

Exploring the Transitions of Veterans Attending College

By

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A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of
Education in Assessment, Learning, and Student Success: Higher Education

Middle Tennessee State University
August 2024

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my children:
Catherine Spencer, Patrick Spencer, and Laura Ashley Spencer

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to recognize all the Veterans of the United States of America who have served honorably. Additionally, I would like to express my gratitude to the participants who generously shared their personal experiences with the hope of assisting other veterans transitioning to college. Moreover, I would like to acknowledge all the service members I have had the privilege to work with, serve alongside, and build relationships with.

I am also indebted to my children, Catherine, Patrick, and Laura Ashley, for granting me the time and space to complete this dissertation. I am truly grateful for their unwavering love, support, and understanding as they calmly engaged in activities, muted the television, and minimized noise while I immersed myself in this work.

I extend my heartfelt appreciation to my beloved parents, Roy and Mary Spencer, for their invaluable assistance in caring for the children. Special thanks are also due to my sister Sylvia Spencer-Trammel and brother Roy Spencer Jr. for their unwavering support and understanding, even during times when I failed to show my gratitude. Lastly, I would like to express my deep appreciation for the guidance and support provided by my chairperson, Dr. Singleton, and my committee members, Dr. Rost and Dr. Godwin.

ABSTRACT

This qualitative phenomenological study employs a phenomenological approach to investigate the lived experiences of veterans returning to higher education. It aims to explore and understand the experiences and difficulties faced by veterans as they reintegrate into college education.

Thematic analysis is used to analyze qualitative data, identifying prevalent themes and patterns in the gathered information. The outcomes of this research have the potential to offer valuable insights that can be utilized in developing more comprehensive and efficient initiatives to enhance veterans' educational journeys and address their specific needs. Additionally, the study provides evidence-based recommendations for college departments and academic institutions to enhance their support and accommodations for veteran students, promoting their academic achievements and overall well-being.

Schlossberg's Transitional Theory, supported by Cohen's Social Support Theory, serves as the theoretical framework for this study. Ten student veteran participants were interviewed via Zoom and in person, sharing their experiences in the military and how those experiences have influenced their college journey. Overall, participants expressed various barriers and challenges encountered in college, as well as different forms of support that enabled them to persevere through their programs. The research emphasizes the importance of increasing awareness about student veterans and the specific support services they may need in college. In addition, the findings suggest a need for more training for college faculty and staff on how to support veterans in higher education. The research aimed to discover effective strategies and support systems to enhance academic performance and well-being. The findings indicate that despite veterans' valuable skills, knowledge, and contributions to higher education institutions, they face multiple

obstacles that hinder their learning and success. Colleges should prioritize establishing effective communication structures within their veteran centers to ensure prompt and necessary assistance for veteran students. Additionally, colleges should consider implementing a peer mentorship program to help new veteran students integrate into the academic community.

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Exploring the Transitions of Veterans Attending College

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

There has been a significant increase in the enrollment of military veterans at higher education institutions, with a specific focus on their experiences and transitions. The veterans bring valuable training, knowledge, and discipline, setting them apart from their fellow college students (Bauman, 2009; Pulley, 2013). For instance, some have served as US Navy and Coast Guard Hospital Corpsmen and US Army Combat Medics (Aikins et al., 2015). Despite their unique qualities, recruiting skilled veterans into college programs leading to professional degrees is challenging (Reyes, et al., 2023; Orenstein & Lewis, 2022). The increasing job scarcity is a significant issue, as emphasized by Keita et al. (2015). The number of veterans enrolling in or returning to college has been increasing, highlighting the need for research and assistance tailored to this student demographic (D'Aoust et al., 2016). Prior research has shown the significance of offering various resources, such as student veterans' departments, veteran organizations, and social spaces, to facilitate connection among veterans (Bauman, 2009). Veterans have notable attributes such as maturity, discipline, and a demonstrated capacity to concentrate on assignments, distinguishing them from their counterparts in conventional higher education settings. Thus, it is essential to recognize the needs of veteran students and provide them with the appropriate support they are entitled to (Reyes et al., 2023; D'Aoust et al., 2016; Olsen, Badger, & McCuddy, 2014).

Veterans pursuing a professional career face unique challenges due to tactical experience, in addition to typical obstacles encountered by all students. The decision to take part in higher education is a groundbreaking endeavor for veterans who need to extend their experiences and utilize the skills procured during their stay in the military (Aikins et al., 2015). Moreover, considering the increasing need for healthcare practitioners, nursing, chemistry, public health

education, and many other majors, provides substantial employment stability and a profound feeling of meaning (Orenstein & Lewis, 2022; Miller et al., 2018). Nevertheless, veterans may encounter obstacles in their journey toward their chosen professional career success. The presence of stringent academic prerequisites, the need for experiential education, and the possibility of encountering a new setting might pose challenges that need tailored assistance (D'Aoust et al., 2016; Kirchner, 2015). Furthermore, veterans may have supplementary obstacles, including managing post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), coping with physical injuries, balancing family obligations, and adapting to civilian life (Reyes, et al., 2023; Aikins et al., 2015).

It is essential to understand and effectively tackle the distinct obstacles veterans encounter upon reentering higher education, particularly within professional careers, since this is vital for their scholastic achievements and holistic welfare. University programs/schools can work with the thorough development of veterans by understanding their needs and offering appropriate help beyond a certifying official or a veteran's lounge. This approach engages veterans to acquire the essential abilities and capacities vital for progress in their chosen field. (Kirchner, 2015).

The main goal of this research is to investigate the different experiences of veterans enrolled in professional career programs, the challenges they encounter, and the support systems available to them (Miller et al., 2018; Rumann et al., 2009; Aikins et al, 2015). Utilizing extensive interviews with United States Military Veterans currently enrolled at one large University in the South, this study gives perspectives on the troubles experienced by returning veterans and the potential systems that might be used to chip away at their educational experience. Furthermore, this study will make a significant commitment to the ongoing

collection of research about veterans who choose to become healthcare workers, teachers, law enforcement, or other professional career avenues, and will aid the progress of initiatives. This research has been driven by the need to provide enhanced support for these groups pursuing higher education in their chosen field. As military veterans transition from service to higher education, they encounter challenges while attending college. These challenges might be categorized as follows: *Academic Essentials*: Getting the important academic prerequisites is one of the fundamental challenges for veterans signing up for their chosen program. Veterans could have substantial training and experience through their military jobs as Hospital Corpsmen, Combat Medics, Law Enforcement, Aviation, Administrative services, and other professional careers, but their chosen schools may still have academic criteria they must complete (Keita et al, 2015). These criteria may include passing standardized examinations, finishing necessary coursework, or maintaining a certain GPA.

To fill the gap between their military experience and the academic requirements of college programs/schools, many veterans may need extra academic help (Gonzalez, et. al, 2011). *Experiential Education*: For example, students in nursing schools are often required to do clinical rotations and first-hand patient care training (Keita, et. al, 2015). Some, veterans possess medical expertise, but transitioning to a civilian healthcare system may present challenges. They may require support in understanding new healthcare procedures and protocols and integrating into a healthcare team. They may succeed in these experiential components of nursing education with effective orientation and mentoring programs (D'Aoust et. al, 2016; Keita et. al, 2015). *Transitioning to a New Environment*: For veterans, transitioning from the military to a college campus can be challenging. The academic environment, with its autonomy and freedom, differs significantly from the regulated and disciplined military life (Lim et al., 2018). Veterans may

need assistance adjusting to their new surroundings, accessing local resources, and navigating the administrative and academic processes (Elliott et al., 2011). *Physical and mental problems:* As a result of their military obligation, a few veterans might be genuinely harmed or experience the ill effects of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). These challenges could significantly impact their well-being and academic achievements (Reyes et al., 2023; Schonfeld et al., 2015; Stone, 2017). To successfully assist veterans in handling these challenges, all programs/schools must include support services, counseling, and accommodations for disabilities (Semer & Harmening, 2015). *Balancing Family Responsibilities:* Many returning veterans are also juggling their family obligations. Veterans may have stress and time management difficulties because of this new dimension in their life. To assist veterans in striking a balance between their academic and familial obligations, programs/schools can consider flexible scheduling and support services for families with veterans (Lim et al., 2018; Schonfeld et al., 2015).

Background

The issue of veterans transitioning into higher education, particularly within a chosen professional discipline, is increasingly significant (Miller et al., 2018; Ackerman et al., 2009). Given the increasing number of veterans transitioning from military service, it is crucial to gain comprehensive insight into and effectively address the challenges they face when entering the academic world (Aikins et al., 2015). The reintegration process from military duty to civilian life often presents difficulties for veterans. Numerous veterans have challenges finding meaning and organization after departing from military service (Reyes et al., 2023; Orenstein & Lewis, 2022). The pursuit of further education, namely in a professional career, offers veterans the chance to use the abilities they gained during their military service and discover rewarding professional pathways in the civilian world (Bauman, 2009). Continuing with the military healthcare

personnel example, veterans have significant expertise in a domain that closely aligns with the nursing profession (D'Aoust et al., 2016). The possession of specialized training and competence in delivering medical treatment under high-stress contexts might provide significant advantages within the healthcare sector. Nevertheless, with veterans' exceptional abilities and the persisting need for healthcare experts, veterans encounter various obstacles when reentering higher education (Meca et. al., 2021).

Academic readjustment is a notable problem often faced by veterans (McLain et al, 2020). The shift from a military training setting to an academic one might elicit a sense of disorientation. Significant discrepancies exist in the classroom setting, academic requirements, and learning approaches experienced by veterans in contrast to their military instruction, including age gaps, socioeconomic status, and potential mental health concerns (Orenstein & Lewis, 2022; McLain et al, 2020; Rumann, et al, 2010). Moreover, it is critical to note that veterans might have had a delayed absence from an organized educational environment, compounding the hardships they face throughout the process (Aikins et al., 2015) It is also important to note that veterans may experience various physical and mental health challenges as a result of their military service. Consistently experienced concerns consolidate PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder), TBI (traumatic brain injury), and various kinds of physical disability (D'Aoust et al., 2016; Pulley, 2013; Elliott et al, 2011). These issues can impact not just the general prosperity of veterans but also harm their ability to partake in scholastic pursuits (Reyes, et al., 2023; Orenstein & Lewis, 2022).

Furthermore, veterans may face personal, social, academic, and health-related challenges. Individuals may be burdened with familial obligations or encounter challenges while attempting to assimilate into civilian society (Reyes, et al., 2023; Orenstein & Lewis, 2022). The challenges

associated with adapting to a new setting, establishing fresh social connections, and effectively managing the intricacies of everyday life all influence a veteran's capacity to concentrate on their educational objectives. In response to the distinct obstacles encountered by veterans pursuing higher education, academic institutions and college programs have initiated the implementation of support services mainly designed to support their unique needs. These services include academic tutoring, counseling assistance, handicap accommodations, and specialized support groups. Furthermore, many efforts, such as the Yellow Ribbon Program and the GI Bill, provide financial support to veterans seeking to further their education (Elliott et al, 2011).

Statement of the Problem

The issue of effectively facilitating the integration of veterans into higher education, with a specific focus on professional careers, has emerged as a topic of increasing importance. Numerous veterans possess commendable abilities and experiences with the potential for meaningful contributions to various career fields (Miller et al., 2018; D'Aoust et al., 2016). However, they encounter distinctive obstacles that impede their academic achievements and limit their successful assimilation into civilian society (Aikins et al., 2015).

The focus of this research is to examine and understand the educational experiences and challenges that veterans encounter as they reintegrate into college education, and to evaluate the implications of these challenges on their academic progress. By examining these obstacles, this research aims to make a valuable contribution to the improvement of support systems that can enhance the educational experience of veteran students, ultimately leading to better overall well-being (Reyes et al., 2023; Bauman, 2009).

Research Questions

This research will specifically address the following questions:

1. How do veterans attending college make meaning of their experiences in their respective programs? This inquiry will explore several elements, including academic adaptation, physical and emotional well-being concerns, and personal and social challenges veterans may face while pursuing college education.
2. What adversities impact veteran college students' well-being and academic performance? This inquiry examines the effects of the highlighted obstacles on academic achievement, student retention rates, and overall satisfaction levels of veteran college students.
3. What strategies and support mechanisms can be implemented to assist veterans in overcoming these challenges and achieving optimal academic outcomes?

By addressing these research questions, this study aims to address the needs and challenges faced by college students who veterans are and propose recommendations for developing tailored support systems within college departments. The primary goal is to create a supportive environment that facilitates veterans' academic achievement and professional growth.

Purpose of the Study

This study seeks to explore the challenges veterans face when transitioning to higher education, aiming for a comprehensive understanding of their reentry obstacles. Additionally, the study aims to uncover effective strategies and support mechanisms that may augment their academic achievements and general welfare. This research gathers student veterans' viewpoints and experiences through in-depth comprehensive interviews. The primary objective is to get important insights into veterans' unique difficulties. An additional objective of this research is to ascertain and analyze the extant support structures and resources accessible to veteran students. This study suggests ways to improve support services in college departments and academic institutions by evaluating different support mechanisms.

Moreover, the research aims to provide a scholarly contribution to the current body of literature on the topic of veteran education and college-educated professionals. Specifically, it seeks to generate new insights and enhance the understanding of veterans pursuing college degrees. The study outcomes will provide evidence-based suggestions for college departments and academic institutions to improve their assistance and accommodation for veteran students, fostering their academic achievement and general welfare.

Objectives of the Study

1. To identify and understand the challenges veterans face returning to higher education.
2. To examine the existing support mechanisms and resources available to veteran students.
3. To propose strategies and interventions to enhance the academic success and overall well-being of veterans returning to college.

Significance of the Study

This research is important for various stakeholders, including veterans, college departments, academic institutions, professional organizations, and society (Schonfeld et al., 2015; D’Aoust et al., 2016). The primary beneficiaries of the study's findings will predominantly be veterans seeking higher education (D’Aoust et al., 2016; McLain et al., 2020; Orenstein & Lewis, 2022). Through the identification of distinct issues, this study has the potential to provide valuable insights that may guide the creation and execution of specialized support services and interventions (Aikins et al., 2015). For those who have served in the military, this entails obtaining the essential resources, assistance, and accommodations to augment their academic achievement and general welfare. The primary objective of this research is to provide a valuable contribution toward enhancing the empowerment and achievement of veterans in their pursuit of educational and professional aspirations within their chosen field.

The research findings will also significantly benefit college departments and academic institutions (Allen et al., 2014; Lim et al, 2018). To improve their current support systems, educational institutions can better understand the challenges faced by veteran college students (D'Aoust et al., 2016; Lim et al, 2018). The results of this study have the potential to provide valuable insights that may be used in creating more comprehensive and efficient initiatives designed to improve the educational journey of veterans and address their distinct requirements (Orenstein & Lewis, 2022; Allen et al, 2014; Rumann et al, 2009). Furthermore, this research has the potential to assist college departments in the recruitment and retention of veteran students, thereby making a valuable contribution to cultivating a strong workforce that is both diverse and highly trained (Griffith, 2005; Allen et al, 2014).

The study findings will also have a positive impact on various professional organizations and associations (Voelpel et al, 2018). Companies can improve their support and integration of veteran students by gaining a comprehensive understanding of these individuals' unique challenges and specific needs. Implementing mentoring programs, specific training initiatives, and the provision of chances for veterans to use their distinct skill sets gained during military service may ensue (Semer et al, 2015). Ultimately, this may mitigate the increasing need for highly impacted professional jobs and enhance customer service. This research contributes to the existing literature and enhances our understanding of veteran education, post-military transitions, and various careers on a societal level (D'Aoust et al., 2016). The results of this research can provide valuable insights into policy discussions and decision-making processes regarding the delivery of support services for veterans in the field of higher education. Finally, the examination highlights the need to recognize and handle veterans' obstacles while supporting a more inclusive and equivalent society (Schonfeld et al, 2015; Elliot et al, 2011; Allen et al, 2014).

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical approach used in this research draws from Schlossberg's Transition Theory (Schlossberg, 1989; Schlossberg, 1981; Schlossberg, et al.1995; Anderson et al. 2022), which focuses on the processes and obstacles people face while undergoing major life changes. Based on the provided framework, veterans who pursue higher education experience a time of transition as they go from military duty to civilian life and the academic environment (Ackerman, et al, 2009). Schlossberg's theory is relevant when researching college veterans to help explain the transition from the highly stressful and demanding military life to the pursuit of a rigorous and sometimes very stressful college program. Schlossberg's transition theory developed from her belief that "transitions of all kinds... can be analyzed, and possible interventions formulated" (Schlossberg, 1981, p.3) This transition process encompasses acclimating to a new environment, gaining more proficiencies, and aligning oneself with the anticipated standards and requirements of the educational milieu. Schlossberg's theory consists of three main parts: the stage of transition, identification of coping resources, and methods for strengthening those resources to support, analyze, and find possible interventions for veterans integrating into a college program after military service (Schlossberg, 1984; Schlossberg et al., 1995; Anderson et al., 2012).

Additionally, it is essential to include the Social Support Theory in this research as it emphasizes the importance of social networks and available resources in effectively supporting transitional processes (Cohen, 2004). According to the concept, individuals such as military veterans who have sufficient social support are more likely to effectively handle challenges, overcome obstacles, and achieve positive outcomes. These theoretical frameworks provide a perspective through which one may understand the experiences of veterans reentering college.

