as much as I could.”

Allison, Zoe, and August all recounted their experiences in the military when they negotiated, reclaimed, or neglected their racial and ethnic identities. As women of color and as women of a non-Christian faith in the military, their experience proved to be complex and came with more layers of consideration for their safety than their white participant peers.

Subtheme 2: Higher education is not a mission or deployment

A second subtheme within this research theme is the trend of some WSV participants experiencing feelings of guilt and unsettledness as they adjust to how higher education is founded on an individual’s choices compared to the mission and deployment-based cycle of the military. When asked about their service and time in school, several participants recounted how school felt selfish compared to the mission-based work they experienced in the military. Hannah said,

> So you're like, put under stress and you have to get through things, especially some of the trainings to go overseas…I'm not working. I think I'll get this back, but like a feeling of like, oh, I'm doing something for someone else besides myself. And like self-worth. I feel like you have a really good sense of that when you're in the military. And then like when you're just in school and I'm only doing stuff for myself. I feel like once I become a nurse practitioner and I'm like helping other people again, I'll like have that again, but right now I just kind of like just getting through the trenches to an extent.

She explains how she felt a more palpable sense of a bigger purpose in the Navy, but once she transitioned into nursing school, she had to be patient with herself. Evelyn echoed this sentiment of searching for patience and grace with herself during her transition into nursing school. She said,

> There was a lot of patience, a lot of giving myself grace. I guess I could say that as well. Just because I remember it was kind of nice because I had about five months from when I stopped being active duty and surrounding myself with men 24/7 to when I started school, and now I'm surrounded by women. You know, I'm just now. I'm just home. I'll cook, I'll clean and then like, OK. That's it, you know and then I started school, and I remember freaking out. Because, you know, I've spent so many years with men, and especially. When we got deployed, I spent like nine months kind of speaking this language and then I remember when I started nursing school. I was just a little bit like, not scared, but I definitely held back a little bit in terms of like the personality.

Once Josie transitioned out of the Air Force and completed her master's degree, she began working as an executive assistant in the corporate sector. She walked me through what that experience was like for her as she transitioned out of an extreme environment like a Public Health clinic into the corporate setting. She said,

> It's hard for me to go from such extremes to and I think a lot of veterans, you know, have a difficult time with this. Like, I was actually important at one point. Like, I was their medic…And then I come to the states getting chewed out because the Diet Coke has expired, you know? And it was like so hard for me.

A medical student, Addie reflected on her guilt from leaving the service to attend medical school. She stated,

> This kind of I struggle with this a little bit too like guilt of having left the service having left the people that are still in the military, deploying kind of being put in harm's way and doing something that is so opposite. Whereas like going into school and it's like, feels a lot more like selfish in a way.

Addie also connected this guilty feeling with her role as a parent, which will be discussed in the following sections.

Zoe, an intelligence officer in the Navy, explained how her leadership position can conflict with her role as a student. She says,

> I think when you spend your time taking care of others, which I think inherently like military leaders do, especially officers, you come in very early, been giving a lot of responsibility over people. And then when it's just you, now you're like, oh, this is different like, you know, I haven't just had to worry about myself.

Throughout the interviews, I found that the participants had a warped sense of service as they took on the role of a student and were on their unique journeys of accepting their veteran identity related to the anti-mission environment of higher education.

Theme 2: Relationship with Femininity

A few common themes emerged from the interviews when the participants were asked about their relationship with their femininity. The following sections will discuss what they shared about the changing uniform regulations, parenting during service and transition, and the common gender-based stereotypes in the military.

Subtheme 1: Regulations changed in 2021

In January 2021, the US Army and Navy released updated (and more relaxed) grooming regulations for its members. These grooming guidelines aim to be more inclusive and to promote diversity within the various military branches (ASVAB, 2021). Notable regulation changes include allowing hairstyles like braids and ponytails. Additionally, acceptable nail colors other than neutral colors

and nail shapes were available to service members. Throughout the interviews, several participants discussed how these changes impacted their relationship with their femininity and gender expression.

Hannah was in the Navy when these regulations were implemented, and she reflected on cultural shifts she noticed that came with these new changes. She said,

> I remember like the day it was passed, all the leadership was like you can put your hair in ponytails now like they were telling us, but I think it's because they were excited about it cause a lot of the supervisors were women. They like, wanted us to all know, because if you aren't paying attention, you won't even know that the things have changed.

While Hannah's experience with regulation changes had more to do with her role as a mother, which will be discussed in the next section, Allison discussed how the changes impacted her as she wore natural hair in locs.

Allison noted how she and other Black women received some indirect messages about their locs. She said she received additional attention about her hair "more so because of like regulation purposes like locs can't be too big." Allison also gave insight into how she internalized the messages she was given about her natural hair and how it differed from her male peers. She said,

> Your locs are seen as a hair style, so they have to look like this. I mean, I always took it as the men were mad that they had to cut their hair like so. I'm just like, don't hate on me. Like, don't hate on anybody. Locs is a hair style, but locs are natural like regardless anybody in the world. Even if you're a man, woman. Just because I decided to lock the hair and regulations were in place in regards to that does not mean that I should be looked at any different.

Allison chose to wear her natural hair because it protected her hair from additional tension from tight regulation buns, and it was important to her to embrace the updated regulations. August chose to

wear her more naturally towards the end of her twenty-year career, and she discussed how that choice ultimately contributed to her deciding to leave the military.

> Towards the end of the career, I started wearing the hair more natural and I went to work one day the hair was out and it was curly, and it was just the hair. I walked in and the executive officer at the time, she was like she had this face, and she was like, 'what's wrong with you? What did you do to your hair?' And I was like, 'ma'am, this is the hair. Oh, you didn't know that I was black.' I remember this experience because she changed in the way that she interacted with me after that, which was really weird because she knows like she was from Jersey and she was, you know she seemed like she was OK, but after that it was like it became a very problematic relationship and I attributed to that conversation because I noticed that everything changed from then.

August was transferred to another department and filed an official complaint against her former executive officer. When asked what she thought of the new regulations, she supported the move toward inclusivity:

> They need to be more updated in a lot of ways, so sometimes when you see like the things that they're changing and the things that are being more inclusive, I think it's really nice. Yeah, because, I mean we're different. We were shaped differently. You know, everything is different, and I think that they should acknowledge those differences in the way that they interact with the different service members.

When Zoe discussed the updated regulations regarding her relationship with her gender expression, she felt the updated regulations allowed her to take pride in what she enjoyed about her femininity. At the time of her interview, her nails were painted green for Christmas, and she was happy to tell me she paints her nails a different color for each holiday she wants to celebrate, and the newly

approved nail polish colors allowed her to do that with more choices. Zoe said, “I found a way to fit whatever it was that you could do and I'm like, OK, I'm going to still be myself. I'm like after work, I'm a person. I want to feel like one.”

The grooming regulation changes in 2021 sparked conversations in the interviews around gender expression and how each woman who experienced these changes processed their gender expression. Institutional shifts toward inclusivity around gender continued when talking with participants who were parents during their service and transition into higher education.

Subtheme 2: Parenting during service and/or transition

Six out of the twelve participants are mothers. Each of these six women had insightful reflections on how their role as a parent impacted their time in the military and higher education.

Experience with maternity leave and having a family

Addie had a child while on active duty and recounted her experience being pregnant and a new mother. She felt she had her child at a good time in her career and she received support from her female supervisor in regards to taking leave, accommodating for how her life changed after birth with things like “pumping, dropping off at daycare, and all the emotions I was having.” Addie then explained how her desire to move on from the Navy benefited her but would have potentially been harmful to her career. She said,

> I think the biggest thing I struggled with was and this was fortunate because I didn't want to stay in the Navy, but I think if I had ended up wanting to stay in the Navy. The way that I got ranked when I got back from maternity leave was like kind of crazy to me. And the boss's boss when he sat me down was like, Oh yeah, this ranking is just because, like, you weren't here. You were on maternity leave. I was like, well, OK, but. And I'd also like just recently checked into so I get it, but it was like based on like how long I've been there, there's kind of like a flow that you put

people in. In case they wanted to stay in and, like, do further things. I think maybe in the long run that could have hurt me.

