The Experiences of Veterans With Disabilities During Their
Enrollment at a Four-Year University

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A Dissertation Submitted to

The Faculty of
The Graduate School of Education and Human Development
of The George Washington University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Education

May 17, 2015

Dissertation directed by

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UMI Number: 3684952

UMI 3684952

The Graduate School of Education and Human Development of The George Washington University certifies that Candice Cloos has passed the Final Examination for the degree of Doctor of Education as of December 1, 2014. This is the final and approved form of the dissertation.

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Dedication

To my parents, Tricia and John, for teaching me the value of education and providing a

lifetime of unconditional support. Without them, none of my success would be possible.

And to my amazing husband and partner, Patrick, for his unwavering faith in me.

Acknowledgments

First and foremost, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my committee chair, Dr. Lynda West, for her guidance and encouragement throughout the dissertation process. I deeply appreciate her insights and positive motivation over the years. Working with Dr. West has been a joy and I have come to regard her as a mentor.

I would also like to thank my committee members, Dr. Esther Merves for her continual research expertise and reading countless drafts, and Dr. Corrine Weidenthal for her passion for military families. I am eternally grateful for the enthusiasm and time they devoted towards this study.

In addition, thank you to my outside readers, Dr. Susan King and Dr. Melissa Burn for lending their time and knowledge of education, research, and veterans to this dissertation.

I would like to extend my appreciation to my dear friend Nina Askvig for her support throughout this study. I am also grateful to my two favorite veterans, my father and husband, for helping me better understand the experiences of military service members.

Most notably, I would like to thank the veterans who shared their postsecondary experiences with the hopes that they would be used to benefit others, and more importantly for their service to our country.

Abstract

The Experiences of Veterans with Disabilities during their Enrollment at a Four-Year University

This qualitative study identified the challenges, supports, and services that a diverse sample of veterans with disabilities utilized as undergraduate students at universities across the United States. The study sample consisted of ten veterans with disabilities who were currently enrolled in, or had graduated within five years from, a four-year postsecondary institution. The participants attended ten different universities and were a diverse sample in terms of disabilities, branch of service, combat exposure, area of study, and gender. The veterans participated in semi-structured interviews that examined their transition, academic, and social experiences in college.

Generally, the participants struggled during the transition to school and received a limited number of supports from their postsecondary institutions. The majority also faced a number of academic challenges, although they did not seek formal assistance. There was a severe lapse in Disability Support Services (DSS) as none of the participants registered with the DSS office and more than half were unaware that these supports were available to them. The veterans had limited social experiences on campus and none of them opted to join student veterans' organizations and other social groups, though they felt most comfortable around other veterans. These findings suggest the need for additional research on veterans with disabilities, specifically between those who are receiving DSS and those who are not. There is also a clear need for improved transition services, including methods of identifying veterans with disabilities, and academic

supports at four-year institutions. Furthermore, these results indicate that it is may be

more effective to connect veterans to each other through channels outside of traditional

on-campus veterans' organizations.

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Chapter I

Introduction

Overview of the General Area of Concern

There have been an increased number of military veterans in the United States since 2001 due to the United States' military involvement in Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) in Afghanistan, and Operation Iraqi Freedom in Iraq (OIF) (U.S. Department of Defense, 2012; Garamone, 2011). About 2 million U.S. troops have been deployed in both wars and contribute to the growing population of veterans (Institute of Medicine, 2010). Advances in medicine and body armor have led to more service members surviving injuries that would have previously resulted in death (Warden, 2006; Institute of Medicine, 2010). Consequently, many veterans are returning with traumatic brain injuries, amputations, burns, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), mental health impairments, and other disabilities (Tanielian & Jaycox, 2008; Institute of Medicine, 2010). Veterans are "often survivors of war injuries but they nearly universally reject civilians' construction of them as damaged goods who suffer from wounds and disorders associated with the trauma of their services" (Doe, 2012). As veterans transition back to civilian life, many of them enroll in postsecondary education, leading to the current influx of veterans on campuses. This study sought to understand the implications of the aforementioned data for veterans enrolled in postsecondary institutions.