Furthermore, they contribute to the creation of efficient support systems and interventions. In addition to their training, belief system, and code of honor, military veterans embrace a social group from day one to provide instrumental support, informational support, and emotional support. These three forms of support form the basis of social support (Cohen, 2004; House & Kahn, 1985). Social support is essential for veterans' well-being and plays a significant role in their lives. Proescher (2022) stated that having a diverse and interconnected social network can lead to decreased disability and an enhanced quality of life for veterans. It is important to note that there are no significant variations among veterans based on age, gender, education, race, ethnicity, or exposure to combat trauma. This suggests that social support groups can be a valuable resource in helping veterans reintegrate into civilian life (Proescher, et al., 2022).

Limitations

A limitation of this study pertains to the sample size, which includes ten participants. Although considered suitable for a qualitative phenomenological investigation, a larger sample size might have bolstered data saturation. To increase the sample size, it would have been helpful to recruit more veterans from a different university population. The research encountered an additional limitation because participants were hesitant to provide detailed opinions, fearing potential repercussions if their identities were disclosed. Even though strict measures were put in place to guarantee anonymity, neither the public nor the university had access to any identifying information during the study. Participants were interviewed and asked about the obstacles or barriers they encountered in their college program, which could have impacted their responses. Another potential limitation of the research could be linked to my disclosure of being a veteran. Even though I avoided sharing specific details about my military background, I revealed this information to build rapport with the participants. However, this action might have

unintentionally introduced bias or changed the dynamics of the relationships with the participants.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Introduction

This literature review examines the experiences and challenges United States veterans face as they transition from military service to higher education. Reviewing existing research, this section will provide a comprehensive overview of the unique barriers and obstacles veterans encounter during this critical reintegration into civilian life. The review will begin by examining Schlossberg's Transitional Theory, which serves as a theoretical framework to understand veterans' challenges and adjustments during their transition to higher education (Smith et al., 2017; D'Aoust et al., 2016; Stankey, 2018). This theory will assist in providing insight into the mental, social, and natural factors contributing to veterans' fruitful or ineffective transformation as they seek higher education. Moreover, the literature review will investigate the key topics that arise out of past research, for example, the effect of PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder) on academic execution, the job of support systems in working on the transition cycle, the accessibility and viability of veteran-explicit assets, and the meaning of military culture in the learning climate (Reyes, et al., 2023; Semer & Harmening, 2015; Pulley, 2013

By combining the current literature, this survey will help us understand the intricacies and subtleties of veterans returning to school. It will inform future research endeavors by identifying gaps in the current body of knowledge and directing attention toward areas that require further investigation. Ultimately, a deeper understanding of the experiences of veteran students will contribute to developing tailored support services and policies that can enhance their successful transition into their chosen profession.

US Military Veterans Transitioning to Higher Education

Transitioning from military duty to civilian life presents challenges for veterans, with a heightened complexity for those seeking higher education. Military veterans in the United States face various challenges when transitioning into higher education, including academic, economic, social, and psychological factors (Reyes, et al., 2023; Aikins et al., 2015; Pulley 2013).

Understanding and implementing effective strategies to address these issues is crucial for facilitating a smooth transition and promoting academic success among military personnel.

Serving on active duty can lead to high levels of stress due to the unpredictability and sudden changes in plans. Recognizing the unique challenges faced by veterans can help colleges and universities in accommodating their needs during the admissions process (Reyes et al., 2023; Aikins et al., 2015; Pulley 2013). According to Schlossberg (1995) and colleagues, transitions can be categorized into three types: anticipated, unanticipated, and nonevent, such as events that were expected but did not occur, like a sudden cancellation of orders to return home from a combat zone.

One of the primary obstacles veterans encounter while moving to higher education is adapting to the academic requirements and learning atmosphere. Numerous veterans have either been absent from educational institutions for a long time or currently are unable to access higher education (D'Aoust et al., 2016; Zinger 2010). People may need assistance in academic settings with tasks such as reading, writing, and basic research, as well as dealing with the challenges posed by instructors and the pace of higher education (Orenstein & Lewis, 2022; Zinger, 2010). Additionally, it is common for veterans to have minimal exposure to the liberal arts discipline, which may provide challenges when attempting to establish connections between their military background and the larger ideas and theories taught in a college setting.

Financial issues can substantially impact the process of veterans transitioning to higher education. Although they may meet the criteria for receiving educational benefits under the GI Bill, the expenditures associated with tuition, fees, textbooks, and housing arrangements may still pose significant barriers (Orenstein & Lewis, 2022; Jones, 2017; Schonfeld et al., 2015). Simultaneously managing financial obligations, familial commitments, and occupational duties might introduce an augmented level of stress and strain for military veterans actively pursuing higher education (Bauman, 2009). Moreover, it is common for veterans to encounter social obstacles upon their reintegration into higher education (Özçelik, 2022). Some individuals encounter challenges when attempting to establish connections with their peers, who might be notably younger and may not possess a complete understanding of their military experiences (D'Aoust et al., 2016). The experience of feeling alone might impede the establishment of a robust support system, posing challenges for veterans in effectively navigating the collegiate environment (Jones, 2017; Aikins et al., 2015). Additionally, it is important to note that veterans may experience cultural disparities due to differing beliefs and conventions in the military, which may contrast with those in a higher education environment. The mental implications of military service, including PTSD, traumatic brain injuries, and further mental health problems, may considerably impact veterans' progress into advanced education. These problems might present themselves as difficulties in keeping up with the course requirements, disturbances in rest, sensations of anxiety, or side effects of depression (D'Aoust et al., 2016). These factors can potentially negatively impact scholastic achievements and the general state of wellness (Jones, 2017; Semer & Harmening, 2015). Providing adequate support services, including counseling and disability accommodations, within their chosen programs is of utmost importance in effectively managing mental health difficulties among veterans (Özçelik, 2022). In order to

better support military veterans during their transition to higher education, college departments must recognize and address the unique challenges they face, while also providing customized resources and support services (Semer & Harmening, 2015). Academic support services, such as tutoring and supplemental classes, can help veterans enhance essential academic skills and address educational gaps (Semer & Harmening, 2015; Zinger 2010). Financial aid programs, scholarships, and work-study initiatives specially tailored for veterans may effectively mitigate their financial challenges and guarantee equitable access to educational prospects (Galvez, et. al., 2023; Library of Congress, et. al., 2018)

The establishment of a hospitable and all-encompassing atmosphere is vital in facilitating the seamless assimilation of veterans into the realm of higher education. Peer mentoring programs and veteran support groups can foster interpersonal ties among veterans, fostering a feeling of inclusion and camaraderie (Özçelik, 2022; Jones, 2017). In addition, cultivating an enhanced understanding of military culture and experiences among staff and students may bridge the social divide and establish a more inclusive campus environment (Orenstein & Lewis, 2022; Lumina Foundation et al., 2013). The recognition and effective response to the mental health requirements of veterans has equal significance (Semer & Harmening, 2015).

Sargent and Schlossberg (1988) argued that individuals undergoing a transition are often preoccupied and somewhat disoriented, which is a reasonable reaction when the transition results in potentially life-changing experiences. College departments are recommended to provide readily available counseling services and maintain strict confidentiality while also possessing a comprehensive understanding of the distinct obstacles veterans encounter (Orenstein & Lewis, 2022; Lumina Foundation et al., 2013). Additionally, faculty and staff are expected to complete comprehensive training programs that aim to enhance their ability to identify indicators of

mental health concerns and provide appropriate referrals and assistance effectively (Hunter-Johnson, et al., 2021).

Following the completion of military operations in Afghanistan (OEF, Operation Enduring Freedom) and Iraq (OIF, Operation Iraqi Freedom), colleges and universities witnessed the arrival of over 260,000 student veterans who may have been involved in combat missions, witnessed the loss of fellow soldiers, faced gunfire, and engaged in combat themselves (Miles, 2010). Veterans bring a wealth of life experiences and work skills acquired through their military service. They also face unique challenges that set them apart from traditional students (Smith et al. 2017; Schonfeld et al., 2015). Many veterans choose to pursue college programs, and some have already earned college credits through their military service and other educational pursuits. Nonetheless, their pursuit of education was regularly disrupted due to military directives for deployment (Aikins et al., 2015). Consequently, these students often need to submit a new application for their chosen programs, transfer any recently acquired credits, navigate the administrative complexities of the Veterans Administration to access student benefits, and deal with the challenges posed by an overburdened veterans' department within the institution (Ackerman et al., 2009).

The considerable difficulties faced by student veterans in colleges, who enlisted in the military intending to leverage the benefits of the GI Bill and Post 9/11 GI Bill, stemmed from the inherent unpredictability of potential deployments (Bauman, 2009). A significant number of military personnel were concurrently pursuing higher education by enrolling in college courses throughout their tenure in active duty, reserves, or the National Guard (Costantino, 2006). Nevertheless, because of military directives, a significant number of student veterans were compelled to withdraw from their academic programs during the midst of the semester, rendering

them unable to resume their studies for a duration of up to 18 months owing to their deployment abroad (Bauman, 2009). The recurrent interruptions posed a significant challenge for student veterans, impacting both their academic pursuits and psychological well-being. In addition to contending with the emotional repercussions of the deployment experience, individuals faced the challenges of managing the logistical complexities associated with reapplying for programs and transferring academic credits (Orenstein & Lewis, 2022; Voelpel et al., 2018). The potential consequences of deployment-related stress and the unpredictable nature of military service may substantially influence veterans' capacity to focus on their educational pursuits and achieve academic success (Jones, 2017; Bauman, 2009; Zinger 2010).

In addition, the notable prevalence of reserve and National Guard members in areas of conflict contributed to the academic difficulties encountered by student veterans. According to Griffith (2005), it was observed that as of April 1, 2008, there were an estimated total of 27,900 military soldiers deployed in Iraq who belonged to reserve or National Guard forces. The reservists and National Guard members had heightened challenges due to the concurrent demands imposed by their military duty and academic commitments (Orenstein & Lewis, 2022). According to Griffith (2005), the persistent management of many obligations and the unpredictability associated with deployment led to significant stress and often hindered the progress of educational endeavors.

The distinct obstacles student veterans encounter during their transition to higher education underscore the need for tailored assistance and available resources. The intricate bureaucratic processes involved in navigating the Veteran Administration and the overburdened nature of university veterans' departments may result in dissatisfaction and heightened stress among student veterans (Orenstein & Lewis, 2022; Voelpel et al., 2018; Smith, et., 2017).

Institutions of higher education need to acknowledge the unique requirements of veteran students and provide comprehensive support services to assist them in surmounting these challenges (Smith, et., 2017; Ackerman et al., 2009). Furthermore, providing academic and emotional assistance plays a critical role in facilitating the achievement of student veterans. Institutions can provide veteran students with various academic support services, including but not limited to flexible course schedules, online learning opportunities, and expert academic guidance. Additionally, essential counseling services aimed at addressing the mental health challenges experienced by veterans, such as PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder) and difficulties adapting to civilian life (Reyes, et al., 2023; Schonfeld et al., 2015).

Establishing collaborative partnerships between college programs and veterans' departments within institutions is crucial in facilitating a seamless transition for student veterans. Through the implementation of streamlined procedures and the establishment of effective communication channels, colleges have the potential to mitigate the bureaucratic obstacles encountered by these students (Zinger, 2010; Costantino, 2006). In addition, cultivating a nurturing campus atmosphere that promotes solidarity and offers avenues for professional connections may significantly enhance their overall welfare and academic achievements (Ackerman et al., 2009).

The significance of military service on student veterans' transition to higher education should not be underestimated. The academic path of individuals may be considerably influenced by several factors, including the unpredictability of deployments, the difficulties encountered in reapplying for programs, and the emotional impact of combat experiences (Özçelik, 2022; Lumina et. al., 2013). Higher education institutions can support and empower student veterans in pursuing higher education and future jobs by acknowledging and addressing their unique issues.

The Impact

Both veterans who have yet to use their GI Bill benefits and those who are presently enrolled in colleges have substantial obstacles. Transitioning from military duty to school might provide challenges without sufficient support structures (D'Aoust et al., 2016). Veterans possess diverse invaluable attributes, such as maturity, discipline, and a strong orientation toward work completion (McLain et al., 2020). Nevertheless, individuals in this context need personalized assistance to properly manage the complexities of their chosen programs.

Initiatives such as the Veterans' Bachelor of Science in Nursing (VBSN) programs attempt to mitigate this disparity by assisting veterans in obtaining nursing degrees. These programs aim to enhance the leadership skills and clinical training of medics and corpsmen who have gained valuable experience during their military service by collaborating with organizations such as the HRSA (Health Resources and Services Administration) (McLain et al., 2020).

As of now, more than 31 establishments and colleges offer Veterans Four-Year Certification in Scientific Studies in Nursing (VBSN) programs to enhance veterans' fulfillment of the Four-Year Education in the Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BSN) educational plan.

Understanding the Veteran Experience

A study by Stone, Sharon, L. M., titled "Internal Voices, External Constraints: Investigating the Influence of Military Service on Student Development," provides insight into the effects of military duty on the advancement of student veterans in their journey towards self-authorship (Costantino, 2006). This research employs theoretical frameworks such as self-evolution, constructivist adult learning, and epistemological reflection to understand student veterans' developmental trajectories (D'Aoust et al., 2016). The results indicate that implementing mandatory military service, which emphasizes practical training and experience,

promotes self-authorship growth (Costantino, 2006). The research offers significant contributions to the knowledge of the impact of military service on the personal growth and development of veterans (Rodriguez & Smith, 2018; Zinger, 2010). Moreover, it is crucial to improve our understanding of the challenges that veterans face when transitioning into higher education.

Schlossberg's (2004) research highlights the significance of transition as a continuous process, involving adaptation to life events and adjustments to overcome challenges.

Understanding the nature of transition can aid in managing it effectively, particularly for veterans undergoing such changes. She emphasizes that transitions have the potential to reshape various aspects of our lives, including roles, relationships, routines, and assumptions. The extent of these changes determines the impact of the transition and the time required for integration and progression (Schlossberg, 2004).

The Responsibility of Institutions

Ensuring the preparedness and commitment of experienced students to their higher education is paramount. However, university personnel and professors must take responsibility for establishing a helpful learning environment (Semer & Harmening, 2015). Gaining a comprehensive understanding of the veteran experience and purposefully implementing effective strategies will increase these students' academic success and well-being (Bauman, 2009).

Collaboration with various institutions like the Navy College Program for Afloat College Education (NCPACE) and Veterans Upward Bound Program, is essential for acquiring knowledge from academic sources and creating a framework of shared accountability to ensure a seamless transition and adequate support for students with military backgrounds (Navy College, 2042; Costantino, 2006). The active involvement of higher education leadership is vital in

facilitating the ease of re-entry, financial assistance, and crediting procedures, guaranteeing the sustained achievement of veterans in their educational endeavors.

Current Veteran Services at Most Universities and Colleges

Veteran services offices have at least one person designated to aid student veterans. The staff member(s) assigned are usually responsible for certifying official documents, assisting with GI Bill requirements, and other tasks to ensure the veteran student's transition is without interruption or complications (McLain et al., 2020). These staff members, who are often veterans themselves, are trained to establish close working relationships with student veterans. Although not perfect, the veterans' support offices are vital and essential for serving the veteran community (Costantino, 2006). "Veteran-friendly campuses" is a term used by most veterans to indicate that the campus understands the needs of veteran students as they transition back to civilian life. This is an essential indicator that student veterans are getting the attention they deserve (Ackerman et al., 2009).

Re-entering Civilian Life

Re-entering civilian life after serving overseas or on a demanding military base can significantly impact a U.S. service member. Student veterans may experience a range of impacts, from minimal to extended periods of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Having an adjustment period is common for student veterans, and access to campus resources such as the student center, counseling center, and others can be extremely beneficial if introduced and presented correctly. It is essential for these departments to collaborate effectively to ensure that student veterans do not feel like outsiders. This presentation typically takes place during student orientation, and sometimes, a separate orientation specifically for student veterans is also required (Zinger, 2010; Ackerman et al., 2009). Cohen's (1985) social support theory suggests

that individuals, such as military veterans, who possess adequate social support are better equipped to conquer challenges, overcome obstacles, and attain favorable results. An excellent setting to witness the effectiveness of social support is during student veteran orientation and at social gatherings for veteran students (Cohen, 1985).

Furthermore, Schlossberg explains the intricacies of transition theory through anticipated, unanticipated, and non-event transitions. Utilizing a veteran as a case study, anticipated transitions occur when the veteran enters college, unanticipated transitions are experienced as the veteran progresses through their academic journey, and non-event transitions occur when the veteran leaves college. Schlossberg's Transition Theory employs the 4Ss framework - situation, support, self, and strategies - to guide individuals in coping with transitioning in, and out of college, as outlined by Ryan et al. (2011) and Stankey (2018). Notably, the transition of veterans from military service to civilian life is a critical component of their reintegration process, further emphasizing the importance of understanding and supporting individuals through these significant life changes.

The significant impact of military service on the psychological development and self-ownership progress of student veterans is an important area of study. Stone (2017) points out that existing research has not adequately addressed this aspect and aims to bridge this gap through their research. Educators need complete knowledge of the behavioral traits of combat veterans to provide a conducive setting for them in education systems. Stone (2017) cites a 2007 study by Black et al. (2007) who stress the need to understand student veterans from a military context, arguing that military training and culture have deep-seated psychological changes since they view themselves as a unit. Thus, Stone's (2017) research provides a comprehensive background on the effect of military service on student veterans.