Hannah's experience with motherhood in the Navy was similar to Addie's. As Hannah discussed the updated grooming regulations, she mentioned how an additional four weeks were added to women's maternity leave, and men were now eligible to take paternal leave. She describes the Navy as "very family friendly" because she was able to take off for her daughter's doctor appointments as long as there were not any pressing things going on with her squadron, and her supervisors understood if she needed to leave to take care of her daughter if her husband was not available.

August joined the Navy as a parent and had her youngest child while on active duty. She said,

> Joining as a parent is tough…you go to boot camp, you go to your initial trainings and then you go to your first ship. It's hard for you, but it's hard for them because you know children, they feel abandoned when you are not there.

August talked a great deal about the stress of military life and its toll on families, especially children. The number of deployments and moves a family experiences is a stress point for kids and some marriages. August was able to reflect on how she has seen the sheer number of changes impact her, "It's very hard on families, you know, you have to when you go on deployment and you come back, you have to relearn everything and everything and you have to learn how to interact with your families again." In the conversations about motherhood, a natural conversation about adaptability kept coming up with the participants.

Motherhood as a WSV

In interviews with the mothers in the participant pool, a trend of time management and resilience emerged as they connected their roles of mother, veteran, and student. Hannah noted that transitioning into nursing school as a parent was the most challenging part of her transition. Her

daughter was still young when she enrolled in school and her days began at 4:00 am every day of the week to study and prepare for class so she could reserve her time for family time in the evenings, after daycare and school. She describes this time as “running on a hamster wheel,” and she could “barely keep up some days.” Hannah credits her time in the military and being trained to be time-focused and diligent, which helped her, especially when her role as a mother was incredibly demanding.

Addie shared some insightful thoughts about the “mom guilt” she experienced when she first enrolled in medical school. As she spoke about the guilt she was feeling leaving the service, she also had to grapple with the guilt she felt about being a parent and a student. She said,

> You have an end goal and it's OK to be pursuing that, and it's OK that the military wasn't your lifelong thing and that kind of goes with parenting, too. Like, there's also always guilt there. Like, if you're not at home, you know. But I think it does kind of all come to kind of reconciling that and being OK with like this is the path now and that doesn't mean that that doesn't discount the past.

Charlotte became a mother after her military service ended and discussed her experience completing her doctoral degree with a toddler. Like Hannah, time management was her highest priority as she balanced being a new mom and a student and being a “a wife and a full-time worker at the same time (personal communication, December 30, 2024).” as Charlotte said. She credited her time in the military to her ability to manage stressful situations.

Faculty interactions

Josie described a particularly hostile relationship with a faculty member in her doctoral program. She walked through several instances when this faculty member discounted her military service in the classroom by questioning the validity of her telling of her time in combat. Josie says the dismissive reception from this faculty member “tainted the way that I see him and how I know he’s

going to perceive me from now on." Later in the semester, this same faculty member gave her "another spiel about being a "mama bear" and said, 'you know, think about your son. Think about why you're here." Josie's response explained that she had to be a student at that moment, not just a mother. She went to say, "I don't want to think about the kid right now. because. I need to focus on the classwork. I actually don't wanna think about him in this moment because I need to focus." Josie talked more about the significance of this incident and commented that "he would have never said to man- you're a dad think about why you're here." The weaponization of motherhood impacted Josie in a very hurtful way.

In contrast to Josie's experience with faculty members, Charlotte discussed how supportive her faculty members were when she was a new mom. She described her faculty members as forgiving and did not worry about any late assignments she turned in for their classes. Charlotte's faculty members celebrated and supported her role as a mother, while Josie frequently interacted with a faculty member who demeaned her female and veteran identities. The next subtheme discusses the gender-based military stereotypes the participants discussed and how their roles as mothers intersected with them.

Subtheme 3: Gender-based military stereotypes

In nearly half of the interviews, the participants named two or three common (and derogatory) gender-based stereotypes they encountered in the military. Emma was the first to name the stereotypes:

> There are three types of female marines, and this is all across the board. There are lesbians, whores or barracks bunnies, or bitches. That's it. You are one of the three. Like there's no in between. You can't just be a nice straight person because then you're easy or you're gonna be labeled like a whore. Like, if you if I showed any kindness to the male counterparts that didn't know me well, they automatically assume I want to sleep with them. And that's just the baseline.

Emma, who was married at the time to a male Marine, was uninterested in her male counterparts and was perceived as a lesbian until her relationship became public. She explained that she was comfortable with the men in her unit thinking she was gay because “they left her alone.”

Evelyn, who is an openly gay woman, explained how she navigated the negative stereotypes:

> It was definitely always because I will get hit on by the boys and I'd be like no, like we're on the same team, buddy. And they're like “what?” and then I will have to explain it to them because they don't even know what that means. So it's a lot of that. And then once I got married, it just got easier. I would say the wife, and then I would take her to the military ball with me and people got to see.

Other participants, like Sloane and Josie, also discussed the prevalence of these derogatory stereotypes during their service. Sloane explained how she was instructed to carry herself as a woman in the Marine Corps: “They wanted you to like, respect yourself as a woman and would say things like don't go around being a walking mattress.” Josie echoed how this ‘bitch vs whore’ attitude was presented in her everyday life in the Air Force. She said,

> I would either like we always used to jokingly say, but also true that there are only two types of women in the military, bitches and whores, and you have to pick one to fit in. I would go the bitch route. You know, there was a lot of people that didn't like me and I didn't care because it was better than getting jerked off and thrown on. You know, if you're too nice or too passive or just there, then you're a target. You know, if you're a bitch and you talk shit and you make fun of their little dicks and stuff, then they leave you alone, you know? And that sucks.

Allison explained that she also took on the ‘bitch’ stereotype and how that intersected with her race. When asked how if at all, her identity as a black woman connects with these stereotypes that women must confront, Allison used the word “hurdles.” She expounded on her thoughts:

> It's never been easy for women period to get what they need and want from the world, and then you put on another layer...like Because they the one question I got asked every morning. Mind you, it's about 435 o'clock in the morning, up for formations. They're like, why do you always have this resting bitch face? Excuse the bitch face, OK, I'm tired. So that person asking me that is thinking I am an angry black woman.

As Allison processed this intersection of race and derogatory stereotypes, she gave an example of how it plays out in her everyday life. She said, “I did not make people feel like home, if that makes sense. Not at ease like whatsoever, because I was used to having that hard, rough exterior. I didn't know how to turn that off. I did not know how to code switch.” Her mother noticed how her 17-year-old daughter who enlisted “no longer exists,” Allison credits her relationship with her roommate, who made her transition easier. The following sections provide insight into how the interview participants engage with their campus community and bring their entire selves and identities into the academic space.

Theme 3: Campus Engagement

The final theme from the interviews came about when participants discussed how they engage with their campus community, including faculty members and student organizations. The two subthemes within this topic are positive and negative engagement with faculty members and student affairs professionals and Increased involvement on campus.

Subtheme 1: Positive & Negative Engagement with Veteran Identity

Positive Engagement

As women student veterans, participants like Emma, Charlotte, and Meg had positive experiences engaging with their campus communities, specifically with faculty members and student

affairs professionals. When Emma first met her department head and mentor, the faculty member instantly recognized that Emma was a Marine. She described this initial meeting:

> As soon as I walked in the room, she was like "prior marine." And I it just. It shook me and she was like you know something that we also kind of can relate to each other- She is also 5'10". And she was also in a hugely male dominated field. Her and I have been through very similar struggles just trying to be recognized as like a human being in a misogynistic field.

Throughout her first semesters, Emma experienced a challenging PTSD episode, and her mentor provided her accommodations and was a source of support during that time. Having this support source, Emma describes herself as a "second mom," which gave her a person on campus who saw her as an individual and a student who "has the own life going on." Charlotte, who was completing her dissertation with a toddler, had faculty members in her doctoral program who were lenient with her as needed with assignments and projects. With the help of her faculty members, she could focus on her time management skills and figure out how to balance all the parts of her life that existed outside of her life as a student.

Meg recalled her positive experience seeking assistance from the Veterans Resource Office (VRO) at her institution. She encountered nearly four decades of denial of services from the Department of Veterans Affairs, so once she arrived on campus, the staff members of the VRO emboldened her to continue seeking assistance from the VA and to seek disability accommodations through the institution. Throughout the interview, Meg frequently told me instances when she advocated for herself and other students and explained that the VRO staff helped her "stand up for herself."