Transitioning back to civilian life can be challenging for veterans, with 44 percent reporting that the adjustment was difficult (Pew Research Center, 2011). In June of 2012, the suicide rate of veterans eclipsed the number of troops who have died in battle since

2001 (Williams, 2012). The suicide rate of combat veterans has risen dramatically since 2005 and can be attributed to the stigma of receiving mental health services compounded by other issues such as unemployment, familial and financial stresses (Williams, 2012). A deeper knowledge of the experiences of veterans is necessary to fully support their return to civilian life; 84 percent of veterans feel that the public does not understand the problems they face (Pew Research Center, 2011).

Statement of the Problem

Approximately 22 million veterans are living in the United States and more than 1 million people utilize the education benefits from Veterans Affairs (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2014). Many of these veterans have survived injuries that would have resulted in death during earlier wars due to advances in medicine and armor (Warden, 2006; Institute of Medicine, 2010). According to the Pew Research Center, about 15 percent of veterans who served after September 11, 2001 report they were seriously injured while serving in the military and nearly 40 percent are suffering from post-traumatic stress (Pew Research Center, 2011). Veterans with these and other disabilities may require additional services and supports during their enrollment at a postsecondary institution to help them achieve academic success. However, few veterans seek disability support services for various reasons, such as the stigmatism of having a disability that may have resulted from military experiences (Church, 2009; Shackelford, 2009). There are a variety of factors involved in whether veterans disclose their disabilities to Disability Support Services (DSS).

The military experience is known to promote strength; accordingly veterans may associate their disability with weakness and be apprehensive to disclose it (Burnett & Segoria, 2009). Furthermore, numerous veterans only recently developed a disability in combat and therefore may be unaware of what services are available or how to access them (Church, 2009; Shackelford, 2009). Postsecondary institutions struggle to address this situation as they lack data on the types of barriers and supports veterans with disabilities deem effective (Vance & Miller, 2009). These factors add to the problem of veterans with disabilities not receiving necessary assistance at a postsecondary institution.

There is little research about the academic performance and graduation rates of veterans in the U.S. (Fain, 2013). However, the Student Veterans of America (SVA) released a report in 2014 combining data on U.S. college degree attainment with information on veterans who have used the Post 9/11 GI Bill (Cate, 2014). This report is the first phase of the Million Records Project that is an initiative of the SVA. SVA partnered with the Veterans Administration (VA) and the National Student Clearinghouse (NSC) to conduct this research. These results showed that about 51.7 percent of veterans have received a postsecondary degree or certificate, a rate that is similar to traditional college students. The report also reveals that the majority of veterans complete a bachelor's degree within four to six years due to the unique challenges facing student veterans. Additional information about the graduation rates of veterans with disabilities is necessary to contribute to this growing body of research.

About one-third of veterans are funded under the GI Bill so they will be better equipped to contribute to and participate in society as a college graduate. When a veteran does not receive or utilize adequate supports in college that are offered without charge, he or she is less likely to graduate. Consequently, addressing this problem will not only benefit the students, but will serve society as well (Tanielian & Jaycox, 2008; Baum & Ma, 2007).

Several studies have addressed this problem by researching the supports offered to veterans with disabilities from the collegiate Disability Services and Veterans Affairs Offices (Vance & Miller, 2009; Miller 2011). These supports are discussed at length in chapter two and include extended time on exams and transition services, such as orientation and receiving credit for previous coursework. However, these studies are from the perspective of faculty and administrators, not the students. The imperative for this study was to learn what the veterans with disabilities find effective.

A primary barrier to effectively solving this problem is the lack of disclosure of disabilities by veterans (Church, 2008; Shackelford, 2009). An institutional understanding of how to best support veterans with disabilities will not succeed until veterans seek assistance through disclosure to Disability Support Services (DSS). Postsecondary institutions must learn how to best facilitate this challenge of encouraging disclosure.