Stone (2017) outlines a theoretical framework that can help understand student veterans to assist them in their quest for education. The model consists of theories of self-evolution, epistemological reflection, and constructivist theories of adult learning, which enable one to understand learning and development in adults (Stone, 2017). These theories help explain the problems that student veterans encounter when transitioning to a college education (Reyes, et al., 2023; Orenstein & Lewis, 2022; Voelpel et al., 2018). Self-evolution, which is based on the subject-object theory, involves recognizing personal development when an individual renounces something they once considered integral to their identity. One can compare these arguments to Schlossberg's Transition theory, which highlights changes in routines, relationships, roles, and assumptions as crucial for transition (Koenig et al., 2014). In this context, military service and its operational focus enable veterans to transform. Hence, educators require information about student veterans to understand their new approaches to life to assist them with their education needs. In addition, Holland's theory (1997) allows educators to understand the importance of creating a teaching and learning environment that aligns with the personality types of the learners. The educational environment should foster traits such as interconnectedness, determination, encouragement, and proactivity. Therefore, the theoretical framework in this paper presents crucial insights into human development.

Additionally, Stone, 2017, notes that epistemological reflection and constructivist theories of adult learning provide helpful information about student veterans, which one can apply in helping veterans returning home to go to college. Epistemological reflection recognizes that people undergo constructive development by taking various initiatives to improve skills and gain knowledge (Stone, 2017). Student veterans go back to college because they yearn for better lives. Theories of andragogy, self-directed learning, and perspective transformation recognize the

need to support adult learning. In this case, an educator can help veterans in their chosen field acquire new skills, knowledge, and perspectives (Stone, 2017).

Stone, 2017, unveils vital information about student veterans' development towards self-authorship, and an educator requires these details to help veterans cope in higher education programs. The results show that military service supports the flexibility of mind, soul searching, and open-mindedness towards diversity (Stone, 2017). In addition, the service enables individuals to acquire discipline, get used to being forced, and acknowledge challenge and support. Stone (2017) outlines student veterans' common traits and behavior as supportive relationships, initiative, responsibility, and drive. These issues point to how military service positively affects young adults transitioning to a college education. Therefore, educators can rely on the information to assist these students when they join their chosen departments.

Furthermore, the article outlines how the compulsory nature of military service supports human development. Stone (2017) argues that the training provides these people with a safety net for risk-taking, a separate and insulated environment from past service members' lives, and an opportunity for soul-searching or critical reflection (Stone, 2017). Further, the study reveals that military operational focus makes members responsible for other people, equipment, and mission outcomes and enables critical thinking development (Elliott et al., 2011). Another theoretical element from this study is that student veterans develop self-authorship. At the same time, young people develop initiative and drive, which are necessary for receiving peer support and mentorship regarding choices and decisions (Stone, 2017). In line with Erikson's theory (1968), this information helps educators understand veterans regarding their identities and needs. Thus, the research indicates that military service and its operational focus influence self-authorship development among all veterans.

The information presented in this study may reflect what other theorists and scholars have discussed about human development, making them relevant to helping veterans in college. Erickson highlights various issues that affect how people develop in different stages of life. In stage six, Erickson identifies intimacy and isolation as factors that young adults strive to balance (Orenstein & Lewis, Gould et. al., 2021; 2022; Pulley 2013). This marks the initial stage of adult development for student veterans. It enables them to shift from self-focus to considering others, supporting self-authorship as discussed in the article. These individuals must develop intimacy and acknowledge love as essential for socialization in education settings. In this way, veterans who return home to go to college can feel safe in college and remain caring and committed in their relationships with other students and educators (Orenstein & Lewis, Gould et. al., 2021; 2022; Pulley 2013).

Stone (2017) argues that military service and its operational focus help individuals with personality traits such as interdependent relationships and drive to develop toward self-authorship. These arguments are akin to people transitioning from isolation to intimacy during young adulthood. Moreover, the vector of moving from autonomy to interdependence that the Chickering theory postulates supports this phenomenon (Özçelik, 2022). Stone's (2017) suggestions and conclusions mirror Erickson's and other theorists' assertions about human development.

Conflict

Unfortunately, student Veterans returning from combat and other military service, have found themselves in conflict with their peers and sometimes their professors (Reyes, et al., 2023; Bauman, 2009). While adjustments are expected, student veterans must prepare to deal with pushback from peers and sometimes Professors when their opinions differ significantly (Elliott et

al., 2011). Examples are noted on college campuses where a professor called veterans "terrorists" during a lecture, and in another situation, a student called a student veteran a "traitor" when the student veteran voiced his objection to the war (Ackerman et al., 2009, p. 11). In their study, Keita et al. (2015) assert that Florida International University, located in Miami, Florida, actively embraces and prepares for human interaction situations. The VBSN program specifically targets the challenges encountered by former service members upon their transition from the military, such as the lack of recognition for their military expertise, unemployment, insufficient income, and homelessness.

The US Health Resources and Services Administration program supports qualifying veteran students with childcare services, counseling, accelerated learning programs, separate facilities for independent study and tutoring, and many other vital services to guide student veterans in completing their curriculum (Aikins et al., 2015). The program also helps educate staff and faculty on their significant impact on veteran students returning to civilian life after military service (Reyes, et al., 2023; Bauman, 2009). Evaluating the differences and challenges and finding solutions between military and higher education cultures becomes necessary when universities seek to serve a growing population of prior-service members returning to college or starting for the first time (Falkey, 2016; Gwin, et. al., 2012).

Identifying the differences between veteran and traditional college students can be helpful and lead to a path of success for students, faculty, and staff. The veteran student population is increasing in higher education (Lim et al., 2018; Zinger, 2010). The number of student veterans pursuing higher education has increased, leading to more research focused on helping them transition smoothly into the new education culture.

Despite the benefits of higher education in establishing a career path, student veterans encounter several challenges. Initially, they struggled to adapt to the social and cultural norms of the education system, which differed from those of the military culture. For example, higher education is characterized by individualism, competition, individual thinking, and personal responsibility, contrary to the military culture (Lim et al., 2018). Another challenge is that veteran students are older adults with responsibilities such as caring for their families. As a result, balancing responsibilities and education becomes challenging. For example, because of serving in combat or high-stress environments, veteran students often have health issues like PTSD and physical disabilities that interfere with their learning (Reyes, et al., 2023; D'Aoust et al., 2016; Zinger, 2010). Considering these challenges, faculty and staff must find solutions to assist the growing population of veteran students. One of the differences between veterans and other traditional students highlighted is that veterans possess practical leadership skills (Lim et al., 2018). Veterans are also highly mature as compared to other students. They are also highly determined to pursue academic excellence more than other students (Lim et al., 2018). The variation results from the differences between educational and military backgrounds.

According to Lim et al. (2018), the hidden curriculum suggests that schools have a role in facilitating student interactions to prepare them for future citizenship (Lim et al., 2018). Scholars have used the concept to highlight students' challenges during their transition to higher education. In the article, the concept of cultural values was used to analyze the difficulties that veteran students face in understanding the differences between higher education and the military. Bauman (2009) pointed out that this concept had not previously been applied to veteran students. For example, veteran students have always been taught to follow orders. Placing them in a group

of other students to do an assignment may be difficult since they would deal with some non-committed students.

Lim et al., 2018, suggests that institutions should provide a cultural transition program for veteran students. The program would help individuals prepare psychologically for the educational culture, and institutions must also understand the military culture to create a veteran-friendly school environment (Lim et al., 2018). Additionally, institutional staff are encouraged to establish associations with veteran students to assist them with acclimating to the new cultural standards (Reyes, et al., 2023; Lim et al., 2018). Thus, veteran students will have a simpler and more appealing transition into advanced education.

Maturity

Kohlberg's 6 Stages of Moral Development (1963) plays a significant role with military veterans. For example, based on Lim et al. (2018), veteran students are at the post-conventional level since they have already developed a set of ethical principles. They are already used to the military culture where strict rules apply. Military veteran students have been conditioned to strictly adhere to rules and regulations, leaving little room for deviation or failure. Consequently, these students often struggle to adapt to the cultural norms of higher education, particularly when some students are still in the pre-conventional stage. Some veterans may only comply with certain rules if they believe they can do so without attracting attention. Based on Perry's (1999) theory of moral development, veteran students are in the relativism stage, where everything is viewed within a specific context (Weebly, n.d.). In military life, veteran students are accustomed to analyzing and responding to situations based on the context (Constantino, 2006). For example, they are trained on what to do during an attack by terrorists. Such is different higher education

where students are in the multiplicity level of questioning the authority. As a result, veteran students need help to conform to the higher education setup.

Considering Carol Gilligan's theory (1982) on Women and Moral Development in higher education, institutions must embrace student diversity. They should ensure that there is equality and that no gender feels mistreated. A similar approach should be applied since veteran students are different from other students in higher education (Costantino, 2006). According to Shackelford (2019), Veterans have diverse cultural and social norms. Therefore, institutions should formulate strategies to ensure everyone feels appreciated while in school. This would also apply to diversity in religion, which already has foundations, policy, and support services. Higher education institutions can apply moral development theories to understand their students. Knowledge of the stage or level each student belongs to will help the staff assist them in transitioning into the desired stage. As a result, learning becomes easier since students are handled based on their moral development stage (Kirchner, 2015; Meca, et al., 2021; Shackelford, et al., 2019).

US Branches of combat and their background toward education

The United States military branches, such as the Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines, Coast Guard, and Space Force, have a rich historical background and play a critical role in protecting the nation's interests at home and abroad (U.S. Military, 2024). These branches include individuals committed to their country and undertaking extensive training, deployment, and combat experiences.

Each military branch has distinct historical and pedagogical characteristics that shape their respective educational approaches, including providing higher education opportunities tailored explicitly for veterans. As an example, the Army can be traced back to its origins in the

Continental Army, which was founded in 1775 during the American Revolutionary War (U.S. Military, 2024). The Army has always recognized the importance of education for its personnel, implementing initiatives like the Army Continuing Education System (ACES) to support their academic pursuits while in active service or upon transitioning back to civilian society. The Army allows troops to accrue college credits using military training and experience. Likewise, the United States Navy, founded in 1775, emphasizes the educational development of its personnel. The US Navy gives a scope of educational benefits, including the Navy School Program, intended to help sailors seek additional education while simultaneously being on active duty or during their exchange to non-military life. The Navy has teamed up with many schools and institutions to ensure its members' access to excellent education (U.S. Military, 2024).

The US Air Force, established in 1947, places a strong emphasis on education and provides several valuable opportunities for its members to pursue further education during or after their military service (U.S. Military, 2024). Institutions such as the Community College of the Air Force and Air University provide educational opportunities for military personnel, helping them acquire specialized skills and knowledge relevant to their respective fields (U.S. Military, 2024).

The Marine Corps, founded in 1775, strongly emphasizes the cultivation of leadership abilities and provides its members with a select range of well-regarded educational prospects. The United States Marine Corps offers tuition support to its active-duty troops, enabling them to engage in post-secondary education, whether it be via conventional brick-and-mortar institutions or online educational platforms (U.S. Military, 2024). Since its commencement in 1915, the Coast Guard has placed priority on procuring information and creating abilities through schooling and training programs. The organization offers a range of programs, including the

CSPI (College Student Pre-Commissioning Initiative) and the TAP (Tuition Assistance Program), which provide financial support to individuals pursuing higher education (U.S. Military, 2024).

Current services provided to Veterans (GI Bill)

The GI Bill, officially known as the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, is a crucial piece of legislation that provides educational benefits to veterans returning from active duty. The bill was created to aid in the reintegration and transition of military veterans into civilian life after World War II.

The GI Bill allows qualifying veterans to acquire monetary aid to seek higher education, i.e., enlistment in colleges, universities, and vocational institutions. The provided support encompasses the costs of tuition, allocations for educational materials and resources, as well as a modest housing stipend for qualifying students (Post-9/11, 2015; Donnelly, 2021; Costantino, 2006). The primary objective of the GI Bill is to effectively promote the smooth transfer of military veterans into institutions of higher education, to enable their successful integration into the labor market (Post-9/11, 2015; Donnelly, 2021; Elliott, 2015; Miller, 2015).

The GI Bill has seen a series of modifications and adaptations to address veterans' evolving requirements effectively. It encompasses many incarnations, including the post-9/11 GI Bill, the Montgomery GI Bill, and the Reserve Educational Assistance Program (REAP) (Post-9/11, 2015; Özçelik, 2022; Donnelly, 2021). These iterations have significantly broadened the advantages offered to veterans, including provisions for vocational training initiatives, online educational opportunities, and even the option to transfer benefits to spouses or dependents.

The GI Bill has facilitated veterans' access to Higher education, mitigating financial obstacles that may impede their academic endeavors (Post-9-11, 2015). Through financial

assistance, the legislation has facilitated veterans' acquisition of essential skills and knowledge, enabling them to transition into many professional domains, successfully (DeCoster, 2018; Costantino, 2006). The GI Bill has undeniably made considerable progress in facilitating veterans' reintegration into higher education (Özçelik, 2022; Donnelly, 2021). However, it is imperative to sustain ongoing assessment and enhancement of these programs to maintain their efficacy in meeting veterans' requirements.

Veteran Friendly Campuses

Veterans returning to higher education face unique challenges and require specific support for seamless academic integration (Özçelik, 2022; DeCoster, 2018; Elliott, 2015). The construction of campuses that are accommodating and supportive to veterans is essential for creating an environment that fosters effective learning for these individuals. For example, a school considered to be veteran-friendly is characterized by its acknowledgment and understanding of veterans' unique experiences and needs (Dillard et. al., 2016). Such a campus is committed to providing veterans with the essential resources, assistance, and provisions to manage their academic pursuits effectively (Reyes, et al., 2023; Elliott et al., 2011). These educational institutions prioritize and effectively address the unique challenges of veterans, supporting their academic success and advancement.

Some fundamental attributes lead to the designation of a campus as accommodating and supportive towards veterans. In the first instance, it is common for such educational institutions to possess a specialized office or department designated explicitly for veterans' affairs, which is staffed by personnel who possess expertise in the distinct requirements of veterans and the many benefits accessible to them (DeCoster, 2018; Elliott et al., 2011). The purpose of this office is to function as a single center for providing services and support to veterans. It offers advice and

assistance in educational benefits, financial aid, and academic preparation. In addition, universities that prioritize the needs of veterans may provide tailored orientation programs that are specifically intended to cater to the unique requirements of this demographic. These programs enhance veterans' transition into the scholarly sphere, familiarize them with the numerous resources available to them, connect them with other veteran students, and provide network support (Dillard, et al., 2016). Fostering a sense of kinship and belonging is essential for veterans, as it plays an urgent role in encouraging a supportive community (Reyes, et al., 2023). Moreover, colleges focusing on the necessities of veterans frequently offer mental health programs explicitly intended to address the unique challenges faced by those with military backgrounds (Reyes, et al., 2023; Costantino, 2006). This might involve counseling services that are specifically designed to meet the mental health needs of veterans, as well as support groups and programs aimed at addressing mental health challenges like post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and difficulties related to transitioning from military to civilian life (DeCoster, 2018; Elliott et al., 2011).

Finally, establishing well-defined and efficient procedures for converting military credits and experience into academic credits is paramount. The skills and training acquired by veterans during their military service are often essential and should be properly recognized and credited to their college education.

Veterans' Rights and Hiring Preference

The protection of veterans' rights and the implementation of hiring preference policies are integral aspects of comprehensive programs designed to provide support and acknowledgment for the valuable contributions made by veterans to society. Veterans receive preferential treatment in state and federal employment, providing them with advantages in the recruitment

and selection process (Özçelik, 2022; Ruiz, 2016). These programs acknowledge the unique skills and knowledge that veterans acquire from their military service, justifying their prioritization over individuals without military experience. The Veterans' Preference Act in the United States provides veterans with extra points or benefits throughout the employment process, enabling them to compete. Furthermore, this preference also extends to employment opportunities within the public sector, offering additional support to veterans (Özçelik, 2022; Ruiz, 2016). It's important to note that these benefits only apply to qualified veterans and are dependent on factors such as their discharge status, level of disability, and length of service.

The justification for laying out veterans' privileges and employing inclinations is established by encouraging reasonableness and recognizing the sacrifices made by the people who have served in the military. The primary objective of this initiative is to provide veterans with steady employment and support their smooth integration into civilian society. Furthermore, these efforts significantly foster workforce diversity inside state and federal agencies since they attract people with distinct skill sets and a solid dedication to serving the public.

Summary

It is clear from the above literature analysis that historically, American soldiers' journeys have been characterized by hardships and sacrifice. Serving the country wearing a uniform requires commitment, discipline, and devotion to duty. Reintegrating into civilian life can present difficulties, frequently entailing numerous hurdles and cultural disorientation. There has been an increasing understanding of the necessity to support and aid our veterans as they navigate this challenging journey over the years. The establishment of the GI Bill, a notable piece of regulation intended to give veterans the choice to seek after their schooling, was a basic move toward helping veterans' post-administration goals. Various veterans are now able to

pursue higher education thanks to the expanded GI Bill program. The transition back to civilian life presents unique challenges due to the hurdles and cultural differences inherent in military service, which are often not fully understood by society. Recently, higher education institutions have started to consider the specific needs of veteran students. They have developed programs and services specifically designed to assist veterans in this important transition. These programs aim to address veterans' physical, mental, and emotional needs, including issues such as TBIs and PTSD, which are commonly associated with military service.