Negative Engagement

Conversely, several participants discussed instances of campus engagement that negatively intersected with their veteran identity. Josie, a doctoral student, recalled another troubling interaction

with a male faculty member who questioned and weaponized her military service. When speaking with her professor during office hours, she asked a question about a recent lecture, his response was, “Why are you here? Why are you still here? What are you doing here? If you don't understand any of this stuff, then why are you still here?” This reaction caused Josie to have a strong reaction because it caught her off guard, and she was not prepared to have him react this way to her sincere question. A few moments later, the professor said: “Are you telling me you’re a combat veteran and you’re about to cry in the class?” As Josie reflected on how this interaction impacted her, she explained she “doesn’t want to be paranoid and think of mental or physical attacks coming at me all the time.” This faculty member is a source of stress for Josie because he chooses to demean her as a woman, mother, and veteran.

Allison explained how she chooses to enroll in online classes whenever possible because of experiences with professors when she is called for drill or active duty. As a member of the National Guard, her unit gets called to aid areas impacted by natural disasters. Her unit was called to mobilize quickly to serve areas affected by a hurricane in the state during a week she had three exams; not all professors were understanding and questioned her absence even when she provided proof she was away on drill or a mission. These faculty members who do not understand her role as a member of the National Guard have pushed Allison to be a distance student and limited her engagement on campus.

Each of these instances of positive and negative engagement with faculty and staff impacted the women because either the faculty/staff member actively worked to support their veteran identity or to add another barrier to the participant’s desire to engage with their campus community.

Subtheme 2: Involvement on Campus

The study participants shared many experiences with faculty and staff members and how they engage their intersecting identities on their campuses. The range of engagement for this group of WSVs is vast and impressive, much like the population sample itself.

Zoe discussed her involvement with a local HBCU's Air Force ROTC program. When we talked about her relationship with the women cadets specifically, she said: "I hope that they'll pay that forward in doing that to the next person, you know." It is important for Zoe to serve those around her and the next generation of Black women officers in the Air Force. She continues serving her institution as a Law School Ambassador; she told me more about that role:

> I meet a lot with prospective students. Give them tours, meet with alumni, meet with admissions and administration for the school to figure out how can we better reach prospective students or what can we do to modernize our processes?

Being an ambassador allows her to access the core principles of her veteran identity, which she names:

> I think from being a veteran, I would hope just like being very respectful, respectful of people's time, it's OK to disagree with people about fundamental things. That doesn't mean that, like you have to be disrespectful to them or be at odds with them, and I think that's something that I wish we could do a better job at, like as a whole, like, you know, doesn't make someone evil to think something different.

August, another student in the legal academic space, recently joined the Women's Legal Association at her institution, and she talked with me about what that community means to her:

> They started having meetings and I came in and there are there are women veterans that are a part of the group. It's the camaraderie is still there that that you get from being on active duty, but it's a little different.

Having a community designed to support her as a woman in the legal field and as a student gave August a place to join her roles in one place.

As Meg talked more about transition into higher education, she disclosed that she is a disabled student and a member of the Lakota tribe. Being a disabled student impacts every aspect of her life, which compelled her to join the Student Advisory Committee in her university library. Additionally, she serves as the Vice President of the Disabled Students Honor Society. An event she is proud of assisting in planning is a Disability Town Hall, which served the 1,500 students registered for accommodations at her institution. Her work as a disabled student helped her connect with other women, some of whom are disabled students, including another Indigenous student.

Meg and this student began to talk about the absence of an Indigenous student organization, and they came to find out such an organization does exist but is not active. She has worked with her peers and administration to restart the organization, and a scholarship for Indigenous students was recently established. As the interview concluded, Meg proudly told her plans to wear her traditional Lakota garments and her student veteran stole at graduation. Her intersecting identities as a disabled student, woman student veteran, and Indigenous student directly informed the type of engagement she created on her campus.

Conclusion

This chapter presented descriptions of the participants, the study's findings, and themes found within the data. Additionally, this chapter included a detailed response to each research question and corresponding findings from participant interviews. The first research question within this study contained three main themes: Strong Academic Performances, Adaptability, and Veteran Status (Hesitant vs Not Hesitant to Share). The second research question within this study also contained three main themes: Renegotiate a Sense of Service to Self, Relationship with Femininity, and Campus Engagement.

The culture of the United States military informed the participant's academic careers in ways seen in their strong academic performances, their ability to adapt to the changing needs of their coursework, and their desire, or lack thereof, to share their veteran status to their community on campus. The participants shared how they learned the skill of diligence from their time in the military and how that work ethic shows up in their academic programs. The learned behavior of "improvise, adapt, and overcome" is seen in each person in this study. Some participants were more comfortable disclosing their veteran identity, while others were not as quick to share that part of their life. The highly structured yet fluid culture of the United States military directly impacted how these women student veterans transitioned into higher education.

The participants in this study discussed how their identity as a woman student veteran impacted the perceived interactions with their race, ethnicity, and gender expression. The study found some participants were on their development tracks in accepting that their time as students was not a deployment or a mission with a unit; it was their task to accomplish, and it did not discount their past military service. Additionally, the participants in this study shared how their relationship with femininity intersects with recent regulation changes for things like hair and nails, their role as mothers, and how they view and process the derogatory, gender-based stereotypes in the military. The women in this study explained how the relationship between their femininity is impacted by systemic gestures of inclusivity, such as allowing hair to be worn in ways other than a bun to accommodate those who want to wear their natural hair. Several participants were mothers before serving, while others started families while enlisted. As they added on the role of student, some of these women had to balance being a mother and caregiver. With the help of supportive faculty and staff members, these participants could healthily engage with their campus communities while negotiating how they fit into the culture of higher education. Finally, this chapter discussed how these twelve participants engaged with their

campus and peers. Some positively engaged with faculty members, student organizations, and community partners, while others had more difficulty making meaningful connections on campus.

These twelve participants willingly shared about their military service, lives, and path to higher education. They demonstrated resilience, flexibility, and empathy for other women veterans and their future patients, clients, and colleagues. The next chapter of this study will discuss the research questions, demonstrate the relationship of the findings to the appropriate literature, and provide study conclusions, implications, and recommendations for future research.

Chapter 5: Discussion

Introduction

This phenomenological case study examined the experiences of Women Student Veterans during their transition into higher education. The two main research questions of this study are as follows:

How does the culture of the United States military inform a Woman Student Veteran (WSV)'s transition into American higher education?

How is the identity development of a WSV impacted by their perceived interactions with race, ethnicity, and gender expression?

This chapter discusses the interpretations of the research using the thematic findings presented in Chapter 4. Additionally, this chapter provides Theoretical and Empirical Implications, Limitations, Implications for Practice and Future Research, and a Conclusion to this study.

Discussion

This section examines interpretations of the study by discussing the thematic findings in Chapter 4. First, this section will summarize the themes found within the participant data and the theoretical and empirical implications of those themes. Next, the study's limitations will be discussed, followed by implications for practice and future research, and a conclusion to give readers a summary of the study.

Interpretation of Findings

Summary of Thematic Findings

This study examined the transition of women student veterans from the United States military to Higher Education. Two research questions were developed to guide this study, and themes within each research question were developed during data analysis. The first research question sought to

identify how the culture of the military informs the participant's academic life. In contrast, the second research question examined how the participants' identities, like their race, ethnicity, and gender expression, intersect with their identity as students. For the first research question, the following themes emerged:

Theme 1: Strong Academically

Theme 2: Adaptability

Theme 3: Veteran Status (Hesitant vs Not Hesitant).

For the second research question, the following themes and subthemes emerged:

Theme 1: Renegotiate a Sense of Service to Self

Subtheme 1: Intersections with Race and Ethnicity

Subtheme 2: Higher education is not a mission or deployment

Theme 2: Relationship with Femininity

Subtheme 1: Regulations changed in 2021

Subtheme 2: Parenting during service and/or transition

Subtheme 3: Gender-based military stereotypes

Theme 3: Campus Engagement

Subtheme 1: Positive & Negative Engagement with Veteran Identity

Subtheme 2: Involvement on Campus

The collection of themes represents the complex experience of WSV's transition from the military to higher education. The following sections provide detailed discussions of each research question and its' corresponding themes.

Research Question 1

Three themes were present when considering how the hypermasculine culture of the military informed the participant's transition into higher education. These themes are strong academics, adaptability, and veteran status (hesitant vs not hesitant to share).