Based on research in the field, the most promising approach for this population may be targeting the transition process to college (DiRamio, Ackerman, and Mitchell, 2009; Zinger & Cohen, 2010; Livingston, 2009). When offering transition services,

universities can educate veterans about what supports are available, and how to access them. Furthermore, during this process, universities can address the challenge a veteran faces because of possible stigma. In addition to ensuring that students begin the collegiate experience positively, postsecondary institutions need to provide ongoing assistance for veterans with disabilities (DiRamio et al., 2009).

Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to examine the experiences of veterans with disabilities who were currently enrolled in, or had graduated within five years from, a four-year postsecondary institution. The goal of the study was to identify veterans' perceptions of their postsecondary experiences. The major research question that directed this study was, "what were the experiences of veterans with disabilities during their enrollment at a four-year university?" The study had four subquestions:

1. How did veterans with disabilities describe their postsecondary educational experiences?

2. How did veterans describe their situation and self?

3. What were the challenges veterans with disabilities experience in pursuing postsecondary education?

4. What were the supports and services veterans with disabilities utilize in postsecondary educational settings?

Potential Significance

Prior to this study, there was a paucity of literature relating to the experience of veterans with disabilities in higher education. While several studies have included interviews and surveys of the veterans themselves, none have specifically targeted veterans with disabilities (DiRamio et al., 2008; Elliott, Gonzalez & Larsen, 2011; Livingston, 2009; Zinger & Cohen, 2010). This study augmented the current body of literature by giving veterans with disabilities a voice by examining their experiences in postsecondary education.

Further research is necessary to discern best practices since there is an influx of veterans attending postsecondary institutions, many of whom are in need of disability support. There have been studies addressing the postsecondary services provided to veterans, but all of them have been from the perspective of the institution, not the veterans (Cook & Kim, 2009; Miller, 2011; Vance & Miller, 2009). This study provided veterans with disabilities an opportunity to discuss what challenges and university supports lead to their success. It also served to ascertain the ecological factors that impact the success of veterans with disabilities in higher education by examining the influential relationships in their environment. Therefore, the scope of this research extended beyond the disability and veteran communities to include areas such as policy, transition, counseling services, and faculty training.

Theoretical Framework

Two conceptual frameworks that helped to frame this study were: Schlossberg's Transition Theory and Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory.

Transition Theory. Schlossberg's Transition Theory is a framework to foster an understanding of transitions that has been used as the theoretical basis for several recent studies of the postsecondary experiences of veterans (Ackerman et al., 2009; DiRamio et al., 2008; Liviningston, 2009). This study focused on the two foremost parts of the model, approaching transitions and factors that influence transitions. Approaching transitions refers to identifying the type of transition and how the individual views it. For example, attending a four-year postsecondary institutions may be anticipated or unanticipated for veterans and can affect their preparation and attitude towards their experiences. The model also notes the contextual factors such as ethnicity and gender that may shape the transition, as well as the impact the transition has on the individual's daily life through relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles. Veterans whose lives are extremely changed by the transition are likely to require more supports and take longer to adapt. Veterans' perspectives of the transition will alter over time as they are moving in, through or out of a transition (Anderson et al., 2012).

Schlossberg's Transition Theory cites four major sets of factors that influence the ability of an individual the cope with a transition, known as the 4 S System: situation, self, support, and strategies (Anderson, Goodman, & Schlossberg, 2012). Each of these variables can serve as an asset or a liability. The situation surrounding a veteran's transition to a four-year university has a direct impact on his or her experience, especially if there is concurrent stress, such as having children. The self refers to the personal and demographic characteristics that influence how individuals deal with change. For example, veterans who are older may have a more difficult time becoming accustomed to being a student again. Another factor, support, can refer to the social support that is often

noted as being the key to handling stress. Veterans who receive support from their families, friends, communities, and institutions are likely to transition better. In addition, veterans who develop successful strategies to facilitate the transition are also at an advantage. These strategies may include: self-advocacy, joining veterans groups, or seeking additional support when needed. The situation, self, support, and strategies are all factors that influence the success of the postsecondary transition and success of veterans with disabilities. Researching the assets and liabilities can help universities support them better in the future (Anderson et al., 2012).