One of the most significant risk factors for veterans leaving the military has been identified as the transition itself (Schlossberg, 2004). However, veterans have learned many valuable skills, discipline, honesty, maturity, and unshakable dedication—while serving in uniform. They may use these skills as a solid basis for their new civilian life to pursue further studies and jobs in disciplines such as nursing, law enforcement, law, and various other professional careers. With a focus on professional programs specifically, the purpose of the literature and analysis was to shed light on the various experiences veterans confront when they pursue higher education. The assessment also examined the existing practices, services, and opportunities provided by universities to better support veteran students. This comprehensive examination uncovered the difficulties faced by veterans transitioning from military life to civilian life, while also showcasing the resilience and dedication of those veterans who are pursuing higher education. As a result, the transition for veterans into higher education is characterized by both adversity and success. Universities and other institutions should continue offering specialized support services tailored to understand veterans' unique challenges as society increasingly values their experiences. Veterans will continue pursuing education and

achievement in their chosen areas with the appropriate resources and a firm commitment to their objectives, enhancing our society via their unique experiences and insights.

CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Introduction

Research methodology is paramount in any study, as it delineates the structure and processes that will be used to answer research inquiries. This dissertation focused on the qualitative research approach used to investigate the experiences and obstacles encountered by veterans reentering higher education. Drawing upon the information acquired from Chapter One and the comprehensive evaluation of relevant literature in Chapter Two, the research technique concentrated on specific subjects and domains identified as noteworthy in the current corpus of scholarly work. Through a comprehensive analysis of existing literature, theoretical frameworks, and empirical data about veterans' transition into higher education, this research aims to uncover areas of knowledge that still need to be adequately explored. By conducting a meticulously planned and executed study, this research addressed these gaps in knowledge and made a valuable contribution to the existing body of scholarship. The methodology used in this study encompasses qualitative techniques, facilitating a complete comprehension of the college experiences of veterans. To conduct a thorough analysis of the perspectives held by veterans, the research employed qualitative approaches, including interviews, as a means of investigation. The interviews followed qualitative criteria by asking open-ended questions, which helped identify common patterns and trends in the gathered data. The study also addressed ethical issues, including ensuring participant anonymity and obtaining informed consent. Moreover, this paper examined the sampling methodology, data collection processes, and data analysis techniques that will be used to acquire and analyze the data. This study was designed within the theoretical framework of Schlossberg transition theory, which informs the researchers' methodological approach.

Research Design

The study's research design used a phenomenological approach to investigate the lived experiences of veterans reentering higher education. *Phenomenology* is a qualitative research approach that focuses on understanding the fundamental nature of a phenomenon by examining the viewpoints and lived experiences of the persons engaged in it (Creswell, 2007). This phenomenological research helped explore veterans' lived experiences (Creswell, 2018; Creswell, & Creswell, 2007). The main objective was to document the educational journeys of experienced college students and comprehend the core of their experiences and how they processed or interpreted what they had gone through (Patton, 1990). The phenomenological methodology allowed the participants to share their stories and experiences of similar or common events (Stratton et al., 2024). Utilizing this method allowed the researcher to share insight and explore the veterans' experiences as they found meaning in their past and present experiences and applied them to college (Rodriguez & Smith, 2018).

Research Site

Middle Tennessee State University (MTSU) is a comprehensive institution located in Murfreesboro. It is a top choice for Tennessee undergraduates and has a national and international influence through unique programs and graduate offerings. The university is dedicated to knowledge creation, preservation, and dissemination, using research to enhance teaching and community engagement. MTSU focuses on preparing students for success in their fields and a changing global environment. With over 20,000 students, it is the main source of graduates for the Greater Nashville area and consistently ranks on The Princeton Review's list of top colleges in the US. It is also the preferred choice for transfer students in Tennessee.

Population and Sample Size

The study's demographic comprised of United States military veterans. The main emphasis was set on the people who have served in the military and are attending a professional college program or have recently finished their program (Roberts, 2020; Rodriguez & Smith, 2018; DeCoster, 2018). The populace contains people who have served in the military, including males and females. In this study, the selection of participants focused on specifically targeting persons who have undergone the transition from military duty to college (Stratton et al., 2024; 2012; McLain et al., 2020).

A mix of snowball sampling, deliberate sampling, and convenience sampling techniques choose the study sample. Snowball sampling is a method of participant recruitment that relies on recommendations from first participants who satisfy the predetermined inclusion criteria (Creswell, 2014; Luborsky, et al., 1995; McLain et al., 2020). Purposeful sampling was employed to guarantee the inclusion of various experiences and backgrounds within the sample. Convenience sampling was used to include veterans who are readily available and willing to participate in the study.

The determination of the sample size was guided by the notion of data saturation, whereby the interviews were continued until the point at which no new information or themes arose from the collected data. This methodology guaranteed the attainment of a thorough comprehension of the experiences encountered by veterans upon their transition into college. The sample included a diverse representation of male and female veterans who have served in combat and non-combat roles, including a broad spectrum of viewpoints and experiences.

Instrumentation

The primary instrument used in this investigation was an interview protocol. The protocol interview was used to provide direction and structure to the interview, guaranteeing consistency and unwavering quality in the data collection process (Roberts, 2020; Rodriguez & Smith, 2018). Using a journal, a recorder, and the option of zoom, the inquiry questions comprised semi-structured and open-ended questions, empowering the interviewer to dive into the participants' encounters, challenges, and explanations behind their choice to seek additional study in their chosen field. This methodology facilitated the interviewer conducting more thorough investigations into specific subjects and requesting more explanation, promoting comprehensive and significant dialogues with the participants (Rodriguez & Smith, 2018; Roberts, 2020). The utilization of open-ended inquiries facilitated the appearance of unforeseen ideas and viewpoints, augmenting the richness and perceptiveness of the data gathered for analysis. The researcher used a recorder and a separate journal to capture thoughts, ideas, and possible questions.

Data Collection Procedures

The process of data collection involves gathering, measuring, and analyzing accurate data from various sources to address research problems, answer questions, evaluate outcomes, and forecast trends and probabilities (Baht, 2019). The researcher employed the use of an interview protocol to collect data on the educational experiences of veteran students in higher education.

Figure 1: Qualitative Data Collection Process



Source: QuestionPro, 2023

The data-collecting techniques for this research included recruiting participants via the Veterans Office, admissions office, and college departments. The first point of contact with prospective participants was established via telephone communication or face-to-face introductions conducted on the university or college campus premises. The rights of participants were clarified, and informed consent forms were procured after the disclosure of the inclusion criteria.

To gather qualitative data, the researchers conducted interviews with the individuals. Data collection was facilitated using semi-structured interviews, allowing participants to express their narratives and personal experiences using their language. The interviews were recorded in audio format and transcribed afterward which provided a thorough analysis.-The approach consisted of face-to-face interviews and Zoom interviews. The participants were allowed to choose their preferred interview format. The importance of voluntary engagement was emphasized, and participants had the prerogative to withdraw their involvement at any point before or during the interview.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to analyze the qualitative data and discern and identify prevalent themes and patterns within the data gathered. The procedure encompasses coding and categorization techniques to discern patterns of repeating thoughts, events, and emotions within the data. Through an examination of these thematic elements, the researcher achieved a deeper understanding of the significance that veterans attribute to their previous encounters and how these experiences are used in their pursuit of education within their chosen fields (Roberts, 2020; Rodriguez & Smith, 2018).

The raw data collected from the interviews were transcribed verbatim to guarantee the fidelity of participant replies. After the transcription, the data was coded using Tesch's Eight Steps (Tesch, 1990). The process entails a methodical approach to categorizing and arranging the data into themes and sub-themes, considering repeating patterns and ideas (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; McLain et al., 2020; Luborsky, et al., 1995). The researcher conducted the coding procedure, autonomously examined the data, and assigned suitable codes. Scheduled sessions were conducted with an additional researcher to provide peer debriefing and maintain inter-coder reliability. Ultimately, the themes and sub-themes that have been found were subjected to analysis and interpretation to thoroughly understand the experiences and difficulties encountered by veterans entering higher education.

Ethical Considerations

The study emphasizes ethical issues and commits to strictly adhering to ethical guidelines throughout the research. To ensure ethical standards are upheld, the researchers received informed permission from all participants. This process included a comprehensive explanation of

the study's objectives, the participant's rights, and the voluntary nature of their involvement. To maintain confidentiality and anonymity, each participant's unique identification was assigned to safeguard their identities (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The data will be maintained safely and only be available to the researcher and persons granted authorization. The data is secured in a locked briefcase and kept at the private home of the researcher. Participants were guaranteed the ability to voluntarily discontinue their involvement in the research at any point without facing any negative repercussions (Rodriguez & Smith, 2018; Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The research was conducted in adherence to pertinent ethical protocols, and before data collection, clearance from the institutional review board was given to the researcher.

After interviews and data analysis, participants were assigned pseudonyms. Interviews were audio recorded and all audio recordings were saved on an encrypted USB drive with password-protected access. The USB drive is kept in a locked briefcase. The USB drive will only be used on a personal password-protected laptop.

Summary

This chapter introduces the study's selected research design, focusing on using a phenomenological research methodology. This method tried to investigate the study participants' real experiences and views. The recruiting process made sure to include individuals who represent the target market by including important individuals like the Director of the Veterans Center, faculty and staff, and the Associate Dean of Students. A thorough procedure was laid out to guarantee ethical standards and safeguard participant rights and privacy. This entails asking everyone who has met the inclusion criteria for participation for their free and informed permission. The project used semi-structured interviews to elicit rich and varied perspectives from the participants. These interviews were performed individually only. Hence, this chapter

provides a framework for the research technique by outlining the measures used to ensure the study's ethical conduct, the participant selection process, and the data collection method. It establishes the framework for a thorough investigation of the experiences and viewpoints of the selected participants concerning the study issue.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Introduction

This chapter describes the findings and key discoveries obtained from 10 Veteran students and their perceptions of their academic experiences in their perspective programs attending a university. The goal is to understand how they make meaning of their prior and current college academic experiences and the obstacles they encounter upon reentry into higher education. The broad overarching question that guided this study was:

How do veterans attending college make meaning of their experiences in their respective programs?

Additional questions to further guide the overarching question for this study included:

1. What adversities impact veteran college students' well-being and academic performance?
2. What strategies and support mechanisms can be implemented to assist veterans in overcoming these challenges and achieving optimal academic outcomes?

This chapter begins with an overview of the participant selection and recruitment process, including basic demographic information. It then provides a brief background summary of the Veteran students who participated in the study. The findings are then categorized into three main themes and six subthemes. The section ends with some concluding thoughts and a chapter summary follows.

Participants Recruitment

Ten United States military veterans were recruited for the study through various methods. Initially, I approached the veterans' office on campus and communicated with the director, who requested me to draft an email to potential participants. Additionally, I visited the veterans'

office and engaged with veterans present there, expressing my interest in their participation. Upon inquiry, they expressed their willingness to take part in the study. During one such interaction, a veteran informed me about a volunteer veterans club on campus and invited me to their meeting. Attending the meeting, I had the opportunity to meet more than 20 veteran students. As a result, several individuals signed up for the study, and some even shared my contact details with their fellow student veterans. Through these efforts, I successfully gathered ten interviews for the study. Participants have been given pseudonyms to protect their identities.

Participants

Seth is a 32-year-old male who separated from the US Marines in 2016. He is from Southwest Florida and spent many years on the West Coast in military service. As a freshman in college Seth brings in a few college credits that were accepted for earned credit with another institution. Seth's goal started in business, but he has embraced the idea of going back to his technology skills and mastery of information and communication systems. He has chosen to pursue an Aerospace, Unmanned Aircraft Systems degree.

Ann is in her mid-20s and signed up for college right after serving in the military. She is from Tennessee and spent time overseas. Ann is enthusiastic about college but finds her transition to be a struggle. She prides herself on being attentive to detail with great punctuality. Ann has served at the Brigade level in the military and shared that her experience working with mostly officers gave her an advantage she has made use of while speaking to professors and senior administration at MTSU.

Matt is in his early 30s and is an avid Red Socks baseball fan. He applied to only two colleges MTSU and Emory Riddle and was accepted to both. He knew right away that he desired to continue his aviation career. His military experience in aviation has given him a leg up in his

studies at MTSU and has made it easy to settle into the program. Matt presents as a no-nonsense professional ready to graduate.

Tina is in her late 30s maybe early 40s currently working as an EMT-B locally. Tina was a Hospital Corpsman in the US Navy and although she had plans to attend a Physician Assistant program, she is happy attending the MTSU Nursing program full-time. She has had very few obstacles thus far and has found the transition from the military to nursing school with little difficulty. Tina has a lot to say and doesn't shy away from providing advice to those who inquire.

Fran is in her early 20's and currently living on campus. Fran did not expect to ever go to college as she thought she would "marry a rich guy one day". However, after experiencing the military as a medic she has developed an eagerness to learn more about the medical career and as a nursing student, she intends on earning a commission as an Army Nursing Officer. Fran has not had an easy go of things and she does not expect everything will be easy, but she is presented as a confident and eager young lady who plans to take care of herself and have a family.

Earnest is a 44-year-old law enforcement officer in Murfreesboro. He also served in law enforcement while serving in the military. Referring to his obstacles as "challenges" Earnest has an optimistic viewpoint regarding his college career and professional career. Earnest is a patriot and excited about his future and although his priority as a father comes first, he is an active member of the community, his church, and the university.

Kurt is a 45-year-old combat veteran with some struggles with PTSD. He would like to have more interaction with fellow veterans, but he does not feel like the veterans' office does enough to make that happen. Kurt shares that he feels out of place and much older than everyone, but he is optimistic about his plans and what he will do after graduation.

Tim is a 25-year-old combat veteran. He served in the military and has deployed multiple times overseas to combat zones. Tim currently suffers from PTSD and feels disconnected from the community due to his age difference. Tim believes he and fellow veterans have a “leg up” regarding their experience through their military jobs, training, and maturity.

Susan is a 25-year-old combat veteran. She served in combat zones and has experiences she hasn't felt comfortable sharing while serving overseas. Susan presents a mature and extensively prepared student with a plan and active goals for success. Susan found solace in her ties to the military community, reminiscing about the convenience of dining at the mess hall and expressing her appreciation for the sense of discipline she and her peers lack in college. Susan struggles with PTSD and finds it difficult to manage some conversations of the political type in class among students and professors.

Henry is a male in his late 40's. Henry enjoys talking and discovering new things in class. He feels his peers, and classmates, get flustered with him for the number of questions he asks but he wants to do his best. Henry is a combat veteran with PTSD and his transition from the military to college comes with certain challenges, he is not afraid to share his Christian values, being an American patriot, and a Veteran. However, he does share he has been put in positions he did not appreciate and did not feel safe among judgmental students and professors.

Organization of Data

The interviews provided the raw data, which was then transcribed word for word to ensure the accuracy of participant responses. Following the transcription, the researcher used both open and axial coding to organize the data into categories and themes. As described by Creswell and Creswell (2018), coding involves organizing the collected data by associating relevant words to create categories. The coding process enabled the lead researcher to

meticulously analyze the data while progressing through the coding stages (Tesh, 1990). Subsequently, topics were listed and grouped based on relevance, uniqueness, and remaining themes. This process allowed the researcher to thoroughly analyze the data and identify patterns and themes within the information collected. The following themes emerged as a result of the process:

Theme 1: University Support

Sub-theme 1: Positive Support

Sub-theme 2: Lack of Support

Theme 2: Community & Belonging

Sub-theme 1: Positive experience

Sub-theme 2: Adverse experience

Theme 3: Educational Experiences

Sub-theme 1: Pre-Education

Sub-theme 2: Current Education

Emerging Themes

The following analysis presents emerging themes of educational experiences for veteran students in higher education.

Theme: University Support

Sub-Theme 1: Positive Support

Most participants in the study shared their experiences regarding the support they received during their transition into college. All the participants were United States military veterans who had undergone training and served in various military roles, some of which were related to the college degrees they were pursuing. Among the support services offered and

mentioned like the gym, library, and veterans' center, the participants found that financial assistance provided through the GI Bill stood out. Specifically, Ann, Matt, and Tim had positive experiences utilizing online websites, payment structures, and tuition payments available to them as veterans. Matt mentioned his financial struggles but expressed gratitude for the support he received through the GI Bill and other services that helped him progress in college.

Before leaving the military, Matt was already navigating his transition to college by applying and getting accepted to MTSU and Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University. This decision stemmed from his enthusiasm for pursuing an aviation career, building upon his experience as an aviation mechanic during his military service. Consequently, Matt found it logical to shift from “a mechanic to aviation management” as he embarked on this new path. Regrettably, a lack of understanding concerning financial matters and a personal challenge impeded Matt's ability to continue his college education, so he had to set out for a year.

Matt disclosed that he needed to engage in multiple unconventional jobs to maximize his earnings, secure more suitable accommodation, eliminate his reliance on “credit cards, and establish emergency funds”.

Nevertheless, he did not allow this setback to discourage him. Taking a temporary departure from academics, Matt worked in landscaping to address his financial concerns and acquaint himself with available resources like Pell Grants. Moreover, he used the GI Bill and Pell Grants to cover his college tuition expenses. Matt made sure to be well-prepared for his desired professional career, but he encountered a valuable lesson regarding the financial aspect of achieving his goals. Having achieved success in managing his finances, Matt is now on track to graduate in just one more semester.

Ann benefitted from the online support system, enabling her to efficiently manage her time for accommodations provided by the Disability and Access Center (DAC). The assistance

and accommodation from DAC helped Ann concentrate on her exams and tutoring opportunities. The extra time for exams and the absence of financial aid struggles were key factors contributing to Ann's academic success, and she appreciates the online support systems that alleviated her financial worries. She further mentioned how much “double time on tests” makes things go much more smoothly. Despite professors' reluctance to accommodate her during tests, papers, and other class requirements, Ann stressed the significance of utilizing DAC services. She firmly asserted that she “would not let any professors who think DAC services is inconvenient for them” deprive her of the entitled services. Ann expressed her admiration for the professors who endorsed DAC, but she did not hesitate to confront those who did not recognize or value the significance of DAC services. She made it clear to them that complying with DAC was not only a moral obligation but also a legal mandate for professors.