Theme 1

Many participants expressed their pride in being academically successful by reporting their 4.0 grade point average or by expressing their idea of success simply meant they have continued to enroll in their program each semester. These participants who discussed their academic success credited their military service as a critical element to their success. The time-focused, highly stressful environment of the military aided these women in finding the diligence needed to do well in school. Hannah reflected on this skill: "I think being in the military and being so time focused and being able to be diligent helps me a lot…compared to my peers."

Another aspect of this theme that is found within the data is that more than one participant reported how the military gave them the confidence to embrace their role as students; as servicemembers, they were often given instructions without all of the contexts that non-veteran students are used to receiving, but the WSVs explained how this difference between cultures benefitted them in their transition. One participant, Evelyn, described how she had "no fear of failure," while Addie noted,

> In the end I don't see like a huge difference other than maybe my willingness to just kind of like throw myself into unknown situations without prior preparation. Like there's a lot of people that want to know, you know, what are steps 1- 8 before we do it, whereas I'm just kind of like, OK, throw me in it. We'll figure it out when we do it.

Theme 2

This cultural difference brought up the skill of adaptability within the participant population. I heard common phrases during interviews: “improvise, adapt, and overcome.” As veterans, they mastered bending and changing their approach, as needed, to academics. Quinn describes herself as “very, very flexible,” and Charlotte said, “I don't think there's a challenge that I've been given that I haven't been able to overcome. Not to sound cliche, but [I credit that] to the military.” The study participants were quick to name how they had to be adaptable in the military and saw how that skill now benefits them.

Theme 3

The final theme within the first research question was how inclined or not the participants were to share their Veteran Status (Hesitant vs Not Hesitant). Within the participants, each person fell on a different point within this spectrum. Some folks, like Hannah, Addie, and Evelyn, felt comfortable bringing their entire selves to academic spaces, including their veteran status. In contrast, some participants, like Meg, Josie, and Zoe, were not as willing to share their identity as veterans when they reflected on their experiences. While there were various reasons for being willing to share their veteran status, all participants felt proud of their service but wanted to be able to self-select when and how they shared that information with their academic peers. In some instances, the opportunity to share about their life as a veteran came up naturally, which prompted Addie to remark:

> I think when it comes up naturally I will because I think a lot of times as students like oh, people are like, what did you do before? So it's not necessarily the first thing I lead with, but as soon as it comes up, I'm forthright like, oh, yeah, I was in the military for 10 years, and because that's obviously a huge part of who I am.

Conversely, Josie had a profoundly negative experience in the classroom when her military career was brought into the conversation, “No one wants to hear my cool veteran stories…You know, I've been to 38 countries. I've had the most crazy life. Nobody gives a shit.” Josie does not share a core part of her life and relevant work experience because she is treated differently when she shares that part of her life.

Within these three themes, a story comes together of a group of successful students who are adaptable and experience a range of comfortability, bringing their entire selves along with them as they transition into higher education.

Connection to Theory and Literature

The three themes found within research question 1 presented ties to elements of Culver’s proposed Gender Identity Development of Women in the Military theory (2013). According to Culver (2013), WSVs encounter four phases of identity development: Feeling the need to put on a mask, wearing a mask, Recognizing and experiencing the consequences of wearing a mask, and Struggling to take off the mask. Phase two, “Wearing a Mask,” begins when women begin to employ compensation strategies related to insecurities identified in the feeling of the need to put on a mask phase (Culver, 2019, p. 70). This phase contains two identities: wearing the warrior and femininity masks. These two identities revolved around the insecurities the WSV feels related to the military and civilian societies’ perceived expectations of being a warrior. Culver posits when WSVs feel insecure about various elements of their identity, for example how they outwardly express their gender, they using strategies that are more traditionally masculine or more feminine.

In this study, Meg and Zoe exhibited how they negotiate how these “masks” show up in their life as students. All three of these WSV are hesitant to share their veteran status or “warrior mask” because

their perception of how their campus community received that information was negative. For example, Meg recounted how she feels that “no one wants to hear my veteran stories…no one gives a shit.” Zoe enters academic spaces and actively distances herself from the “warrior mask:”

> People have revealed this information [veteran status] against will. I actually don't lead with it often. And I think that not that I wanted to dissociate from that. But I feel like I am a multifaceted person. It's always just been a part of who I am, but it's never been fully who I am.

Culver’s Gender Identity Development of Women in the Military theory was represented in this study as participants further discussed how they make meaning of their femininity and warrior masks. Culver (2013) remarked how the final stage, *struggling to take off the mask*, “requires women to develop an authentic gender identity, it is difficult for them to do so before they are no longer influenced by external factors” (Culver, 2013, p. 69). The term “gender compensation” is used in Culver (2013) to illustrate how WSV employ strategies associated with wearing these femininity and warrior masks. Further, Culver (2013) explains how more junior WSV may not experience phases 3 and 4 of the proposed gender identity development because often the dissonance they experience relating to their gender may not occur until they leave the military. The dissonance between their true identity and the strategies they implemented while in the military will often cause them to question their employment of compensation strategies (Culver, 2013). Participants in this study discussed their own “gender compensation” strategies and demonstrated how identity development is non-linear and complex. Allison shared her experience with gender compensation strategies,

> Whenever you have more features that a man has, and you’re in a male dominated field its easier. I’m not tall, I still have and did have locs. I do not a high-pitched voice that helped me a lot, turns out and on top of that I am a woman. So those four things alone definitely had their set back because they did not expect me to know anything, do anything or help with anything.

> They already had that pre-expectation of I don't why she's here, but we're just going to figure it out [without her]. Day one of basic I gave them a run for their money. I was picking up things no other men wanted to pick up…things of that nature.

Allison articulated how she had traditionally feminine features like height, gender, and a natural hair style, that worked against her in the Army, while also having traditionally masculine traits like a low-pitched voice and a strong physical performance that gained her respect in the eyes of her peers. Allison further reflected on how these compensation strategies translated into her transition into higher education, specifically when interacting with her male professors and male civilians,

> I had male professors and male civilians that were around me trying and testing me in different ways that I'm not used to or even touched in a way. I just came out of dealing with a whole different side of the world, so I was more aggressive and not submissive. I was used to having a hard, rough exterior and I didn't know how to turn that off. I did not code switch.

Emma echoed this sentiment of not being able to code switch, or taking off the warrior mask, in an educational space, as she discussed a confrontation she had with a professor,

> I got there three minutes late. She locked the door to the classroom, and I knocked on the door and she looked at me, kept talking and I knocked on the door again. We started class, and she said, "just letting you know you will be counted absent for this period." I was there as per institution policy so I told her "You will not count me absent, or I'll report you." I don't like being treated like a child, and that's something the Marine Corps very much instilled in me is that I am an individual strong person. I have the right to speak up if I feel like something is wrong or something's not right, I will use my confidence and I will speak up.

As stated in Baechtold & De Sawal (2009), when WSV are removed from the system of the military a crisis of identity can occur as they struggle to re-assume their roles as civilians. Allison and

Emma illustrated the unique gender identity tension WSV experience as they deconstruct which masks they wear. Researchers like Baechtold and De Sawal have identified as this tension as a "crisis" for some WSV,

> When their military occupation is removed and a new vocation must be found in a college or university setting, many women veterans face a unique identity crisis. The way in which they constructed meaning for their life is not appreciated on campus as it was in the military. As a result of this dissonance, women veterans need to socially construct a new identity that is specifically related to gender in order to make meaning of the collegiate environment (Baechtold & De Sawal, 2009, p.40).

The participants in this study shared how this tension often pushed them to be more flexible and resilient than their peers. This trend of adaptability and strength of WSV is a common trend in other studies like Atkinson (2019), Machtan (2019), and Cowley & Sandhoff (2017).

In addition to Culver (2013), themes from the first research questions contain parallels to Sorenson's (2018) study that explored the transition of women student veterans in and through college. Sorenson (2018) structured their study on Schlossberg's Transition Theory and described the participant's experience using the 4 Ss found in Schlossberg (1981). In the Moving Through phase, Sorenson (2018) found that time management was key to the participants' success. In later sections of this study, the skill of time management and its importance are discussed in more depth, specifically for participants who are parents. Unlike Sorenson (2018), participants in this study, like Charlotte and Quinn, credited her time in the military as a foundational experience contributing to her ability to adapt and manage her time. When asked where she learned to adapt and manage her time, Charlotte said,

> Not to sound cliche, but [I credit that skill] to the military. I mean, you're put through a lot of stressful, stressful situations and you have to manage, balance, and go with the flow.