Ecological Systems Theory. Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1977; 1979) is based on the notion that individuals are a part of their ecology, which is always shifting. The relationship between the individual and the environment is comprised of four systems, the micro-, meso-, exo-, and macro. The microsystem includes the relationships between the individual and the settings he or she comes in direct contact with, such as family, peers, faculty, Disability Support Services (DSS), the Veterans Support Office (VSO), and the Student Veterans Program (SVP), as in this study. The mesosytem is the interactions between two or more of the microsystems, such as the relationship between the DSS and VSO. This study investigated the experiences veterans' with disabilities have with the elements in their microsystem, as well as examining how these work together in the mesosystem.

Veterans with disabilities do not directly interact with elements of the exo- and macrosystems. The application of relevant federal policies and laws are part of the exosystem, as well as the institution's administrative policies. The macrosystem contains

federal laws and social norms that shape all of the other systems. These include society's beliefs about veterans and disabilities, as well as how disabilities are diagnosed. The exo- and macrosystems provide background for the study and are fully discussed in chapter two. Bronfenbrenner's four ecological layers all shape the postsecondary experiences of veterans with disabilities and provide a lens into a more thorough understanding (Bronfenbrenner, 1977; 1979).

Methodology

This inquiry was a qualitative study that investigated veterans' perspectives – particularly those with disabilities who are enrolled in postsecondary education. This study described the situation, self, support, and strategies of veterans with disabilities during their postsecondary education. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with ten veterans with disabilities who were currently enrolled or who have graduated from a postsecondary institution within the past five years. For the purpose of this study, the term "disability" referred to a veteran who receives disability benefits from the Veterans Administration (VA) or is registered with Disability Support Services (DSS) on campus. All of the participants were current students at the time of the interview, or had attended a four-year university in the last five years.

Researcher Subjectivity Statement

The researcher is a female in her early thirties who has personal relationships to veterans with disabilities who completed postsecondary institutions after serving in the

military. She has several friends and acquaintances who have shared their experiences with her, which led her to pursue this study.

Delimitations

Four delimitations of this study included: the number of participants, veteran and disability status, and enrollment in postsecondary education. The interviews were conducted with 10 veterans with disabilities who were currently or previously enrolled in a four-year institution at the time of the study.

Limitations

While this study has the potential to make a significant contribution to both the veteran and disability communities, it contains several limitations. All research is susceptible to subjectivity and "bias has the opportunity to occur and many points in a qualitative study" (Bryant, 2004, p. 107). There is bias since the veterans volunteered to participate in the study and may not divulge all aspects of their experiences. Additionally, self-reported data cannot be verified. The nature of qualitative interviewing is to produce an in-depth analysis of veterans' personal experiences and is therefore not generalizable in a statistical sense. Given the extreme variance among postsecondary institutions in providing veteran and disability services, the same study conducted at other universities may not yield similar results. The researcher sought to strengthen the credibility of the study by using triangulation with analytic memos, peer reviews, and participant feedback. Because of the diversity of universities that the participants attended, the study's findings can only be theoretically generalized to other institutions across the United States.

Definitions of Key Terms

Academic Adjustment: Adjustments made by universities that can include auxiliary aids, services, and modifications to academics as needed to ensure equal educational opportunity (OCR, 2011). Examples of academic adjustments include: reducing a course load, course substitution, note taking, sign language interpreters, and extended time on exams, and providing changes in the delivery of a class (OCR, 2011; National Center for Education Statistics, 2013).

Analytic Memo: Memo to document and enhance the analytic process that can consist of questions, reflections, and speculations about the emerging data (Creswell, 2007).

Disability Support Services (DSS): Support from the postsecondary institution to help students with disabilities achieve success in postsecondary institutions. DSS interprets and applies federal law and policy for students with disabilities (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013). Disabilities that routinely qualify for services include: hearing and visual impairments, learning disorders, physical disabilities, psychological disorders, chronic health impairments, and Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorders (George Washington University Disability Support Services, 2014). In order to receive services, students must present evidence of their disability and be registered with this office. Disability documentation guidelines vary based on the type of disability and can include: comprehensive assessments, diagnostic interviews, specific diagnosis, and clinical summary. These accommodations and academic adjustments vary based on the student's needs (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013).