Tim described how he used online services to secure his GI Bill payments, allowing him to avoid dipping into funds earmarked for his home and family. He expressed relief at bypassing the financial aid office, having heard numerous complaints from other students.

Tim revealed that he battled extensively with PTSD, highlighting the additional challenges he faced in dealing with certain departments that failed to show proper respect towards veterans, or at least that's how he perceived it. Tim expressed gratitude for not having to “juggle with financial aid”, as he recognized that financial struggles often lead to dropouts and episodes related to mental healthcare.

Tim held the belief that one of the key priorities in college should be to alleviate the burdens on students, particularly veterans returning from war. He expressed his concern, stating, “We just don't need more complications and adjustments since we have enough as it is!”

Seth has enjoyed the free gym use and he likes that the hours are available to him when he wants to work out. Seth has not much used the other services of the campus, mostly because he is not aware of them, and he is not optimistic that other veterans who follow him will be told

about them either. Overall, Seth has managed to negate his obstacles as they come and do what he needs to do to get things done.

Seth acknowledged that his experience with PTSD and military service has equipped him with valuable "survival skills" that enable him to adapt more effectively than others in various situations. Despite feeling frustrated at times, Seth expresses gratitude for the opportunities provided by his GI bill and eagerly anticipates his upcoming graduation.

Seth has a goal and plan; he is eager to complete his program and move forward with his life.

Tina has discovered that despite being familiar with various campus services, she does not find them particularly useful. She asserts that she effectively manages her time and utilizes this ability to enhance her learning and studying routines. Tina attributes her excellent time management skills to her military experience. Additionally, she finds solace in the online GI Bill, which provides her with financial security and allows her to navigate through her academic journey without any concerns.

Tina mentioned that she does not allocate time to fret over things she is unaware of, as she has already encountered numerous instances of uncertainty during her childhood and military service.

Tina expressed that she is currently responsible for handling all tasks independently, which can occasionally lead to feelings of being overwhelmed. Despite this, she acknowledges the existence of supportive resources available on campus, although she may not always have the opportunity to utilize them due to time constraints.

Earnest has chosen the library as his favorite service on campus due to its numerous benefits. Being in the military for several years, he experienced a constant influx of people in his personal space, office, and business. Therefore, the library serves as a sanctuary for him, providing a serene atmosphere where he can concentrate on his studies and complete his tasks efficiently. Additionally, the library offers a wide range of resources, including books and

research materials, enabling Earnest to expand his knowledge and enhance his academic performance.

Earnest has willingly embraced the role of a college student, considering it not only as a lifestyle but also as a gauge of his accomplishments. As someone more than a decade older than his fellow students, he observed that “their level of maturity, or sometimes the lack thereof,” has served as a reminder to Earnest of the significant personal growth he has achieved. He attributes his continuous progress to his unwavering faith in God and his commitment as a devoted husband and parent. These factors serve as constant motivators for him to keep pushing forward in his academic journey.

Earnest's unwavering belief in God has proven to be a guiding force in his life, enabling him to navigate through challenges with resilience and determination. By prioritizing the positive aspects of his faith, Earnest can fulfill his duty to serve God in the most effective way possible. To ensure he remains aligned with God's plan for him, Earnest actively utilizes various resources such as the library, the veterans' office, and the gym. These spaces not only provide him with the necessary tools and knowledge to deepen his understanding of his faith, but also serve as reminders of the importance of staying focused on God's divine purpose for his life.

Kurt's transition to college has been positive, as he has utilized the campus services he knows about and has also discovered additional services along the way. While he suggests the need for a letter or meeting to inform students about available campus services, Kurt has faced minimal obstacles during his college experience. He emphasizes that he promptly addresses any questions or concerns that arise, drawing on his military background which has instilled in him the confidence and expectation to be a problem solver. With his faith and maturity, Kurt has successfully prioritized his studies while keeping God at the forefront of his life. He finds solace in the library and occasionally visits the food court for a coffee and some reading.

Susan enrolled in college while still serving in the military and took a leave of absence before her discharge. She found comfort in the financial support provided by the GI Bill and her

familiarity with online programs for financial assistance. However, she is currently facing challenges adjusting to civilian life due to the high cost of living. Despite this, Susan is grateful for the various services available on campus, such as ROTC, the Library, the veterans' center, and the gym. Additionally, she resides in the college dorms. Although Susan has encountered difficulties fitting in with her fellow nursing students, her focus remains on obtaining her degree and becoming an Army Nurse.

Henry's transition to college has been smooth and successful. He believes that his military background has prepared him well for this new chapter in his life, and he anticipated having numerous questions upon arriving on campus. While he is not familiar with all the services available on campus, Henry has been collaborating with the veterans' office and is heartened by their support and open-door policy. While dealing with PTSD, there have been instances where Henry has needed to distance himself from his peers who lack understanding of military service and the sacrifices made by veterans. However, he remains steadfast in his Christian faith and actively encourages other veterans and students to prioritize their relationship with God above all else.

Fran's interaction with the student support services at the campus has been favorable, particularly finding encouragement from the veterans' office and ROTC. Despite utilizing the food court, she expresses dissatisfaction with the limited food options available. However, she remains appreciative of her overall experience on campus. Fran also mentions facing challenges with male students flirting, attributing their behavior to immaturity and lack of respect for leadership, despite being only slightly older than her peers.

Fran, a participant in the ROTC unit at her school, has gained a deeper understanding of the challenges faced by military officers, specifically her father, who was tasked with making life-and-death decisions. Her involvement in the program has provided her with insight into the sacrifices required in such roles.

Fran confided about the difficulties she faced during her childhood due to the tragic loss of her father, who was serving as a US Marine overseas when she was very young. Despite her military service in the TN Army National Guard, she found comfort in gaining a deeper understanding of the demands and sacrifices involved in serving in the military.

Sub-Theme 2: Lack of Support

Out of the 10 interviewees, all of them concurred that there is a scarcity of support for both veterans and students in general on campus. They expressed that there is an insufficient amount of upfront information, and they are not informed about the services available on campus. Moreover, when seeking assistance, they had to navigate through various departments and staff members to obtain an answer. Although the participants acknowledged that they are older students with more experience and familiarity in handling their own needs, they still believe that the administration is lacking in addressing these concerns. Some participants specifically highlighted the lack of support, communication, awareness about resources, frustration when utilizing physical and academic accommodations, and unnecessary bureaucracy.

Seth's encounters have encompassed a wide range of factors and circumstances that have caused him significant distress and anxiety, which he believes should have been avoidable. He recounted a time when he learned about an email group that shared information about campus services and upcoming events. However, during his time at MTSU, he only received four emails from the veterans' center, which did not explain available services or upcoming events. Seth emphasized that there is a lack of awareness regarding veterans' benefits in the financial aid process, and when he sought clarification, he was given evasive responses. This has left Seth with the perception that insufficient efforts are being made to create a welcoming and appreciative environment for veterans. With feelings of isolation from other veterans, Seth

wishes to be informed about veteran activities and groups; however, he often discovers this information after the respective events or activities have already concluded.

Seth expressed dissatisfaction with the administration's lack of communication regarding available resources for students and veterans, highlighting his struggle to locate the cafeteria as an example of this frustration.

Ann expressed her frustration to the faculty about her experiences. Initially, Ann encountered difficulties with faculty members when she requested to use her DAC benefits for extended time on tests and a peaceful environment to complete exams and assignments whenever necessary. While Ann acknowledges her obligation to treat her professors with respect and patience, she finds it perplexing that she has to explain the DAC benefits to them. Drawing from her military background, Ann possesses the confidence and maturity to take charge in conversations, and she anticipates that the administration and faculty will fulfill students' demands and rights without the need for constant reminders.

Matt expressed gratitude for being accepted early and found the admissions process to be straightforward. However, he felt that the process did not adequately inform him about the various financial aid options available. Relying solely on the GI Bill, Matt was unaware of other possibilities when he first started college, resulting in him having to take a year off due to this lack of information. While acknowledging that not all his financial issues were related to college, Matt was determined to do whatever it took to return to MTSU and complete his program. Although he is still not fully aware of all the services offered on campus, Matt feels more prepared after going through his unfortunate financial situation.

Tina expressed that her busy schedule prevents her from utilizing the services on campus, and she admitted to being unaware of all the available resources. She emphasized her independence and acknowledged being older than her classmates but expressed interest in

connecting with other veterans on campus. Unaware of the existing group or club, she proposed the idea of creating one.

Tina expressed feelings of isolation due to the inability to connect with fellow veterans who have experienced loss during their service. Despite receiving invitations from classmates, she doesn't feel a sense of belonging and hopes for more support from student services or the Veterans' Services Department to address this issue. Tina expressed she would like the student services office or the veterans' services department to "step it up."

Fran mentioned that she feels acknowledged and valued when she visits the veterans center on campus. However, she expressed her concern regarding the insufficient number of campus events and opportunities available for veterans to connect with each other. Fran recognizes that nowadays many veterans tend to remain isolated due to societal attitudes towards them, often associating them with PTSD or their views on the 2nd amendment. Living on campus, Fran stays aware of the various events and social activities taking place, yet she rarely hears about any gatherings specifically for veterans unless they are organized by the veterans center itself.

Earnest, a local police officer and former military law enforcement officer, emphasized that the level of service and support on campus is comparable to that in the community. He expressed that both the Murfreesboro community and MTSU should focus on improving veteran services and supporting veterans in their pursuits. Despite being proud of his role as a police officer, Earnest voiced disappointment with certain departments on campus. He mentioned that while he appreciates the convenience of class schedules and online options, he has encountered difficulties in obtaining assistance after 4 p.m. as most offices either do not respond or wait until the next business day to provide help, which could be a Monday or Tuesday if requested on a Friday.

Earnest mentioned that his colleagues in law enforcement who are also enrolled at MTSU face similar challenges when it comes to managing responsibilities outside of work hours, making it particularly difficult for them to address school-related matters while “juggling full-time employment”.

Earnest emphasized that these delays could have been avoided if simple questions about transcripts or VA benefits were promptly addressed. He also mentioned that his recent interactions have shown improvement, and he has not experienced any major incidents requiring reporting or resolution.

Kurt highlights the library as a serene environment where he can dedicate time to his academic endeavors, such as working on school projects, and papers, and studying. However, he expresses that he has never been informed about the various resources and benefits available to assist him with his writing or math inquiries. Although he attempted to seek a tutor, he received minimal guidance and thus relied on his abilities, as he had anticipated. Being one of the older students on campus, Kurt believes it is his responsibility to independently resolve his own issues and find solutions, much like he was taught in the military. He is unaware of and has refrained from inquiring about programs that could enhance his experience at MTSU.

Kurt was informed about a potential veteran’s group in the upcoming semester, but he shared “I struggled to find contact information and ways to contribute”.

Kurt heavily relies on his faith and frequently references God when discussing the immaturity of younger students on campus and their potential to be disruptive to others. He perceives that the professors do not adequately address these distractions in the classroom. Kurt genuinely expresses his desire to collaborate with other veterans, but he disagrees with the effectiveness of the veterans’ center in facilitating such connections. He often receives the response that there is insufficient funding to organize parties or events for veterans.

Upon arriving at the university, Tim expressed his initial lack of expectations. He had been informed about the disconnection between departments and the delay in receiving GI Bill payments, which often resulted in veterans either dropping out or shouldering the financial burden themselves.

Tim also mentioned his disappointing encounters with professors who restricted student access to office hours and occasionally failed to “go to their own scheduled office hours.” Additionally, Tim highlighted the absence of group events or parties for veterans at the veterans' office, and when he inquired about them, he was informed that either there was insufficient funding or veterans lacked interest. Tim further shared his struggle with PTSD, emphasizing its profound impact on his interactions with fellow students and family members. However, he believes that staff and faculty members are not adequately aware of the extent to which PTSD from warzones can hinder and incapacitate veterans.

Susan expressed her desire for a more accepting student population towards veterans, criticizing the lack of educational initiatives by the Student Services and Veterans Department. She highlighted a divide between veterans and other students, attributing it to insufficient efforts in dispelling rumors about PTSD and the lack of action by faculty to address these issues in the classroom.

Susan acknowledged experiencing an emotional crisis following the class discussions on military operations abroad and the associated political controversies. She expressed that individual classmates who support Joe Biden were especially critical of the military, accusing them of being callous and only present to “harm babies and innocent civilians”.

Susan, a female combat veteran, emphasized the need for greater support and inclusion from the veterans' office and student services, noting her exclusion from any veteran-related events during her time at the University.

Henry has had a notable experience at the university, with positive interactions in most departments. However, he feels unaware of the available services. Despite his efforts to prepare himself before attending, he is disappointed with the lack of functions and support from the veteran's department. Some admissions and financial aid staff also lack knowledge about veteran benefits. The biggest disappointment for Henry is the lack of awareness and respect for veterans on campus.

Henry shared that when he wears his military t-shirts or a veteran's hat, he gets ridiculous questions from immature students and sometimes faculty members, he shared that "I just ignore them or don't answer them".

He has experienced ridicule from other students and even faculty members for showing his patriotic spirit, as exemplified by an incident where he was confronted about a non-political red hat he was wearing. Henry found it confusing and ignorant that a professor asked him to remove the hat.

Theme: Community & Belonging

Sub-Theme 1: Positive Experience

The study involved military veterans from the United States who had varying lengths of service. These individuals were interviewed regarding their experiences during their time in college. Specifically, they shared their perspectives on the sense of community they felt at MTSU after transitioning from the military. Although some participants had similar military careers, most of them came from different branches and careers. The participants agreed that their age difference on campus greatly influenced their experience in the college community. When asked about obstacles or barriers in their program, they all mentioned that their age had an impact. Furthermore, they expressed that their experiences, maturity, and veteran status distinguished them from their classmates and, at times, even their professors.

Seth's perspective on positive experiences on campus was limited, as he primarily focused on the university's shortcomings and what they should be doing for him. However, he did acknowledge the presence of other veterans on campus and found it beneficial to connect with them, realizing that he wasn't alone in experiencing frustrations with certain departments. Seth portrayed himself as responsible and authoritative, not merely a complainer, as he appears to seek to offer potential solutions alongside his complaints.

Seth eagerly presented a “traditional military training option” that would assist and resonate with experienced students embarking on their initial journey to college.

Seth proposed a potential solution that involved assigning a sponsor or fellow veterans to guide and support the new student, helping, answering questions, and offering ongoing support throughout the initial semester. This approach, widely implemented in military commands globally, has been highly regarded, understood, and anticipated.

Ann expressed feeling disconnected from other veterans as she has limited opportunities to meet them, but she has formed relationships with students and professors on campus.

Ann experienced a sense of reluctance to express any positive opinions about her classmates and certain faculty members. She harbored a feeling of apprehension towards “sharing” her thoughts regarding them. Consequently, she chose to “remain silent” and refrained from discussing her experiences with her peers and faculty.

Drawing upon his military background, Matt effectively applies his skills to engage with people and display an outgoing nature. His rapid adjustment to the college setting can be attributed to his deep appreciation for education. While he expresses an interest in connecting with fellow veterans and potentially joining a men's group, his current priority lies in dedicating himself to his academic pursuits.

Tina's primary concern revolves around the age difference between her and her peers. Nevertheless, she possesses the ability to establish harmonious relationships with others and

effectively apply her knowledge as a hospital corpsman in the Navy to her studies in nursing school.

Although Tina has encountered a few veterans on campus, they are predominantly “dudes”, and she prefers to socialize with female veterans.

Additionally, Tina has received invitations to various social events from fellow nursing students whom she has assisted throughout her journey.

Fran distinguishes herself from her college peers due to her age difference and mannerisms, yet she successfully interacts with fellow students, faculty, and staff members on campus. Not having served overseas in a warzone like some veterans, Fran acknowledges that she may not face the same challenges such as PTSD that others might encounter. Living on campus and being closer in age to her peers, Fran does not feel like she stands out significantly as a veteran.

Earnest expressed his successful adaptation to college life and his positive outlook on the overall college experience. While acknowledging the need for improvements in the veteran community, he emphasized his enjoyment as a college student. Earnest emphasized the importance of selecting a suitable major for both personal satisfaction and academic achievement, suggesting that individuals should pursue their interests from their military background in their college major as well.

Despite perceiving himself as older than his peers and having doubts about certain professors, Kurt expressed his satisfaction with his college experience and the overall respectful nature of the community. Despite facing challenges, Kurt's maturity and strong belief in God enable him to maintain an optimistic outlook on campus life.

Tim hesitated to elaborate on his campus experiences, without specifying any particular topic he wished to avoid discussing. He mentioned suffering from PTSD due to military service

and expressed gratitude for the opportunity at MTSU. Tim appreciated the welcoming attitude of his professors but desired increased access to them outside of class.

Susan, a 25-year-old, experiences a distinct sense of community at MTSU. Despite this, she remains hopeful that she will eventually find her niche as she progresses through her program. Susan demonstrated a strong research interest that delves into the veteran community, stating her intention to explore this field further once she becomes a graduate student.

Susan did not have much to say regarding her positive experiences, she shared that “I keep running into jerks, to be honest”.

Regrettably, Susan primarily dwelled on the negative encounters she had with her peers and professors on campus.

Henry expressed satisfaction with his interaction at the Veterans Center on campus, indicating a positive experience. Despite his wish for greater student participation, he acknowledged the constraints related to funding. Henry has accepted the reality that financial support plays a crucial role in the success or failure of a department or initiative.