Quinn is a doctoral student and reflected on how she feels her experience transitioning into her program differs from her non-veteran peers. She said,

> I'm able to be very, very flexible. But I know a lot of my peers have to be hand-held and I'm just like, this is life. Sometimes they throw a wrench; you have to deal with it. You know, you got to adapt.

Additionally, the Moving Through phase focused more on instructors needing to be aware that female veterans are a unique student demographic and not always capable of doing the same thing as traditional students (Sorenson, 2018). Baechtold and De Sawal (2009) demonstrated the unique skill set needed when working with WSVs. Ideal WSV student services involve understanding gender identity issues and the transitions associated with moving from the role of an active military member to that of a civilian college student. Select participants in this study had insights into the impact of tailored student services through positive and negative interactions with faculty members.

Meg reflected on how she compared the student veteran experience and treatment of male veteran students to her experience as a WSV:

> I think the male veteran students are acknowledged more in classes. When they acknowledge me as a female veteran, I really have to stand up for myself. If came here dressed in a uniform and stood next to a guy dressed in a uniform, they're going to talk to the guy before they're going to talk to me Because they haven't acknowledged the idea that there is such a thing as women veterans.

Hirudayaraj & Clay (2019) reported similar experiences from women veterans in the private sector to Meg's reflections on her experience in higher education. Female veterans reported a lack of respect, recognition, and growth opportunities compared to male veterans (Hirudayaraj & Clay, 2019, p.486). To combat this lack of respect, recognition, and growth opportunities for WSVs within higher

education, educators are tasked with facilitating an environment in which WSVs are successful. Greer (2020) offers suggestions for adult educators. To facilitate successful transitions, adult education programs for female veterans should include specific characteristics to accommodate the unique needs of women separating from the military. Personal agency is the key factor underlying the efforts of adult educators to achieve an accommodating environment (Greer, 2020, p.160).

Participants in this study exhibited high levels of personal agency when they discussed, especially when they began to discuss how their identities, like race, ethnicity, parenthood, and sexual orientation, interact with their veteran status. The following research question and data analysis reveal a deeper understanding of their transition.

Research Question 2

Several themes emerged about how their race, ethnicity, gender expression, and other elements of their life intersect with their transition into higher education. Additionally, participants discussed how they view higher education differently than the mission-based pace of the military, revealing a tendency of participants to renegotiate their sense of service.

Theme 1

During data analysis, some participants discussed their processes of renegotiating a sense of service for themselves. Two subthemes are associated with this theme. The first subtheme, Intersections with Race and Ethnicity, was prevalent most in interviews with women of color and women with historically excluded identities, such as being members of a non-Christian faith. Allison recounted her experience of being underestimated because of her gender and race. She performed equally to her male peers, who were surprised she was meeting the physical requirements of the Army and said, “I can't believe you being your size, weight, your height like you're. You're a black woman, you

don't do stuff like that…" to her. Allison realized she was bearing the burden of representing all black women just "based on a representation." Zoe is a Naval Intelligence Officer who mentors current Air Force ROTC members at a local HBCU. She talked about the significance this role has in her life,

> I've been the only one, the only black female officer in that. It means a lot just to have certain conversations, like prepare yourself. Hopefully these things never happen, but if they do, you know there's a way to handle them to where you don't lose your credibility to where you don't let hurt, like manifesting your own heart to where you can't be an effective part of your unit.

August, an Afro-Puerto Rican and Muslim woman, discussed her decision not to request to wear a hijab as part of her approved uniform. She said she wanted to keep that "more close and I don't want to force the issue or make my commands have to choose." A common notion in interviews with women of color and women of a non-Christian faith in the military is that their experience came with more layers of consideration for their safety and increased pressure to perform than their white participant peers.

The second subtheme in theme one is a trend within some of the WSV who expressed feelings of guilt and unsettledness as they adjust to how higher education is founded on an individual's choices compared to the mission and deployment-based cycle of the military. The mission and deployment-based military life pattern gave the participants a sense of purpose. Some participants recounted how returning to school felt selfish when transitioning into higher education. Hannah explained this feeling,

> I think I'll get this back, but like a feeling of like, oh, I'm doing something for someone else besides myself. And like self worth. I feel like you have a really good sense of that when you're in the military. And then like when you're just in school and I'm only doing stuff for myself. I feel like once I become a nurse practitioner and I'm like helping other people again, I'll like have that again, but right now I just kind of like just getting through the trenches to an extent.

During our interview, Addie, a medical student, took some time to reflect on the guilt she felt leaving the Navy. She said,

> This kind of I struggle with this a little bit too like guilt of having left the service having left the people that are still in the military, deploying kind of being put in harm's way and doing something that is so opposite. Whereas like going into school and it's like, feels a lot more like selfish in a way.

Josie and Zoe shared how they often struggle to fit their past respective leadership and service roles and their role as a student together harmoniously. Zoe said,

> I think when you spend your time taking care of others, which I think inherently like military leaders do, especially officers…And then when it's just you, now you're like, oh, this is different like, you know, I haven't just had to worry about myself.

When Josie transitioned into a corporate role after her Air Force career, she was struck by how different the nature of the problems was from the issues she encountered in the military. She said, “it's hard for me to go from such extremes to and I think a lot of veterans, you know, have a difficult time with this.” The drastic changes in environments and expectations impacted these WSVs’ transition into the role of a student. They prompted a negotiation of their sense of service with their life after military service. The WSV in this study resonated with wanting to serve others while accomplishing their personal goals, like completing their degree programs.

Theme 2

The second theme from research question 2 came from discussions around the participant’s relationship with their femininity. Three subthemes within this theme demonstrate the areas in which this relationship has come up for this study’s participants.

The first subtheme centers on the grooming regulations updated in January 2021. These regulation changes aim to be more inclusive and to encourage diversity within various military branches (ASVAB, 2021). The most common regulation changes discussed in the interviews with participants were the added hairstyle options like braids and ponytails and the expansion of acceptable nail shapes and polish colors. Some WSV in this study talked with me about the indirect and direct messages they received when they wore their hair more naturally and in locs. Allison chose to wear her hair in locs because it protected her hair, and it was important for her to embrace the new regulations. She mentioned she received some negative attention from her male peers because of her peers, which caused her some disdain. She said, "Just because I decided to loc my hair and regulations were in place regarding that does not mean that I should be looked at any different."

Similarly, August chose to wear her more naturally towards the end of her twenty-year career as a Naval Paralegal, and she shared how that choice ultimately contributed to her deciding to leave the military. After her white supervisor noticed her natural hair, August says, "I remember this experience because she changed in the way that she interacted with me after that…" This experience was significant to August and cemented her opinion that the updated regulations are a step forward because they acknowledge how each servicemember is an individual. Conversations with the updated regulations carried over to how institutional regulations aimed at gender equality informed their roles as parents and students.

Half of the participants in this study are parents and had thoughtful remarks on how their identity as a parent interacts with their relationship with femininity and their role as students. Some participants became parents while on active duty and shared a similar experience with updated maternity regulations that came along with the grooming regulations in 2021. Hannah and Addie described the Navy as "family-friendly" and received four additional weeks of maternity leave.

Conversely, August started her family before she joined the military and noted that “joining as a parent was tough.” Each conversation with the parent participants had an added sense of service because they often had to battle wanting to be a present mother and students. Addie shared her experience with this additional layer of guilt she experienced when she began medical school. As Addie talked about the guilt she felt leaving the service, she also had to grapple with guilt about being a parent and a student. These participants identified time management as the top skill that helped them achieve balance between their school life and life as a mother.

The final subtheme within theme 2 is the presence of the common (and derogatory) gender-based stereotypes the participants encountered in the military. Emma was the first participant to name them: “There are three types of female marines, and this is across the board. There are lesbians, whores or barracks bunnies, or bitches.” Everyone who spoke about these stereotypes discussed how they often leaned into the “bitch” option because it kept them the safest. Josie elaborated more on this difficult choice to choose a negative stereotype and explained how she had to find the impossible balance of “not being too nice or too passive or just there, then you're a target” and “you know, there was a lot of people that didn't like me and I didn't care.”