Mental Disorder: "A syndrome characterized by clinically significant disturbance in an individual's cognition, emotion regulation, or behavior that reflects a dysfunction in the psychological, biological, or developmental processes underlying mental functioning" (DSM-5, 2013, p.20)

Military culture: A set of shared attitudes, behaviors, values, goals and practices that characterizes the military; military culture is a way of life (Moncher, n.d.).

Military students: Veterans as well as those who are on active duty and in the reserves, who are enrolled in classes at a four-year postsecondary institution (Military Friendly Schools, 2013).

Mitigating Measures: Medications and assistive devices that an individual uses to eliminate or reduce the effects of an impairment, such as medication for major depression, prosthetic devices, and hearing aids (Cornell University, 2013).

Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF): The official name given by the U.S. government for the war in Afghanistan that began in 2001 and continues today (Garamone, 2011).

Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF): The official name given by the U.S. government for the war in Iraq that lasted from 2003 to 2011 (Garamone, 2011).

Post 9/11 GI Bill: Provides financial support for education and housing to veterans who have at least 90 days of combined service after September 10, 2001, or those who are discharged with a service-connected disability after 30 days. Benefits may

include tuition and fees, a monthly housing allowance, and an annual stipend for books and supplies (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2012).

Postsecondary education: Any education beyond the high school level. Postsecondary institutions include vocational schools, community colleges, and public or private four-year colleges and universities (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013).

Principles of Excellence: Guidelines for educational institutions receiving Federal funding that include designating a point of contact for academic and financial advising and ending fraudulent and aggressive recruiting techniques, among other areas of compliance (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2012).

Student Veterans' Organization (SVO): A student organization at some postsecondary institutions dedicated to supporting veterans. The organization works to foster a supportive environment for student veterans both on and off campus and functions like any other approved campus organization (The George Washington University Student Veterans Organization, 2013).

Student Veterans Program (SVP): A postsecondary program dedicated to supporting student veterans that is usually housed at the Veterans Services Office (SVO), if the institution has one. Services vary among institutions and can include financial, counseling, academic, and social support (Burnett & Segoria, 2009).

Veteran: "A person who served in the active military, naval, or air service, and who was discharged or released there from under conditions other than dishonorable" (38

U.S.C.§101). Veterans may have served in any branch of the military: Air Force, Navy, Marines, Army, or Coast Guard.

Veterans Affairs (VA): A cabinet of the federal government that "provides a wide range of benefits including, Disability, Education and Training, Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment, Home Loan Guaranty, Dependant and Survivor Benefits, Medical Treatment, Life Insurance and Burial Benefits" (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2012).

Veterans Services Office (VSO): An office at a postsecondary institution devoted to supporting veterans. Services vary among institutions and can include financial, counseling, academic, and social support (Burnett & Segoria, 2009). The Office of Veteran Services was established at GWU as a result of its partnership with the Yellow Ribbon Program. The office not only certifies benefits, but also provides continuous outreach to veterans from the time they enter GWU to their future employment (Collins & Goodson, 2013).

Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment Program (VR&E): "Assists veterans with service-connected disabilities to prepare for, find, and keep suitable jobs. For veterans with service-connected disabilities so severe that they cannot immediately consider work, this program offers services to improve their ability to live as independently as possible" (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2012).

Chapter II

Review of Literature

Introduction

Since 2001, there has been an increase in the number of U.S. veterans returning from overseas conflicts that has led to federal policy changes to better serve them. One of the results from these augmented benefits has been a significant influx of veterans enrolling in higher education programs (Bertoni, 2011). This population poses unique challenges that many postsecondary institutions are not prepared to serve (Vance & Miller, 2009). A considerable amount of veterans have disabilities and need supports, services, and accommodations to ensure their academic success (Radford, 2009).