Henry expressed skepticism regarding the likelihood of the Veterans' Office receiving “any more funding” during his tenure.

While he appreciated assistance from different sources, including departments and professors, he has adopted a self-reliant attitude and refrained from excessive complaints.

Seth, Matt, and Tina have gained a new perspective on their circumstances through their experiences, enabling them to actively engage with their situation instead of merely enduring it. Meanwhile, Henry, Kurt, and Earnest credit their faith for helping them navigate the majority of their frustrations. However, it is evident that all ten participants, who have served their country, possess a distinct approach to their situation, which is only comprehensible and advantageous to

those who have experienced military service. This unwavering determination is deeply ingrained in military veterans and is shared by all these individuals.

Sub-Theme 2: Adverse Experience

Different individuals may have varying responses to shared experiences, sounds, stories, or emotions. These reactions can sometimes be so divergent that it may seem difficult to find common ground. However, when it comes to age and the sentiments associated with it, all the veterans agreed that they often feel isolated, different, or disconnected from the younger generation on campus. The participants deeply resonated with the fact that they were older than their fellow students, as well as some faculty and staff members.

Seth recounted his personal experiences and relayed the information he had received from other veterans on campus. He expressed his deep passion for his military service and the sacrifices made by him and his fellow soldiers in war zones abroad. One of Seth's thoughts was that he did not feel appreciated on campus, even by the veterans' office. According to the veterans, the office was not making sufficient efforts to create a sense of community among veterans, where they could share their experiences and support each other in transitioning from combat zones to college life. Seth felt that his age and the age of other veterans created a gap between them and their classmates and professors. He expressed a sense of isolation and a feeling of not fitting in with others on campus. However, Seth believed that this situation could be improved if the Veterans' Office fulfilled its responsibilities.

Seth strongly emphasized the urgency of enhancing “communication among the administration, veterans”, and the campus community, expressing deep feelings of discouragement.

Seth mentioned that there is a significant amount of frustration between veterans and the staff and faculty, which he attributed to a lack of understanding and relatability. To address these

issues, Seth proposed the implementation of a buddy program or the creation of a small book containing veterans' information, maps, and contact details for various groups and events planned for the year.

Ann expressed her sense of disconnection from the campus community, attributing it to her age, military background, and training. She disclosed that she finds it challenging to adapt to civilian life and is unable to articulate the reasons behind this difficulty. Moreover, she believes that others perceive her differently due to her weapons training and potential experience with combat leading to PTSD. Consequently, she is hesitant to discuss her status as a veteran with others.

Ann explained that there exists a “language barrier for veterans” like herself who are accustomed to military jargon and abbreviations. When she incorporates such terminology into conversations, she often “feels isolated because few people, aside from veterans, can understand” the intended meaning.

This sense of isolation intensifies when witnessing her classmates display disrespect towards staff, faculty members, and peers. Ann also revealed the unease of having to be cautious and tiptoe around professors who are unaccustomed to students actively engaging in discussions, seeking additional information, or challenging their perspectives.

Matt's relaxed demeanor and his focus on promoting harmony resulted in him being less inclined to voice any negative encounters he had while on campus. Nonetheless, he did believe that the Veterans Center should offer greater assistance in terms of organizing events, providing information relevant to veterans, or simply acknowledging their presence on campus.

Despite being aware of the existence of a veteran's office, Matt was oblivious to its extensive size and the fact that numerous individuals were employed there. Upon learning about this, he felt a sense of disappointment and wondered whether he had missed out on various opportunities during his previous semesters at MTSU.

He mentioned that he had received little to no communication from the veterans' office, with only one or two individuals reaching out to him since his time on campus.

Tina expresses being significantly older than her peers, occasionally feeling this age gap is a disadvantage, yet generally managing to overcome it. Nevertheless, the immaturity of classmates and their disregard for authority and experience often create discomfort for Tina. She finds the prevalent party culture on campus unappealing, recognizing it as a societal norm. Tina conveys a sense of isolation and advocates for increased initiatives by the administration to facilitate connections among older students and organize events for veterans to foster a sense of community on campus.

Fran observed the age gap with her classmates but emphasized that she is still close to their age and appears more youthful than other veterans, enabling her to feel like she fits in. However, she feels the need to conceal her veteran status and expressed concern about others discovering it.

Fran expresses her apprehension about being judged and avoiding conflicts with students or faculty who do not hold the military in high regard by stating, "I just choose not to tell my veteran status or tell my age."

Fran also noticed her classmates being disrespectful towards staff and faculty, which she finds challenging to reconcile with her military training and experience. She has grown accustomed to dealing with flirtatious individuals and has developed a thicker skin as a result. Fran's primary focus on campus is to graduate, not to date or find a partner. Despite frequently experiencing flirtation in the military, she was not anticipating this kind of atmosphere at college. Although Fran did not serve overseas and mentioned that she does not have any PTSD or related issues from combat, she does feel a sense of disconnection from people who share similar experiences, such as fellow veterans whom she believes would be easier to form connections and study with.

Fran revealed that her father's loss has made it difficult for her to trust and reach out to others, so when the veterans center lacks effort in assisting her, she perceives it as a lack of care and thus refrains from seeking their help.

Earnest has successfully adapted to his new environment, but he suggests the implementation of an indoctrination class for veterans to enhance their familiarity with the campus and foster camaraderie among fellow veterans. Despite their preparedness in terms of experience, military education, maturity, and wisdom, veterans may lack exposure to certain aspects of traditional schooling such as writing papers in APA format, taking weekly quizzes, and other conventional college experiences.

Earnest, an older student on campus, places great importance on his wealth of experience and maturity in a university setting where most of his peers are “younger than my kids”.

However, he believes that he should not have to tolerate the immaturity of his classmates and the lack of intervention from the administration when these students display disrespect towards staff, faculty, and classmates.

Kurt recognizes the influence of his age on his level of engagement in the community. He mentioned that his primary purpose on campus is not to socialize or participate in community initiatives, but he would have appreciated being informed about such opportunities if they were available. Kurt does express a desire to connect with fellow veterans, and if they establish a good rapport, it could potentially develop into a friendship.

Tim expressed his interest in engaging with the veteran community at his campus, provided that such a community exists. He mentioned that he hasn't had the opportunity to meet many veterans, despite being aware that there are several attending MTSU. Tim expressed surprise at the lack of effort from the veterans' center in fostering a sense of unity among veterans. He believes that individuals who haven't served in the military could learn valuable

lessons from veterans. Tim expressed gratitude for the fact that I am conducting interviews with veterans for my dissertation and hopes that this research will benefit not only MTSU veterans but also veterans nationwide.

Susan expressed a sense of disconnection from her classmates due to the age difference, as she values her maturity and experience. Despite being only 25 years old, she struggles to understand her classmates' behavior reminiscent of high school. Furthermore, Susan, having served in a combat zone, desires to connect with fellow veterans on campus and seeks more information from the veterans' office on organizing events for them. She mentioned the unease and lack of understanding among students and faculty members when they learned about her veteran status. Additionally, Susan highlighted the ignorance surrounding war and overseas conflicts, along with the involvement of the military, among her classmates and some faculty members.

She finds it challenging to express her own honest opinions due to the fear of judgment from others, particularly those she perceives as lacking patriotism or being "brain-dead students". Despite the prevalent call to "be yourself", Susan feels isolated and frustrated with the prevailing "Woke" agenda.

She believes that connecting and socializing with other veterans would alleviate these challenges. In addition, Susan expressed concern that openly disapproving of the current presidential administration might negatively impact her grades, further impeding her ability to be authentic.

Henry, despite acknowledging the age difference as a distraction, has managed to overcome it and prepare himself for college. He remains determined not to let his age hinder his progress.

However, during class, Henry occasionally feels compelled to share his extensive knowledge and experiences as an older student, which often leads to his classmates feeling envious and frustrated.

He finds it ironic that they resist the opportunity to learn, despite being in an educational environment. Henry would have preferred to keep his military service private, but one of his professors discovered or assumed his military background and confronted him about it. Although Henry was not pleased with the situation, he maintained respect and actively engaged in the conversation. Since then, he has noticed an increase in references to his military experience, further exacerbating his sense of isolation. As a devout Christian, Henry remains steadfast in his faith and strives to remain positive, despite the frustrations he faces. He finds solace in confiding in his loved ones at home.

Theme: Educational Experiences

Education forms the foundation of the military, as soldiers undergo continuous training and retraining. The military embraces a diverse range of approaches, recognizing the importance of adaptability. From mastering the precise techniques of loading a rifle to donning a parachute correctly, the military instills flexibility in its soldiers. It serves as a platform for experimentation and testing, fostering an environment where new ideas can flourish. According to interviews with 10 military veterans, those who develop a deep appreciation for learning within the military are likely to excel as college students.

Seth, Matt, and Tina harbored a common aspiration to focus on finding solutions instead of dwelling on problems. Their mutual acknowledgment of the perspective gained from their maturity and military background enabled them to approach situations objectively and actively seek resolutions. Susan, on the contrary, expressed a deeper ambition to conduct research in the foreseeable future to enhance the transition experience for upcoming college-bound veterans.

Seth, Susan, Henry, and the rest demonstrated through their actions that their military training emphasized diversity by developing traits such as adaptability, self-discipline,

leadership, work ethic, teamwork, professionalism, and resilience. Despite not explicitly mentioning it, they all recognized the importance of these qualities in their training.

Sub-Theme 1: Pre-Education

Seth highlighted the effectiveness of the learning environment for veterans, emphasizing their ability to excel due to being taught how to learn and apply their skills to their jobs. In high-stakes situations where lives are at stake, meeting expectations promptly is crucial. The presence of a drill sergeant, exerting pressure through yelling and screaming, further contributed to their success. Seth further explained that the military's learning approach enabled him and fellow veterans to approach tasks with simplicity and purpose. However, he acknowledged that college learning styles lack the same level of hands-on experience, posing challenges for many veterans.

Seth attributed his academic success to his age and maturity, which enabled him to excel in his studies. Seth sees the irony that one perceived “disadvantage” is also his advantage. Additionally, the military-style learning he experienced in the military has equipped him with valuable skills and a strong ability to adapt to different learning environments.

Ann attributed her achievements to her military background. She confessed to her lack of academic prowess in high school but highlighted how her military education instilled in her a passion for acquiring knowledge and the ability to grasp new concepts rapidly. Ann recognized that traits such as discipline, time management, punctuality, and obedience were areas of weakness for her before her military experience, but now she excels in these aspects and beyond.

In her role as the "Regulation Ranger," Ann is known for adhering strictly to expectations, rules, and regulations within a military context. This has led her to habitually correct not only the Professor but also her fellow students.

Matt embraced the notion of attending college from the beginning and took proactive measures to plan for it upon enlisting in the military. His preparations imparted him with a comprehensive understanding of college life, facilitating a seamless transition from his military service to being

a college student. Time constraints prevented Matt from elaborating further, but he acknowledged that without the structured framework, expectations, and guidance provided by the military, he would not have achieved admission into college.

Tina expressed her gratitude for her military education, specifically as a Hospital Corpsman in the United States Navy. She felt a sense of honor, self-assurance, and significance in her role. The training she received surpassed her expectations, equipping her with valuable skills and motivating her to consider furthering her education in nursing or pursuing the challenge of physician assistant school.

Tina emphasized that the military instilled in her the ability to “study efficiently, prioritize vital information”, and seek out solutions through research, rather than relying solely on memorization and regurgitation of facts for exams, as she had done in high school. She believes that her experience in the Navy has transformed her into a more proficient student, an improved individual, and a responsible citizen. Tina firmly believes that her military background has adequately prepared her for the demands of nursing school.

Fran, currently serving as a Medic in the Tennessee Army National Guard, is eager to pursue her ambition of becoming a registered nurse. She believes that her valuable experience, military education, and connections with fellow medical professionals in the Army National Guard will greatly contribute to her success in the nursing program. Fran has swiftly assumed leadership roles both in the military and during her training at Fort Sam Houston, Texas for her military medic career, a characteristic she did not possess before joining the military.

Previously lacking “motivation, and interest”, and displaying distrustful and disrespectful behavior towards authority figures as a younger woman, Fran acknowledges her growth and transformation.

She credits her military training for enabling her to transcend superficial concerns and alter her focus from seeking a partner for stability to developing her independence and personal growth.

Earnest openly embraces the obstacles he encounters, viewing them as opportunities for growth. He refers to these obstacles as challenges and believes that they contribute to his personal development. Earnest's optimistic outlook stems from his military training, which provided him with a unique perspective that he had not acquired during his high school education. In the military, his instructors communicated their expectations and equipped him with the necessary tools to achieve success.

Earnest attributes his accomplishments to his “military education”, as it prepared him “to face challenges and make informed decisions”.

The military education system instilled in Earnest the confidence to pursue his degree program at MTSU. Additionally, Earnest acknowledges that his military education and experiences have shaped him into a responsible citizen who fulfills his financial obligations and respects the system that has granted him numerous opportunities in life. As a military police officer, Earnest's readiness for degree programs can be attributed to his military training and his faith in God.

Kurt emphasized that his military background and education equipped him with problem-solving skills and the ability to tackle challenges head-on.

He emphasized that in the military, success was only possible if one “made a genuine effort to achieve his best”.

In addition to his military experiences and education, Kurt attributed his readiness for college to his unwavering faith in God and prioritizing God above all else. He further explained that his military service taught him to prioritize the mission at hand, enabling him to stay focused on what truly matters. Despite occasional distractions, Kurt's military education instilled in him the discipline to remain dedicated to his educational goals.

Tim expressed that his adjustment from military life to college has been unsettling for him, recounting that he was eagerly anticipating a more forceful form of instruction. In the

military, the trainers and leaders often resort to shouting, banging on tables, or throwing objects to stress the importance of adhering to guidelines, a behavior justified by the life-and-death nature of the military environment.

Tim found this form of instruction beneficial, particularly given his struggles with ADHD and what he termed as “a lack of motivation”.

From his perspective, veterans bring with them qualities like maturity, experience, and discipline, which he believes make them superior students in a college setting, contrasting them with the distracted behavior observed in college classrooms. Tim asserts that the strict military environment would not tolerate the distractions common in college, making the military experience an asset for those considering pursuing a college education in the future.

Susan expressed that her military service has shaped her perspective on learning, educational aspirations, and leadership, which she believes she wouldn't have gained otherwise. At 25 years old, Susan acknowledges feeling somewhat out of place in a college setting, recognizing that her military background has instilled in her valuable qualities like maturity and discipline essential for success in academia and beyond.

Despite facing financial constraints, Susan acknowledges that her military training has taught her responsibility, preventing her from accumulating excessive debt in college or facing potential expulsion due to misconduct.

Susan emphasized that modern students lack respect, knowledge of the Constitution, and basic patriotism, contrasting her worldview shaped by military experience with current societal trends towards "woke" ideologies. In Susan's view, her time in the military enabled her to perceive the world more realistically than if she had not enlisted.

Henry harbored many of his experiences privately, refraining from delving deeply into his time in the Navy, yet hinting at their profound and unique nature.

In his role as a Hospital Corpsman, he credited his “combat medical training for preparing him with invaluable skills” and self-assurance.

Despite grappling with PTSD stemming from his service alongside US Marines abroad, Henry emphasized the importance of honor, dedication, faith, and safeguarding personal boundaries.

Sub-Theme 2: Current Education

Throughout their time in college, all participants appear to have encountered feelings of isolation, a stark contrast to the camaraderie typically found in the military. The level of service and support provided by the administration in college pales in comparison to what is typically experienced during military service.

Seth, when discussing his current experiences with college, revealed that readjusting to the demands of notetaking, studying for exams, writing papers, and attending classes has been a formidable challenge.

Despite this frustration, Seth eventually managed to establish a routine, albeit after a considerable period.

He expresses disappointment that the Veterans Center hasn't offered support in adapting to the college routine and feels compelled to emphasize that certain subjects would benefit from experiential learning rather than confined classroom instruction. Seth attributes his success in college to the survival skills he acquired in the military, specifically citing maturity and discipline as enabling a smooth transition.

Ann is characterized by her strong belief in punctuality, regulations, accountability, and maturity. These principles have been instilled in her through her military background, which makes it challenging for her to witness her classmates constantly being late, disregarding rules, and behaving immaturely. Ann emphasizes the importance of experiential learning, suggesting that current students should be taught how the concepts taught in class personally affect them.

She acknowledges that fitting in at MTSU is difficult for her due to her age, experiences, and military career, but despite these differences, she manages to excel academically.

Matt arrived at college with a well-thought-out strategy. Recognizing the significance of planning his transition, he meticulously identified potential obstacles he could encounter during his college journey. Consequently, he confidently asserts that he anticipates encountering minimal challenges.

Tina expressed that her college journey has been a valuable learning experience. Having undergone various training schools in the military, she has only encountered a few obstacles in transitioning to college life.

Tina confidently navigates “from one class to another”, equipped with effective study habits and motivation.

Her previous career path in the military has greatly contributed to her success in her chosen program at MTSU.

Fran, a medic in the Army National Guard, has found great satisfaction in transitioning from military school to nursing school. With her prior knowledge of nursing procedures and processes, she has seamlessly adapted to her new academic environment.

Fran appreciates the engaging interactions she has with her classmates and professors, and she is grateful for the “excellent” facilities provided to her to use and study.

While she acknowledges the contrasting discipline and requirements in non-nursing classes, Fran recognizes that the nursing courses align closely with military training, emphasizing a high standard of excellence and respect.