The topic of these gender-based stereotypes prompted Allison to reflect on how her decision to be a “bitch” intersected with her race, specifically with her demeanor outside of military environments. She said,

> I did not make people feel like home, if that makes sense. Not at ease like whatsoever, because I was used to having that hard, rough exterior. I didn't know how to turn that off. I did not know how to code switch.

Allison expressed difficulty joining her veteran identity with the socialized expectations of how to perform femininity. Sloane had a similar experience in the Marine Corps when she was instructed to

carry herself as a woman Marine: “They wanted you to like, respect yourself as a woman and would say things like don't go around being a walking mattress.” The participants’ relationships with these stereotypes show how the hypermasculine culture of the military has an impact on their role as students.

Theme 3

The final theme within the second research question relates to how the participants engage with their campus community, including faculty members and student organizations. Both positive and negative engagement trends were found among the participants. There were also commonalities in how the population sample became involved on their campuses. Their involvement was often paired with organizations that advocate and celebrate their shared identities.

Emma, Charlotte, and Meg recounted positive experiences engaging with their campus communities, specifically with faculty members and student affairs professionals. Emma and Charlotte formed relationships with their faculty members, who supported them during challenging moments. Meg included remarks on how pivotal the Veterans Resource Office (VRO) staff was to her when she had to advocate for assistance from the VA and seek disability accommodations through the institution.

Contrarily, a few participants discussed instances of campus engagement that negatively intersected with their veteran identity. Josie, a doctoral student, recalled a problematic interaction with a male faculty member who questioned and weaponized her military service. This faculty member often questions and trivializes Josie’s service, which causes her additional stress and paranoia. Allison echoed Josie’s experience with faculty members and explained how she chooses to take online classes whenever possible. When her unit of the state National Guard was quickly called away to a natural disaster, she had professors who did not understand her veteran status and the unique

accommodations she required. This caused Allison additional stress, ultimately impacting her decision to be a distance learner and informing how she forms a community on campus.

When discussing how these WSVs decided how and where to engage on campus, they tapped into their identities and interests. Zoe, August, and Meg explained how they engage their veteran identity with their racial and ethnic identities related to their engagement on campus. Zoe partners with a local HBCU to mentor other Black women Air Force ROTC students and is an ambassador for her law school. These roles allow her to serve the upcoming generation of Air Force officers and work with administrators to enhance the experience of future law school students. August recently joined the Women's Legal Association, where she met other WSVs. In this organization, she receives feelings of community like those provided by active duty.

Meg shared during her interview that she is a disabled student and a member of the Lakota tribe. She explained how being a disabled student impacts every aspect of her life on campus, which compelled her to join the Student Advisory Committee in her university library. Through the Student Advisory Committee, she connected with other students, including other Indigenous students. She and her peers worked with the administration to revitalize the Indigenous Student organization and helped establish a scholarship for Indigenous students. Her intersecting identities as a disabled student, woman student veteran, and Indigenous student directly informed the type of engagement she created on her campus.

Connection to Theory and Literature

The second research question guiding this study revealed insightful information into the relationship between a WSV's most salient identities and how these aspects of themselves are shown in their transition into higher education. As stated in Chapter 4, half of the participants in this study are

parents, and this role proved to be a critical aspect of their transitions. Additionally, the role of higher education personnel, both positive and negative, became a factor that significantly contributed to how some of these WSV made meaning of their various identities.

According to a 2021 study, there are nearly as many Black women as there are White women enlisted in the Army, and Latinx women now comprise a more significant percentage of the military, 12% of all enlisted active-duty personnel compared (Saunders et al., 2021). A theme that emerged from this study and this research question was the three-pronged intersection of race, gender, and veteran status. Tollerson's (2018) dissertation explored how Black WSV perceived their social, emotional, and financial needs as they transitioned into higher education. Tollerson's study found that Black WSV described "how hurtful it was to be excluded and how hard they fought to have their voices heard, whether in the military, in academic surroundings, or in their civilian jobs" (Tollerson, 2018, p. 98). Saunders et al., 2021, recommended an in-depth analysis of the experience of WOC (women of color) student veterans using an intersectional lens under Critical Race Theory (CRT.) Using the tenants of intersectionality will "help disentangle the overlapping layers of participants' cultural identities, including that of a student, woman, veteran, and racial minority and how these identities shape their civilian transition experiences through higher education" (Saunders et al., 2021, p. 263).

This study represents how the experiences of WOC participants, like Allison, Zoe, August, and Evelyn, differ from those of their white peers. As stated in Saunders et al., 2021, white women veterans' experiences do not represent those of all women veterans, especially WOC. Allison and Zoe reflected on how they were keenly aware of the burden they felt to represent all Black women, while their white peers did not face the same burden. Zoe recounted how it impacted her when she did not see others like her,

> I think it [mentoring black Air Force cadets] means so much to me because I've never worked for a black female officer in every organization I've been in. I've been the only one, the only black female officer in that. Those organizations have been as big as 500 people, but I've been the only one and that is like a lonely experience when you think about it because no one thinks that that's how that will be.

The participants in Saunders et al., 2021 and Tollerson (2018) spoke about how WOC student veterans often feel a decreased sense of belonging in academia compared to their male and non-WOC peers. One participant in Saunders et al., 2021 explains how all of her identities intersect, and she often is in awkward situations as she decides which personal attribute she puts forward for people to see,

> I am a Marine, but nobody knows that. When they look at me, they see an African American woman…it's definitely hard trying to always kind of play it safe, because you want to be a part of this [veteran community group]. But at the same time, it puts you in a very awkward predicament because you're torn because I am affected by so many different aspects of the community [university], I'm a disabled veteran, I'm a single mother. I have all these labels against me, but nobody knows that.

WSVs of color must consider how all their intersecting identities intersect with the higher education community so they can find support and better understand their transition into civilian culture. One of Tollerson's study members stated, "I had to constantly fight to be included and to have my voice heard in the classroom, in my unit, and on my team (Tollerson, 2018, p. 84)." Allison, a participant in this study, spoke to the idea of finding her voice in all areas of her life. She used a metaphor that each of her identities is like a door, and she must juggle keys to unlock her particular set of doors. When asked about how she navigates her transition into higher education while also still serving as a National Guard member, she said,

> I see the difference between the lifestyles, and I know that I do not have the same freedoms as civilians, and we are not the same. I see myself as a soldier, but I'm human. There are a lot of keys, if that makes sense. I have to unlock certain doors whenever I have to be a student or a professional. I have to be a soldier, and I have to be Allison. Being a student is rough. You have to look at other people living the life you thought you would be living.

Saunders et al.'s 2021 study showed how WOCSVs used their understanding and experiences as women of color to help them persevere through transitioning from military culture to civilian society. Resilience was found to be a theme in Saunders et al.'s study because their various identities, like race and veteran status, often put them in a position of being a "cultural outsider." Torres et al., (2009) discussed the Multiple Dimensions of Identity (MMDI) model within the framework of Intersectionality. The MMDI distinguished between social identities (e.g., race, class, gender, religion) and a personal identity, depicted as a "core sense of self" (personal characteristics and attributes that the individual claims)" (Torres et al., 2009, p. 587). This model states that the more integrated an identity is to an individual, the more salient it will be to that person's core self. MMDI also highlights the role of social structures, like the hypermasculine culture of the US military, and how they are embedded into how a person's multiple social identities interact. Torres et al., (2009) suggest how MMDI and Intersectionality are fundamentally linked, "This focus [on MMDI] brings to light the ways in which majority and minority identities interact and the reality that many individuals possess both privileged and oppressed identities" (Torres et al., 2009, p. 587). This study sought to understand how WSV perceive how their social identities inform their transition into higher education. In particular, the WOC in this study demonstrated the complex way they seek community and a sense of belonging.

Parenthood was a common theme in conversations about transitioning from the military to higher education. The participants used various terms and metaphors throughout data collection to

explain how parenthood felt during their transition. Hannah described her life as “being on a hamster wheel” during the first few months of transition when she was trying to balance motherhood and being a student. Charlotte echoed this challenge of managing her time and different roles during her transition into her education: “Time management was definitely a high priority because I had a balance that being a mom, a student, a wife, and a full-time worker at the same time.” The prevailing asset to achieving balance between these roles was time management. Zambito (2017) studied the lived experiences of student mothers and found the same trend; this study described its population as “Octopus Moms.” This strategy “empowered the student participants as they realized how they successfully balanced tasks and simultaneously achieved academically” (Zambito, 2017, p. 85). These Octopus Moms do not have the luxury of time to waste; they must pay attention to their tentacles and parts of their lives that need attention. Hannah and Josie described how they mirrored the patterns of an Octopus Moms. Hannah described a typical week in her life during the most difficult time of her transition,

> I think the first two semesters, I woke up almost every day at 4:00 AM, even on the weekends, usually because I couldn't keep up otherwise because I tried to reserve evenings only for family.