The purpose of this literature review was to explore the contemporary (2001 to 2014) research on veterans with disabilities in postsecondary education in order to gain an understanding of their experiences. Many studies since this time address the major issues veterans from Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) and Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) face such as suicide, substance abuse, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and traumatic brain injury (TBI). PTSD is a subject that has been covered extensively in research about veterans, especially those returning from Vietnam and Iraq. Studies about mental health issues as the result of combat were prevalent after the Iraq war in 2003 and remain an important area of veteran studies.

This literature review was conducted in the Fall of 2012 using the following search engines: Education Resources Information Center (ERIC), Academic Search

Premier, Psych Info, Academic Search Complete, ProQuest (including dissertations and theses), and Google Scholar. The following terms were used to conduct the search on articles since 2001: "veterans and disab* and postsecondary" (for variations of "disability"), "veterans and disab* and college," "veterans and disab* and higher education," and "veterans and disab* and university." The search yielded in excess of 17,000 results.

Due to the large number of publications on these topics, the literature review filtered for peer-reviewed publications, except for dissertations or theses. To further narrow these sources, the researcher opted not to include those that pertained exclusively to veterans in community college. Studies that were specific to a particular group of veterans (ie. branch of military, particular disability, or combat site) were only used to provide supporting information throughout the literature review since they did not capture the scope of this study. These parameters yielded a total of 8 works that included research on the experiences of veterans with disabilities in postsecondary education and were used as the foundation of this literature review (Cook & Kim, 2009; DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2009; Elliott, Gonzalez, & Larson, 2011; Livingston, 2009; Miller, 2011; Pew, 2011; Radford, 2011; Vance & Miller, 2009; Zinger & Cohen, 2010). The researcher established alerts from the above search engines and added three additional studies through December 2014 (GAO, 2013; Osbourne, 2014; Queen & Lewis, 2014).

The search elucidated a dearth in the literature on veterans with disabilities in postsecondary education and in studies that examine the perspectives of veterans with

disabilities. Few studies presented findings specifically related to veterans with disabilities. Radford (2011) researched both active duty service members and veterans who served in the military and did not expressly address those with disabilities. Pew (2011) surveyed veterans, though only about one third of the participants served after September 11, 2001 (Pew, 2011). Five other sources studied veterans, but did not indicate whether the veterans had disabilities (Queen & Lewis, 2014; Osbourne, 2014; Cook & Kim, 2009; Livingston, 2009; Elliott, Gonzalez, & Larsen, 2011). Another three studies looked at veterans with and without disabilities, but failed to separate the findings by these groups (DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2009; GAO, 2013; Zinger & Cohen, 2010). While the literature includes two sources that reported the findings of veterans with disabilities, neither included the perspectives of student veterans in their studies (Miller, 2011; Vance & Miller, 2009). Table 1 below depicts the literature studying the postsecondary experiences of veterans with disabilities.

Table 1

Literature Studying the Postsecondary Experiences of Veterans with Disabilities

	Military (including veterans)	**Veterans**	**Veterans with Disabilities**
Cook & Kim, 2009		X (did not disclose whether any veterans had disabilities)	
DiRamio, Ackerman, Mitchell, 2009		X (3 of 25 had disabilities, but did not separate findings)	

Elliot, Gonzalez & Larsen, 2011		X (did not disclose whether any veterans had disabilities)	
GAO, 2013		X (included veterans with disabilities, but did not separate findings)	
Livingston, 2009		X (did not disclose whether any veterans had disabilities)	
Miller, 2011			X
Osbourne, 2014		X (did not disclose whether any veterans had disabilities)	
Pew, 2011		X	
Queen & Lewis, 2014		X (did not disclose whether any veterans had disabilities)	
Radford, 2011	X		
Vance & Miller, 2009			X
Zinger & Cohen, 2010		X (included veterans with disabilities, but did not separate findings)	

Theoretical Framework.