Earnest has observed a discernible contrast between the education provided at MTSU and military education, particularly in terms of strictness and the higher standards imposed on students in the military. Notably, Earnest encountered poorly written papers written by some of

his classmates in his class, which surprised him given the grades they received. Despite his observations, Earnest refrained from addressing this matter with his classmates.

Earnest derives satisfaction from assisting fellow students using his “hands-on knowledge and practical experience as a police officer”.

However, there are instances when the professor fails to acknowledge Earnest's expertise or displays stubbornness in recognizing his intention to support students with real-world knowledge that the professor has not encountered personally.

Kurt's military background has equipped him with adaptability skills for college life, where he values the importance of working towards self-improvement and benefiting others. However, he finds the individualistic nature of the college experience lacking in group collaboration and theoretical discussions, which he believes would enhance the college learning environment based on his military education experiences.

Tim appreciates the knowledge gained from his military education, which he finds to be a stark contrast to his college experience. Apart from the absence of uniforms and the absence of potentially hazardous activities like weapons training, Tim perceives the atmosphere at MTSU as excessively relaxed, enabling numerous students to engage in unacceptable behavior without consequences.

Susan has found it relatively easy to adjust to campus life, as she is adaptable and does not feel like an outsider. However, she has noticed that the campus fails to adequately prepare students for the challenges they will face after graduation.

Many of her classmates have unrealistic expectations of earning a substantial salary immediately after obtaining their degree, which is not the reality.

Additionally, Susan repeatedly encounters situations where her military background is brought up in class discussions by professors. Although she is proud of her service, she prefers to avoid the judgmental looks and comments from classmates who may have their own political biases.

Henry acknowledges that he was not a good student in high school, but the military had a transformative impact on his life, particularly in terms of his education. The experience of being on campus and having the chance to apply the knowledge he gained from the military has been a source of great fortune for Henry. He expresses his gratitude and appreciation for the opportunities provided by MTSU. Despite occasionally feeling isolated, Henry considers himself a content student and anticipates missing MTSU once he completes his studies.

Summary

This chapter unveils the findings derived from interviews conducted with ten veteran students who are all veterans of the United States military. These participants had undergone military training and held various military roles, some of which were aligned with their present pursuit of college degrees. The chapter delves into multiple dominant themes that emerged from the interviews, all of which pertained to the experiences of these veterans. The dominant themes presented in this chapter were University Support, Community & Belonging, & Educational experience.

One of the central themes explored in this chapter is University Support, encompassing two distinct sub-themes, namely Positive Support and Lack of Support. Most of the study participants shared their encounters regarding the assistance they received during their transition into college. Notably, they highlighted the significance of financial aid provided through the GI Bill. Specifically, participants like Ann, Matt, and Tim expressed positive experiences with the utilization of online platforms, payment arrangements, and tuition coverage available exclusively

for veterans. They acknowledged that the financial support offered through the GI Bill played a crucial role and was duly recognized by them. Moreover, the participants expressed their gratitude for additional services provided by the university, such as access to a gym, library facilities, and a dedicated veterans' center. Ann expressed her deep appreciation for the Disability and Access Center (DAC). Lastly, Susan and Fran, both actively involved in the ROTC program, eagerly anticipate their graduation.

The second theme is Community & Belonging, and its sub-themes are positive experiences and adverse experiences. The study participants were interviewed regarding their experiences while in college. Specifically, they shared their perspectives on the sense of community they felt at MTSU after transitioning from the military. Matt and Seth both shared they were not aware of what facilities are available to them as students or even where some basic services are, like the cafeteria or how large the staff is in the veteran's office.

Coming from various branches of the military, the participants all agree that their age, veteran status, and the stigma associated with PTSD seem to be a sticking point in whether they feel part of the community or not. They all agreed that they wanted a stronger veteran community, and they didn't feel that the veterans center was doing enough to make that happen.

The chapter's third theme focuses on Educational Experiences, which encompasses two sub-themes: Pre-Education and Current Education. Through the interviews, it becomes evident that military training has a positive impact on individuals' ability to excel in college. The participants expressed their appreciation for the rigorous military training they received, with some even suggesting that college life should adopt a similar approach to benefit all students. It is believed that the military's teaching methods contribute to this success, as they enable veterans to approach tasks with purpose. Seth specifically highlighted the effectiveness of the learning

environment for veterans, which emphasizes diversity and fosters the development of traits such as adaptability, self-discipline, leadership, work ethic, teamwork, professionalism, and resilience.

Ten veteran students are poised to have a positive experience and are enthusiastic about their career paths, despite encountering challenges such as financial aid issues, feelings of isolation, disrespect, and misunderstandings with peers and faculty.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

Introduction

This chapter will discuss the research findings on veterans now attending college. The overall purpose of this study was to acquire a complete comprehension of the obstacles veterans encounter upon their reentry into higher education. Additionally, the study aims to uncover effective tactics and support mechanisms that may augment their academic achievements and general welfare. The study utilized Schlossberg's transition theory as the theoretical foundation. According to this theory, adults experience various transitions and utilize the 4S's (Situation, Support, Self, and Strategy) to navigate through them. The data analysis and themes identified from the interviews in this study were found to align with the 4S's as outlined in Schlossberg's theory. This chapter has been organized in the following way: discussion of research questions, the relationship of the findings to the literature, conclusions and implications, and recommendations for future research.

DISCUSSION OF RESEARCH QUESTIONS

How do veterans attending college make meaning of their experiences in their respective programs?

Military veterans transitioning from a structured military environment to a more unstructured college setting bring discipline that can be applied to academic pursuits, allowing for quicker adaptation and potential success in the new learning environment (Ackerman et al., 2009; Gwin et al., 2012). For instance, Seth's transition from a structured military environment to college life showcases the difficulties and rewards veterans encounter when adapting to the autonomy and self-sufficiency of higher education, where strong leadership and self-discipline are essential for academic achievement (Jenner, 2017). By leveraging their disciplined mindset

and structured approach to tasks, military veterans can effectively navigate the academic landscape, utilizing their unique perspectives and experiences to excel in their studies (Hunter-Johnson et al., 2021). The discipline instilled in military veterans fosters a strong work ethic, allowing them to manage their time and prioritize their academic responsibilities effectively (Ackerman et al., 2009).

The rigorous training and experiences in the military teach veterans to persevere and overcome challenges, which can be applied to their academic pursuits. They possess a strong sense of determination and resilience, enabling them to tackle difficult coursework and persevere through demanding academic situations (Gwin et al., 2012). Veterans' ability to work well in teams and follow protocols translates to collaborative projects and group assignments in college. They understand the importance of communication, cooperation, and accountability, valuable skills in a university setting (Jenner, 2017). This was demonstrated by Seth, Matt, Ann, and others when they shared a value for “traditional military training”.

Military veterans often possess heightened self-discipline, allowing them to stay focused and motivated even in the face of distractions or competing priorities. This disciplined approach improves time management and study habits, ultimately leading to academic success (Hunter-Johnson et al., 2021). The structured nature of military training emphasizes attention to detail and critical thinking skills. Veterans are, therefore, adept at analyzing complex information, problem-solving, and approaching academic tasks precisely (Ackerman et al., 2009). Veterans' experiences in diverse and multicultural environments during their service give them a unique perspective that enriches classroom discussions and enhances their ability to understand and engage with diverse ideas (Gwin et al., 2012).

Furthermore, veterans often exhibit a strong sense of duty and responsibility, translating into a commitment to academic excellence. They understand the importance of achieving their goals and take their education seriously, striving to make the most of their college experience (Hunter-Johnson et al., 2021). The discipline and structure brought by military veterans also contribute to their ability to adapt to the academic culture and college requirements. For instance, Earnest adapted to college life, emphasizing the importance of choosing a major based on personal growth, experience, and interests from their military background. The participants share a quick grasp of the expectations in terms of assignments, deadlines, and academic standards, allowing for a smoother transition and integration into the college environment (Jenner, 2017).

Overall, veterans' discipline, work ethic, resilience, and unique perspectives make them valuable assets in the college setting. Their military experiences provide them with skills and qualities that can lead to academic success and contribute positively to the university community (Ackerman et al., 2009; Hunter-Johnson et al., 2021).

Veterans' learning experience is enhanced through integrating rigorous physical training in the military with the academic content taught in the classroom (Hunter-Johnson et al., 2021). Henry exemplifies this as he draws upon his military service to bring a unique perspective to his class assignments, particularly those related to his expertise. However, veterans like Henry and Kurt also face social isolation and misunderstanding from their peers and faculties, leading to a diminished sense of belonging and potentially affecting their overall academic performance (Elliott et al., 2011). To support veteran students in their transition to college, it is crucial to establish robust support systems on campus, including advisors who can assist them in their academic journey (Kirchner, 2015). Raising awareness about the specific academic needs and barriers veterans encounter can facilitate their successful integration into the educational process

and alleviate feelings of loneliness within the school environment. PTSD and other psychological disorders pose challenges for veterans in their pursuit of education. Kurt, a combat veteran with PTSD, lacks sufficient social contact with other veterans, feeling that the veterans' office does not do enough to facilitate this. To address these issues, institutions must provide robust interventions that enhance veterans' academic and overall well-being. Tim and Susan, both veterans, need supportive environments that value their skills and experiences. Effective programs incorporating military leadership qualities can help veterans integrate into the college community more smoothly. Educational institutions should establish and maintain support services for veteran students, including comprehensive programs and services that empower learners to achieve their academic and personal goals. This support system is crucial in assisting veterans and fostering a culturally sensitive institution (Rumann, 2010). Rumann (2010) stressed the effectiveness of Schlossberg's adult transition model in aiding student veterans in understanding and managing their transition from active duty to college enrollment. The research emphasizes how veterans strive for a sense of normalcy, allowing them to navigate both military and academic environments, developing a bi-cultural literacy crucial for successful adjustment and performance (Anderson et al., 2012).

What adversities impact veteran college students' well-being and academic performance?

The challenges faced by college students can vary greatly, but the transition of veterans into college presents a unique obstacle that directly impacts their well-being and academic success. One such challenge is the age difference. For instance, individuals like Seth, who is 32 years old, may struggle to connect with classmates who have just graduated from high school. This can lead to isolation and misunderstanding, as the older veterans may have different interests and lifestyles than their younger peers.

Additionally, veterans like Henry and Kurt may experience discomfort due to differences in maturity levels and life perspectives, distinct from typical students. Another significant concern affecting veteran students is their mental health. Conditions like Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), which are relatively common among veterans like Tim and Susan, can significantly impact their focus and ability to learn in an academic environment. Symptoms like heightened anxiety and difficulty concentrating present serious obstacles to classroom learning, particularly during exams and assignments. According to Hunter-Johnson et al. (2021), many academic staff and faculty members are ill-equipped to understand and address these issues. The lack of support or recognition for psychological problems creates a barrier that hinders the academic performance of veteran students and contributes to low retention rates within higher education institutions for this group.

Veterans such as Seth may find it difficult to adjust to the less structured college environment after coming from a highly structured military background. Adapting to new rules and policies can be challenging, leading to the need for significant changes in self-management skills. As a result, individuals like Tina and Fran may experience feelings of anxiety and a lack of support.

The study's findings provide support for Schlossberg's Transition Theory, along with Cohen's Social Support Theory. To enhance the academic success and overall welfare of veterans, it is recommended that colleges develop inclusive support programs designed to meet their unique requirements. These programs should encompass a variety of services that cater to the academic and psychological challenges stemming from their military experiences, thereby enabling institutions to effectively aid veterans in adjusting to college life (DiRamio et al., 2008).

Veterans may face difficulties in their academic pursuits due to communication challenges. This may be because the language used in academic writing differs from the precise and simple language used in military environments. Kurt and Susan have expressed their struggle to adapt to formal academic language, which hinders their ability to convey their thoughts effectively. Consequently, this can impact their relationships with fellow students and faculty, ultimately affecting their learning experience and interactions within the university setting.

Academic institutions could tackle these obstacles by implementing thorough policies that meet the requirements of veterans and align with the conclusions of the research based on Schlossberg's theory (Schlossberg et al., 1989). Such policies should create an environment that encourages veterans to embrace their unique skills, which can greatly benefit the institutions. By resolving these issues across all aspects, colleges can ensure that appropriate provisions are made to facilitate veteran students' academic success. As the research suggests, with adequate facilities and support, individuals like Henry, Tim, Seth, Susan, Tina, and Fran, among others, will thrive academically and contribute valuable perspectives to the classroom that other students may lack or overlook (DiRamo et al., 2008; Ryan et al., 2011).

What assistance programs are currently available for veterans reentering college programs, and how effective are they?

Schlossberg's framework can be used to navigate various life transitions, which is beneficial for advisors helping students. According to Schlossberg et al. (1995), a transition involves changes in relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles, whether prompted by an event or the absence of one. Assistance programs designed for veterans in college institutions aim to assist them in integrating their military experiences into academic settings. However, the effectiveness of these programs varies. Initially, Seth encountered challenges due to the lack of

structured support, but he found solace in the availability of free gym use and flexible workout hours. Orientation programs are crucial in familiarizing veterans with campus services and the college learning environment. Nonetheless, these programs must be tailored to meet the specific needs of transitioning veterans. Tina and Fran highlighted the difficulties they faced when transitioning from a rigid military structure to a more flexible educational environment, where they had to manage their time and studies independently. Additionally, counseling services are vital, particularly for veterans like Tim and Susan, who struggle with PTSD. Their inability to concentrate during classes and experience anxiety negatively impacts their academic performance. To address these challenges, counseling services should be easily accessible and staffed by individuals familiar with military culture, enabling them to provide effective support (Meca et al., 2021).

In addition, the transition for veterans could be greatly facilitated by additional resources specifically tailored to their needs. This can include a comprehensive veterans' resource directory that provides information on available scholarships, counseling services, and academic support. Such resources are particularly important for veterans like Seth and Ann, who may struggle to find their place within the larger university environment.

To further support veterans, the research from DiRamio et al., (2008) and Ryan et al., (2011) it would benefit institutions to establish veteran centers on campus. These centers can serve as platforms for veterans to share their experiences and build connections, as veteran students are more susceptible to isolation and difficulties in social adjustment. Establishing facilities for veterans and additional support services aligns with the notion that equipping students for their transition is beneficial and aligns with research supported by Schlossberg's original transition theory (Ryan et al., 2011).

Additionally, colleges and universities can improve the promotion of their services to ensure that veterans are aware of the assistance available to them. This can be achieved through strategies like sending bulletins via email, dedicating specific sections on college websites, and organizing briefing sessions with presentations on the support veterans like Susan and Tim may require while enrolling in college. Furthermore, instituting feedback loops for these services can help enhance their delivery and address any gaps that may arise due to changes in the characteristics of veterans as students.

One essential form of assistance is the organization of educational workshops that serve as a guide to understanding and utilizing the unique attributes possessed by veterans. These workshops can focus on translating military experience into academic and professional skills to aid veterans like Kurt, who doubts the veterans' center's effectiveness in facilitating such connections.

Within these workshops, real-life examples of successful veterans in their academic pursuits and beyond could be presented to illustrate their potential further. In addition, implementing communication tools such as forums, social networks, and regular newsletters can inform veteran students like Susan about veterans' events, resources, and policy updates. This platform would enable a two-way feedback system, with veterans expressing their needs and concerns and receiving prompt, valued responses in the academic environment (Obaid, 2022; Hunter-Johnson et al., 2021).

RELATIONSHIP OF FINDINGS TO THE LITERATURE

Social Isolation and Age Differences

When transitioning to college, many veterans face the challenge of experiencing loneliness like Seth and Tina. This is primarily attributed to the unique nature of their

experiences and their age in comparison to the rest of the college population. As an illustration, both Matt and Seth admitted being unaware of the available facilities, basic services such as the cafeteria, and the size of the staff in the veteran's office. Consequently, veterans frequently find themselves feeling detached from society and struggling to establish common ground with others (Schlossberg et al., 1995). Tina, specifically, expressed feelings of isolation due to the difficulty of connecting with fellow veterans who have encountered loss while serving. To address these issues, colleges could implement peer mentoring programs as suggested by Hunter-Johnson et al. (2021). These programs would involve experienced students providing guidance and support to those in need, fostering greater interaction and inclusion within the college community. The experiences of Kurt and Ann underscore the difficulties veterans encounter when transitioning to academic life. Kurt found success due to the discipline instilled by his military education, while Ann faced challenges in obtaining accommodation for her disabilities. To tackle these differences, it is suggested to create special orientation programs for veteran students. Consideration should be given to providing tailored academic services that consider their experiences and train faculty members to better understand and support the unique needs of veteran students, as proposed by Kirchner (2015).

The experiences of Kurt and Ann highlight the unique challenges that veterans face when transitioning from military life to academic life. Kurt's success can be attributed to the discipline and structure instilled in him through his military education. This allowed him to easily adapt to the academic environment and excel in his studies. However, Ann encountered difficulties in obtaining accommodations for her disabilities. This highlights the need for universities to have systems in place to support and accommodate veteran students with disabilities.

Advisors should investigate whether student-veterans chose to leave the military and enroll in college due to personal decisions and effective planning, or if an external factor, person, or institution caused their discharge from the military, leading to higher education being a second choice to military service. This situation involves two factors: a trigger event and the timing of the event (Schlossberg et al., 1995). Student-veterans who perceive their entry into higher education negatively may require more support than those who planned and anticipated entering higher education, as the latter are more likely to feel a greater sense of control and hopefulness associated with a successful transition. Advisors should engage in respectful and considerate conversations with student-veterans about the reasons for their discharge from military service (DiRamio et al., 2008; Ryan et al. 2011).