Josie had to manage external reactions to these “identity tentacles.” The challenging faculty member in her program tried to weaponize her role as a parent by positioning her son as the primary motivation for her to continue in the program. Josie explained that, of course, she desired to complete her degree for the sake of her child; however, at that moment, the “tentacle” of the student needed the most attention. Hannah and Josie demonstrated what it means to try and achieve balance as an “Octopus Mom” by meticulously managing their time and skillfully deciding which “tentacle” most needed prioritization. Like the participants in Zambito (2017), this study proved how student mothers and WSVs embody the characteristics of an octopus to accomplish their goals within higher education.

Vacchi's (2017) Model for Veteran Student Support posed a student veteran-centered model where success strategies and practices are established from a holistic lens. Similar to this study, Vacchi's model of Veteran Student Support is built upon Schlossberg's Theory of Transitions and Diamond's Adaptive Military Transition Theory (AMTT). Schlossberg's theory (Schlossberg, 1981) suggests that transitions involve moving in, moving through, and moving out of a transition experience. Diamond's AMTT mirrors this structure with a three-phase arc of transition that individual student veterans experience: Adaptation, Passage, and Arrival. Using these theories, Vacchi proposed an original student-veteran-focused model. This student support model focuses on the student with four cornerstones: Services, Support, Academic Interactions, and Transition Support. Throughout this study, the participants shared how their veteran identity is represented in all four cornerstones within the Vacchi model. Some participants, like Zoe and Meg, used student services to enhance their transition.

In contrast, participants like Allison avoided using student services outside of the VRC because of how her veteran identity was perceived. During interviews, each participant listed those in their support network and the differences this network had in their transition. The most listed sources of support were spouses/partners, parents, peers, and faculty members. Vacchi's (2017) model of student veteran support identifies the importance of peer and external campus support. This chapter has discussed how academic interactions have impacted the participants' experiences during their transition. For example, Emma identified a positive relationship with a faculty member in and out of the classroom, which gave her the support she needed during her transition. However, Josie named one of her faculty members a source of stress during her transition. Vacchi (2017) suggests that academic interactions are essential to creating accommodating environments for veterans. The final tenet of Vacchi's theory is transition support. He promotes using peer mentorship programs on campus and resources from the military to ensure a smooth transition. Several participants in this study, like Hannah

and August, spoke about their involvement with pseudo-peer mentorship programs that replicated the community of being on active duty.

Limitations

The principal limitation of this study was the limited sample size to recruit participants. The researcher sought women student veterans currently enrolled in two or four-year institutions in an undergraduate or graduate program. Opening the study to women veterans who were not presently enrolled would have allowed more participants to move forward with the study. Additionally, this study had a limited scope to examine specific elements of the military culture and identity-based elements like race, ethnicity, and gender expression. Lastly, a logistical limitation was the timing of data collection. Most of the recruitment and data collection was conducted at the end of the calendar year, which conflicted with final exams and major holidays.

Implications for Practice and Future Research

Implications for Practice

This study's implications for practice include the challenge for higher education staff members. It is essential to consider what elements of their identity a WSV views as a loss and as a win, to use an intersectional lens when supporting a WSV during their transition into higher education, and to gain an understanding of how masculinity is built-in to the structure of the United States military. Incorporating these tenets of the transition of a WSV will create a more inclusive campus environment.

Tomika Greer (2020) proposed six learning and development goals of WSVs, which served as the foundation for this study's first implication for practice. A common feeling among WSV is how to contend with parts of their veteran identity that feel like a loss while others feel like an addition to their life. Educators should help these women adjust to these perceived losses and gains. Forming

relationships with these students based on recognition of their unique service will embolden WSV to see educators as sources of support during their transition. Greer (2020) suggests storytelling and reflection activities to help WSV process through their experiences of perceived losses and wins. Educators should make themselves available for WSV as they understand how they fit into their civilian and student roles.

When working with WSV, faculty and staff members should strive to employ an intersectional lens of student support. Torres et al., (2009) explain how this lens works: "...by capturing the whole of an individual more complexly by emphasizing both social identities and the overlapping domains of identity, cognitive, and interpersonal development" (p.586). As seen in the participants in this study, WSVs do not transition into higher education operating out of a single identity or domain of their selves. As a population, WSVs are best served when educators seek to understand their intersecting identities, including their veteran and gender identities. Torres et al., (2009) explain the best-case scenario of educators practicing using an intersectional lens of student support, "the intent and outcomes of an intersectional approach and analysis is the transformation of practice to address inequalities and promote social change" (p.588).

Finally, higher education faculty and staff members should educate themselves on the storied history of the US military and its structure of built-in masculinity. When educators take the time to learn about historically excluded groups, like WSV, the services offered to these students will become more impactful. Throughout this study, the researcher saw first-hand the impact an informed, well-intentioned, and curious educator can make in the transition of a WSV. When interviewing Allison about the type of support she seeks on campus, she explained how she limits her time on campus because of how her peers perceive her. She said, "You are what help looks like for us." Educators who understand women student veterans will be the help the types of support WSV will seek.

Implications for Future Research

The body of research on women student veterans is largely untapped and contains many gaps in knowledge. This study prompted new questions about the WSV community. Several of the participants shared harrowing experiences with Military Sexual Trauma, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, and other forms of Gender-Based harassment. Student affairs practitioners, faculty, and staff members should devote future research to the prevalence of these epidemics and their impacts on WSV.

An unexpected trend that emerged from this study is the number of graduate students who are women veterans. Three-quarters of this study's participants were enrolled in graduate programs; an avenue for future research is to qualitatively and quantitatively assess this trend. An additional element of future research around women student graduate students is the relationship between their role in the military and the type of graduate program they choose to pursue. For example, out of the four participants in this study who are enrolled in medical programs, only two had direct medical experience from their military careers.

Finally, future research should be dedicated to the experience of historically excluded groups of women within the United States military. This study examined the intersections of race, ethnicity, and gender expression. It merely touched the surface of what research can show about how these women assimilate into civilian and higher education cultures.

Conclusion

This chapter discussed the interpretations of this study using the thematic findings presented in Chapter 4. Additionally, this chapter provided Connections to Theory and Literature. This phenomenological case study explored how the culture of the United States military informs the transition of a woman student veteran into American higher education. The twelve participants in this

study reflected on how their veteran status informed their academic performance and relationships with their faculty members—employing an intersectional lens allowed for an in-depth analysis of the participants in this study, particularly when considering how their social identities, such as a race and veteran status, impact their transition into higher education.

Through further research on women student veterans, faculty and staff members will be equipped to serve this population whose experience is unique and as multifaceted as each one of the participants within this study. Future research should continue to focus on issues WSVs face at high rates: Military Sexual Trauma, Gender-Based Harassment, and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. Additionally, future research should continue to investigate the lived experience of WSV in historically excluded groups. This study will add to the body of literature within higher education and increase awareness of the transition experiences of women student veterans.

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Appendices

Appendix A
Participant Recruitment Email

Women Student Veteran Research Opportunity

Good morning,

My name is Rachel Adams, and I am a doctoral student in the Assessment, Learning, and Student Success (ALSS) program at Middle Tennessee State University (MTSU.) I am contacting you hoping you would be interested in participating in my dissertation study and learning more about women student veterans' assimilation and transition processes from the military to higher education.

I am conducting individual interviews to learn how women student veterans describe their assimilation process from the military to higher education. This research study will help explain how women adjust from the hypermasculine culture of the United States military into American Higher Education.

Thank you for your participation in this valuable research! Scroll down to view more detailed study information and to navigate to the survey. Don't forget to share with other women student veterans at MTSU.

Best,

Rachel Adams, M.Ed., Principal Investigator
Dr. Kim Godwin
Dr. Hilary Miller
Dr. Lisa Kerr

Study Information

Purpose:
I am exploring women student veterans' assimilation and transition process at MTSU.

IRB Details:
Study Title: Assimilation of Women Student Veterans: Perceived Interactions with Race, **Ethnicity, and Gender Expression**
Protocol Number:
Approval Date:
Principal Investigator: Rachel Adams, MEd

Institution: Middle Tennessee State University

Target Population:

- A current MTSU student (undergraduate or graduate)
- A United States veteran or current service member (all branches included)
- A participant who identifies as a woman

Risks & Benefits:

The Risks and Benefits of the study are minimal and may include mental or emotional discomfort from answering potentially sensitive questions. This research will benefit women student veterans and higher education faculty and staff by gaining an understanding of the experiences of women student veterans.

Additional Information:

The interview will last approximately 60 to 90 minutes via Microsoft Teams. You can stop participating or skip any question you may feel uncomfortable responding to. If you choose to participate, the information you provide was confidential.

Contact Information:

Principal Investigator:
Rachel Adams, Med
ra7v@mtmail.mtsu.edu
Faculty Advisor:
Dr. Kim Godwin
kim.godwin@mtsu.edu
Assistant Professor
Womack Educational Leadership Department
Programs in Administration and Supervision, Higher Education

For additional information about your rights as a participant in this study, please contact the Middle Tennessee State University (MTSU) Office of Compliance at 615-494-8918 or via email at irb_information@mtsu.edu. (http://www.mtsu.edu/irb)

Thank you for your participation!

Rachel Adams, MEd
Doctoral Student | MTSU
ra7v@mtmail.mtsu.edu
Pronouns: She/Her/Hers

Survey Link:

https://forms.office.com/r/bXDw90uuCF

Appendix B

Interview Protocol

Participant Name:
Participant Pseudonym:
Interviewer's Name: Rachel Adams

I. Introduction and Background

My name is Rachel Adams, a doctoral student, and I am conducting individual interviews to learn how women student veterans describe their assimilation process from the military to higher education. This research study will help explain how women adjust from the hypermasculine culture of the United States military into American Higher education. In today's interview, I will ask you questions about your military service and time as a student. Any information you share with me today was confidential, and you was sent (via email) the final interview transcript to consent to the topics we cover today. You can stop participating or skip any question you may feel uncomfortable responding to. As a reminder, you completed your informed consent form before today's interview. Today's interview should last about 60-90 minutes. Thank you ahead of time for your participation and for sharing your experiences with me. Do you have any questions before we get started?

II. Interview Questions

Interview Part 1

Biographical and Demographic info

1. Tell me where you grew up, your family and support system, age, race and ethnicity, and other identities like religion, sexuality, ability status, etc. Do you have any dependents? Marital status?

Military Service

2. Tell me about your military service. What branch/branches were you a part of? When did you enter the military? How old were you? How long did you serve? Tell me about your job while you served. Were you deployed?
3. Tell me about your decision to join the military. How did you pick the branch of service? What were some of the benefits of joining up from your perspective?

4. When you joined, tell me what your platoon/unit looked like. How many people? How many women, people of color, etc?
    a. Do you feel you were around people who looked like you or represented some of the things about yourself you said when we first got started?
5. What messages, either directly or indirectly, did you receive (or perceive) about being a woman? Tell me about that.
6. What did you notice about other women in your unit? How did they present themselves? How do you think they perceived those messages you just talked about?
7. Thinking about your experience as a whole, did your relationship with your "womanness" change? How so?
8. How did you grow as a person from your experience in the military?
9. How have you changed yourself to better adapt to the military environment?
10. How did being a female in your unit affect social interaction with peers?
11. Do you feel you should act differently around male service members, e.g., to gain acceptance?

Interview Part 2

College Career

12. How long have you been a student at XX? What are you studying? How did you pick that degree program? What do you hope to do after graduation?
13. How do you approach telling others (students, faculty, staff) that you are a veteran? Do you disclose that willingly, or how do you have a thought process behind how you tell others about your service?
14. What student services have you used at XX? (Veterans Services, Health Services, etc.) What, if any, services have been the most helpful to you as a woman veteran?
15. If another woman veteran was transitioning out of the military and into XX, what advice would you give her?
    a. What advice would you give women student veterans using the student veteran center for the first time? Or talking to the resource officer for the first time?
16. What advice would you give to resource officers working with women student veterans specifically?
    a. What could be added to the veteran's center to benefit women student veterans?

III. Closing

This brings me to the end of my questions for you. Before we go, is there anything we have not covered today or anything you would like to add to our conversation?

Thank you again for participating in today's interview. Your experience as a woman student veteran is essential, and I hope to amplify your and other women's voices with this research. As I stated

earlier, everything we discussed today will remain confidential, and you was sent a transcript of today's interview. If there is anything else you would like to discuss with me after today, please email me.

Appendix C

Consent Form

INFORMED CONSENT

Study Title: Assimilation of Women Student Veterans: Perceived Interactions with Race, Ethnicity, and Gender Expression
Protocol Number: IRB-FY2025-86
Approval Date: 11/26/24
Principal Investigator: Rachel Adams
Institution: Middle Tennessee State University

You are being asked to participate in a research study. The following information is provided to inform you about the research project and your participation.

1. Purpose of the study: This study will explore and dissect how a group of women student veterans' assimilation from the military to higher education was impacted by their perceived interactions with their race, ethnicity, and gender expression.

2. Description of procedures to be followed and approximate duration of the study:

I am conducting individual interviews to learn how women student veterans describe their assimilation process from the military to higher education. The interview will last approximately 60 to 90 minutes via Microsoft Teams. You can stop participating or skip any question you may feel uncomfortable responding to. If you choose to participate, the information you provide will be confidential. Following the interview, participants will receive a debriefing email to review what was covered and will be given the interview transcript to review for clarity and approval. All recordings will be deleted after transcription and before proceeding to data analysis.

3. Compensation for participation: Participants will not be compensated for participating in this study.

Here are your rights as a participant:

a) Your participation in this research is voluntary.
b) You may skip any item you don't want to answer, and you may stop the research at any time. If you leave an item blank, you will be warned that you missed one, just in case it was an accident. You can still click that you don't want to answer. Some items may be required in order to accurately present the study.
c) There are no risks associated with your participation besides possible discomfort with some of the questions.

d) There are no real benefits to you from participating besides possibly learning something about the research.
e) All efforts, within reason, will be made to keep the personal information in your research record private, but total privacy cannot be promised. Your information may be shared with people at MTSU (such as the MTSU Institutional Review Board) or other agencies (such as the Federal Government Office for Human Research Protection) if you or someone else is in danger or if we are required to do so by law.

Contact Information: If you should have any questions about this research study please contact:
Principal Investigator: Rachel Adams
Contact Information: ra7v@mtmail.mtsu.edu
Faculty Advisor: Dr. Kim Godwin
Contact Information: kim.godwin@mtmail.mtsu.edu

For additional information about giving consent or your rights as a participant in this study, please contact the Middle Tennessee State University (MTSU) Office of Compliance at 615-494-8918 or via email at irb_information@mtsu.edu. (http://www.mtsu.edu/irb)

If you're ready to get started, please make your choice below before clicking the arrow button.

Thanks again for volunteering your time to this study!

I have read the information above. I am at least 18 years old. I believe I understand the purpose, risks, and benefits of the research, and I know what I will be expected to do as a study participant.

☐I consent to participate
☐I decline to participate

Appendix D

Participant Interest Form

Participant Interest Form-Assimilation of Women Student Veterans

I am conducting individual interviews to learn how women student veterans describe their assimilation process from the military to higher education. This research study will help explain how women adjust from the hypermasculine culture of the United States military into American Higher Education. If you select to participate in an individual interview, you will be contacted via MTSU email.

* Required

* This form will record your name, please fill your name.

1. Name *

2. Pronouns *

- ◯ she/her/hers
- ◯ he/him/his
- ◯ they/them/theirs
- ◯ Other

3. MTSU Email Address *

4. Please indicate your current military status: *

- ◯ Honorably discharged
- ◯ Active Duty
- ◯ Reservist
- ◯ Medically discharged
- ◯ Retired military
- ◯ Other

5. Please select your branch(es) of service: *

- [ ] Army
- [ ] Navy
- [ ] Marine Corps
- [ ] Coast Guard
- [ ] Air Force
- [ ] Space Force

6. What years did you serve in the military? *

7. Please indicate your rank upon discharge: *

8. What year did you enroll at MTSU as a student? *

9. Do you wish to participate in the interview portion of this research study? *

- ◯ Yes
- ◯ No