It is suggested that specialized orientation programs be established to address these differences and ensure a smoother transition for veteran students. These programs could be tailored to the specific needs and experiences of veteran students and provide academic services that consider the unique challenges faced by veterans, such as navigating the GI Bill and understanding the transfer of military credits.

Additionally, these programs should train faculty members to better understand and support the distinct needs of veteran students. The proposal by Kirchner (2015) suggests that these specialized orientation programs should focus on educating faculty members about the military culture and the challenges veterans face. This would enable faculty members better to understand the experiences and needs of veteran students, allowing them to provide appropriate support and accommodation. Universities can create a more inclusive and supportive environment for veteran students by equipping faculty members with this knowledge. In addition to specialized orientation programs, it is also important for universities to consider establishing

support services specifically designed for veteran students. These services could include academic advising tailored to the unique needs of veterans. These counseling services address the mental health challenges often faced by veterans and career services that assist veterans in transitioning to civilian employment. By providing these specialized support services, universities can ensure that veteran students have the resources to succeed academically and personally (Ackerman et al., 2009; Reyes et al., 2018; Elliott, 2015).

Furthermore, universities should actively collaborate with veteran organizations and community resources to create a support network for veteran students. This could involve partnerships with local VA hospitals, veteran service organizations, and military bases. By leveraging these existing resources, universities can provide a comprehensive support system for veteran students, ensuring they can access the necessary healthcare, financial assistance, and community support.

The length of a transition, whether it is temporary or permanent, can affect individuals' feelings of control and hopefulness. Schlossberg et al. (1995) suggest that individuals may find it easier to deal with a transition if they believe it is temporary, leading to varying perspectives on temporary and permanent changes in lifestyle. Recognizing the valuable skills and experiences that veteran students bring to the academic community is crucial for universities. Veterans can contribute to a more enriching learning environment for all students, given their unique perspectives. By fostering an inclusive and supportive environment for veteran students, universities can benefit from their diverse contributions and perspectives, resulting in a more vibrant and varied academic community.

Henry appreciated that there must be strong support structures in the college. Again, at the college level, Henry expressed satisfaction with interacting at the Veterans Center on campus,

indicating a positive experience. Based on such occurrences, institutions should create and deliver a support system comprising other students, counseling, and career services targeting veterans. The networks required by these students would not only help in their academic and personal development but also aid in the professional development of the veteran students, making their transition look seamless and integrated (Gwin et al., 2012). After reviewing Susan's case, it is apparent that there is a need to improve communication and make products more readily available for veterans. This can be achieved through better resource allocation, creating dedicated veteran portals, and increasing self-promotion efforts. These steps could help address the issue of veterans feeling neglected. According to Walter (2019), a possible approach to increase veteran students' engagement and success rates would be establishing a one-stop center for all veteran services on campus.

Mental Health Challenges

Veterans like Tim and Ann admit to struggling to adjust to college life. The results of interviews with nine out of ten participants revealed that they acknowledged experiencing varying degrees of PTSD, highlighting the significant influence of the condition on their daily routines and educational pursuits. Semer & Harmening (2015) found that college attendance has a significant impact on the academic performance and general well-being of veterans with challenges usually attributed to military service like PTSD, cultural insensitivity, and not fitting into the traditional college student norm. Tim and his fellow veterans' social connections are also affected while transitioning from a military to a college environment, as highlighted in the research by Reyes et al. (2023) and Aikins et al. (2015). The participants dealing with PTSD emphasize that their learning is affected by struggles with concentration and memory, underscoring the importance of these cognitive functions in the learning process. Ackerman

(2009) supports this notion by discussing the challenges faced by combat veterans transitioning to college life, indicating their need to address and overcome unique issues. The research shows how evident it is that college-based programs should integrate mental health services tailored to veterans, considering the higher prevalence of mental health issues among this group in college settings. These services should be easily accessible and administered by professionals with expertise in military mental health (Ackerman et al., 2009; Aikins et al., 2015; Allen et al., 2014; Elliot et al., 2011).

By combining Cohen's Social Support Theory with Schlossberg's Transition Theory, individuals can receive validation, reassurance, and understanding. This can help reduce feelings of isolation and shame associated with PTSD and other issues connected with military service (DiRamio et al., 2008). Supportive individuals who offer non-judgmental listening and encouragement can enhance resilience and motivation for recovery. Social support also assists in managing stress, controlling symptoms, and adopting healthy self-care practices. Susan, a participant who shared her experience with PTSD, is facing challenges of isolation like others. She experienced emotional struggles during class discussions on military operations and political controversies, leading to breakdowns. This situation is a common issue for veterans trying to reintegrate socially in environments where such topics are discussed. (Lim et al., 2018; Lumina et al., 2013; Koenig et al., 2014; Schonfeld et al., 2015; Smith et al., 2017).

Susan shared that she also has encountered numerous instances where veteran students are misunderstood and not accepted, suggesting that better faculty training and student-oriented educational initiatives could address this issue. Elliott et al. (2011) support this notion by advocating for college-based educational programs that foster an appreciation for the veterans' experiences, bridging the perceived gap between the two worlds. Creating an environment that

supports veteran students goes beyond providing academic assistance and requires acknowledging their personal experiences and expectations (Rumann et al., 2010; Zinger et al., 2010).

Moreover, the issue of receiving insufficient support and recognition from academic staff, as exemplified by the cases of Ann and Susan mentioned earlier, raises concerns about cultural competency in education (Lim et al., 2018; Lumina et al., 2013; Koenig et al., 2014; Schonfeld et al., 2015; Smith et al., 2017). Meca et al. (2021) argue that besides providing necessary services for veterans, institutions should prioritize professional development activities for their staff to enhance their understanding of military culture and the challenges veterans face in college. Merely offering accommodation and a supportive environment is not sufficient; institutions should actively work towards integrating veterans into academic life by implementing initiatives such as fraternity mentorship, group support, and organizing events that acknowledge and embrace veterans within the academic community (Hunter-Johnson et al., 2021; Jenner, 2017; Kirchner, 2015; Shackelford et al., 2019; Obaid, 2022).

Recognition of Military Experience

The findings indicate that military education and experience significantly impact student learning, skills, motivation for learning, and understanding of theory. For example, all respondents said they perform better academically due to their military background and discipline. Keita (2015) emphasized how military training, including military medics and registered nurses, contributed to student engagement and learning, offering diverse perspectives for shaping discussions and academic curricula.

Ann, Earnest, Henry, and Seth draw upon their leadership and crisis management perspectives from their military background. The military education they received enhanced their

academic skills, potentially benefiting future veteran students by connecting theoretical concepts to real-world experiences shared by all military personnel (Costantino, 2006; McLain et al., 2020; Gwin et al., 2012).

Moreover, Earnest's career in law enforcement provides valuable insights into the psychological and adaptive mechanisms required to handle stressful situations effectively. Universities can incorporate this knowledge into their programs through seminars or workshops featuring veterans sharing their experiences. Students can engage in meaningful learning activities by delving into the situational assessment and decision-making processes.

Ackerman et al. (2009) emphasize the importance of utilizing veterans' experiences to enrich the education of other students who may not have access to real-life situations, thereby giving value to their lives. There are misconceptions regarding veterans among some students, including Susan. Teachers and educational institutions can incorporate aspects of military experiences like Susan's to address these misconceptions into the curriculum. This can help dispel misunderstandings about the military and shed light on the difficulties veterans may face, such as PTSD. Universities can help educate veterans and other students about the challenges associated with military service by creating a welcoming environment (Kirchner, 2015; Jones, 2015; Falkey, 2016; Walter, 2019).

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Summary of Major Findings

Schlossberg's Transition Theory, in conjunction with Cohen's Social Support Theory, formed the basis of this study. The primary objective was to gain insight into the educational obstacles and barriers faced by veterans as they move from military to academic settings. These obstacles include feelings of isolation, age differences, psychological disorders such as PTSD, and understanding the distinctive backgrounds of veterans in academic settings. As a result, the chapter emphasizes that despite the skills, knowledge, and valuable contributions veterans bring to higher education institutions, they face various difficulties that hinder their effective learning and success (Semer, & Harmening, 2015).

Broader Implications for Policy and Practice

Institutions might consider implementing permanent measures such as a comprehensive mental health program, vocational guidance, and academic counseling to support service members better. Schlossberg's Transition Theory theorizes that adults frequently experience transitions in various stages (DiRamio et al., 2008). It is logical to assume that colleges and universities should pay attention to the voices of veterans, as demonstrated in this research. Veterans are advocating for universities to recognize the significant changes they underwent while adapting to a military culture that emphasizes specific values like honor, masculinity, and loyalty to authority (Lim et al., 2018). The military's emphasis on collective identity over individuality creates a unique challenge for veterans reintegrating into civilian life and academic settings.

Additionally, leadership and practical experiences can help veterans reintegrate into the student community by exposing them to effective programs that can benefit other students (Lim

et al., 2018). College policies should address the psychological and social needs of veterans, which may involve developing orientation activities to help them understand the institution's cultural practices and available resources. It is imperative to adopt an inclusive approach that considers the unique needs of veterans to effectively implement policies at colleges. This may involve developing customized orientation programs that cater specifically to veterans.

Additionally, colleges should consider creating support services such as counseling, academic advising, and career guidance that are tailored to the experiences and challenges faced by veterans. By providing these resources, colleges can help veterans successfully transition from military service to academic life.

To create a welcoming and supportive environment for veterans on campus, colleges should also consider establishing veteran-specific student organizations and clubs where veterans can connect, share their experiences, and provide mutual support.

Furthermore, colleges could work to raise awareness among faculty, staff, and students about the unique needs and experiences of veterans to foster a more understanding and inclusive campus community. By adopting these inclusive approaches and implementing policies that specifically address the needs of veterans, colleges can create a more supportive and welcoming environment for veterans to thrive academically and personally.

Enhancing Academic Success and Personal Well-being

To better support veterans in higher education institutions, it is important to consider a range of inclusive measures (Lim et al., 2018). This means going beyond simply providing resources and services to veterans and actively creating an environment that fosters their success and integration into the academic community.

One important aspect of inclusive measures is the recognition and validation of veterans' unique experiences and perspectives. Several veterans, including those in the study, have encountered difficult and distressing circumstances while serving. To assist them, the study participants proposed that higher education institutions recognize and honor these experiences. This recognition can be achieved by establishing tailored programs and support systems that cater to the unique requirements of veterans, including counseling services that are attuned to their potential challenges (Rumann and Hamrick 2010).

Another key aspect of inclusivity is the provision of academic support tailored to veterans' needs. Many veterans may have been out of the academic setting for an extended period and may require additional assistance in transitioning back into the classroom. This can include offering remedial courses, tutoring services, or academic advising specifically designed for veterans. Additionally, providing flexible scheduling options and online learning opportunities can help accommodate veterans who may have other responsibilities, such as work or family obligations.

Creating a sense of community and belonging is also crucial for the success of veterans in higher education. This can be achieved through the establishment of veteran-specific organizations or clubs, where veterans can connect with one another, share their experiences, and provide mutual support. Additionally, hosting events and activities that celebrate and honor veterans can help foster a sense of pride and belonging within the larger campus community.

Furthermore, it is important for higher education institutions to actively recruit and hire faculty and staff who have experience working with veterans or who are veterans themselves. This can help ensure that there are individuals on campus who understand the unique challenges and needs of veterans and can provide the necessary support and guidance.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Enhance Admissions Processes for Veterans

Colleges should enhance their efforts to cater to the needs of veteran students by implementing various strategies. One effective approach is to provide training for admissions counselors, focusing on the unique aspects of military service and how they relate to educational and personal benefits. Additionally, colleges should ensure that veteran students are well-informed about the services available to them upon admission. These resources may include exclusive scholarships for veterans, the opportunity to receive academic credits for military service, and comprehensive access to counseling services. By incorporating these elements into the admissions process, colleges can better support and inform veteran students, faculty, and staff.

Strengthen Veteran Centers with Robust Communication Systems

Shant et al. (2023) emphasized the importance of a Veteran Resource Center (VRC) in supporting veterans within and outside the university. The VRC serves as a dedicated space that promotes student satisfaction and engagement, encourages collaboration among support services, offers peer mentorship, and employs staff members who are knowledgeable about military culture. Ultimately, VRCs contribute to improved retention and graduation rates.

Colleges can make it a priority to invest in effective communication structures within their veteran centers to ensure timely and necessary assistance to veteran students. By moving away from traditional emails and adopting real-time applications and convenient SMS platforms, colleges can greatly enhance knowledge transfer and improve engagement with critical services. This innovative approach enables veterans to communicate seamlessly and fosters a stronger sense of community among them. As a result, locating and accessing various services becomes

easier for veteran students, leading to increased satisfaction and a more enjoyable educational experience. The significance of personal interaction for veterans cannot be underestimated, as it has a profound influence on the successful outcome of their enrolled courses (Shant et al., 2023).

Revise Campus Policies and Training for Staff and Faculty

To create a more inclusive environment on campus, faculty, and staff could better understand the cultural and service-related background of military students. To achieve this, educational institutions could implement a training curriculum for both staff and students that covers topics such as military culture awareness and the effects of military service, including conditions like PTSD. Additionally, it is important to review and modify current campus policies to accommodate the needs of veteran students, such as attendance and scheduling flexibility due to potential deployment or medical appointments. These changes will not only help veteran students feel valued but also contribute to an improved campus culture overall. (Shant et al., 2023; Semer & Harmening, 2015).

Develop a Peer Mentorship Program

Colleges could implement a peer mentorship program to help new veteran students integrate into academic life (Pease, 2021; D'Aoust et. al, 2016; Keita et. al, 2015). In this program, incoming veteran students could be matched with experienced student mentors who have a military background. These mentors could serve as guides and role models to help the new students navigate any challenges they may encounter. These mentors will not only provide academic guidance but also address the social needs of new veteran students, as many struggle with feelings of isolation. By fostering a supportive environment through this program, colleges can help veteran students better adjust to college life, enhancing their academic performance and social interactions. The peer mentorship initiative could be executed through a comprehensive

onboarding process for new veteran students, where they are informed about the program and can express their interest in being paired with a mentor (D'Aoust et. al, 2016; Keita et. al, 2015).

After being paired, mentors and mentees could have-regular meetings and open lines of communication to build strong relationships and provide ongoing support. Mentors will use their personal experiences as veterans and college students to offer valuable advice on academic aspects like time management, study strategies, and navigating college bureaucracy. Mentors will provide a safe space for mentees to discuss challenges or concerns, offering empathetic support. The program may include workshops and seminars facilitated by mentors, covering topics like career exploration, networking, and wellness, to empower veteran students and enhance their college experience (Pease, 2021; D'Aoust et. al, 2016; Keita et. al, 2015).

Mentors can plan social events to build a sense of community among veteran students, promoting friendships and camaraderie to enhance the college experience. Colleges can work with military organizations to find mentors who can support veterans in their transition to academic life. Regular feedback surveys from mentors and mentees can help improve the mentorship program's effectiveness. Peer mentorship programs demonstrate colleges' commitment to supporting veteran students and creating an inclusive environment for their growth. The success of this initiative can inspire other institutions to introduce similar programs for their veteran student communities.

Create Veteran-Inclusive Spaces and Events

Designate dedicated spaces on their campuses for veteran students to study, socialize, and connect with other veterans. Moreover, arranging customized extracurricular activities like events, workshops, and seminars that address veteran students' unique needs and future career aspirations would help foster a greater sense of belonging within the university community

(Jiang, 2021). The initiatives contribute to veterans' educational and personal growth and raise awareness among the entire student and staff population about their unique needs and perspectives. This is of great significance. By adopting these measures, colleges can foster an inclusive environment that embraces the diverse backgrounds of learners, particularly those with military experience.

Recommendations for Future Research

It is important to replicate this study with a larger sample size to gain further insights into the thoughts and opinions of college-attending veteran's post-service. While valuable data was collected in this study, a larger sample may reveal additional thoughts and opinions that were not expressed by participants. The study also revealed that many participants hold prevalent beliefs in Christian values and characteristics. This suggests a need for further exploration into the reasons behind this. Conducting a larger study could provide insight into why these values are particularly significant for veterans who have faced unique challenges during their time in service. The recognition of the importance of a Veterans Center on campus indicates a need for further research into the support services offered by these centers. There are potential opportunities for increased focus and financial assistance in this area.

Furthermore, conducting a follow-up study with a larger sample size could also allow for a more comprehensive analysis of the specific challenges and barriers that veterans face when transitioning to college. This could lead to the development of more targeted and effective support programs and resources for this population. Moreover, expanding the study to include a larger and more diverse sample of veterans from different branches of the military and with varying lengths of service could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the experiences

and needs of this population. This could lead to more tailored and effective support services for veterans in higher education.

Finally, replicating the study with a larger sample size and over a longer period could also provide insights into the long-term experiences and challenges faced by veterans as they navigate college life and pursue their academic and career goals. This could inform the development of sustained and comprehensive support programs for veterans in higher education.

Conclusion

This study utilized a phenomenological approach to explore the experiences of veterans reintegrating into higher education. Thematic analysis was employed to identify prevalent themes and patterns in the qualitative data, offering valuable insights for developing initiatives to support veteran students. The study is grounded in Schlossberg's Transitional Theory and Cohen's Social Support Theory and emphasizes the need for increased awareness and support for student veterans in college. Ten student veteran participants were interviewed, sharing their experiences in the military and college, highlighting barriers and forms of support encountered. The research underscores the importance of training for college faculty and staff to better support veterans in higher education. The findings suggest a need for effective strategies and support systems to enhance academic performance and well-being, as veterans face obstacles that hinder their learning and success in college.

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