Transition theory. Schlossberg's transition model provides a systematic

framework for listening and analyzing the stories of veterans with disabilities. The

transition model has been used as the foundation for several recent studies of the

potsecondary experiences of veterans (Ackerman et al., 2009; DiRamio et al., 2008;

Liviningston, 2009). While the individuals and transitions are unique, the transition

model provides a stable structure for understanding their experiences. This study utilized

two major parts of the transition model: approaching transitions and factors that influence

transitions, also known as the 4 S's (Anderson, Goodman, & Schlossberg, 2012). Figure

1 below presents a visual diagram of the transition theory.

Approaching Transitions:
Events or Nonevents
Resulting in Change

Type
Context
Impact

Potential Resources- 4 S's
Assets/liabilities

Situation
Self
Support
Strategies

The Transition Process: Changing Reactions Over Time
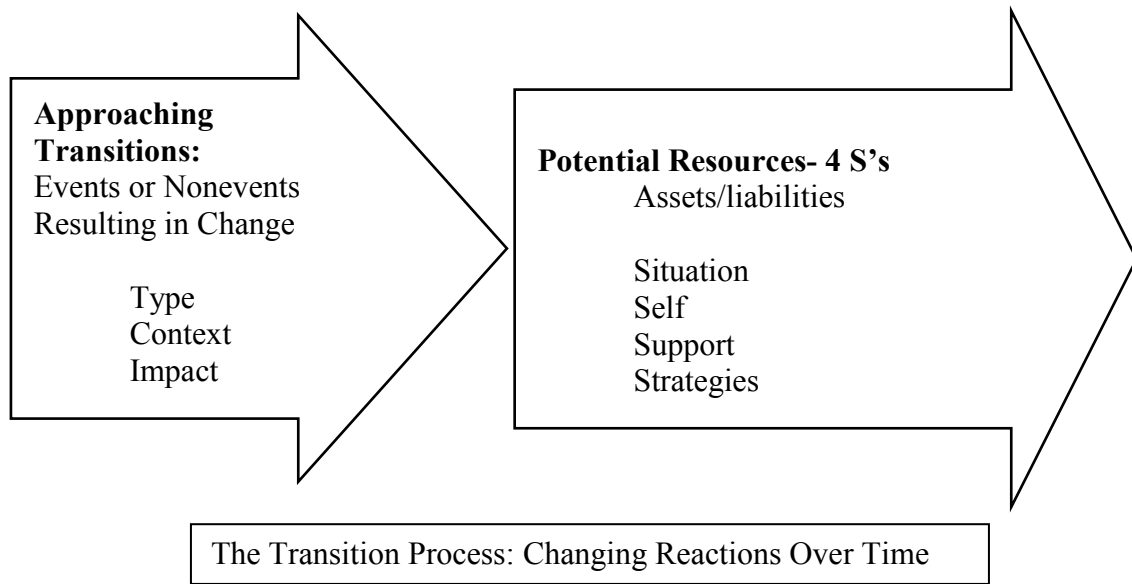
Figure 1: Visual Diagram of Schlossberg's Transition Theory

The transition model defines transitions as turning points or as a period of time

between two periods of stability. The first part of the model, approaching transitions,

identifies the type of transition and whether it was an anticipated, unanticipated, or a

nonevent. Anticipated transitions are alterations that are predictable during the course of

one's life, such as having a child or starting a first job. Unanticipated transitions usually

involve crises and other such events that do not usually occur during the course of a

lifetime, like being the victim of an earthquake. Due to the nature of unanticipated

transitions, many people do not have adequate time to prepare nor are in an ideal situation

to make decisions. Conversely, anticipated transitions are frequently planned and thought

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out in advance. Going to college may be an anticipated event for one person and an

unanticipated event for another. Nonevent transitions are the events someone expected

but that didn't occur, as in child who was never born. Nonevents can have a great impact

on an individual's perceptions and behavior. Regardless of the type of transition,

ultimately the person's reaction to it is the key (Anderson et al., 2012). Contextual factors

have both a direct and indirect impact on transition and on an individual's perception of

it. For example, factors include gender, socioeconomic status, disability, ethnicity, and

military culture. The transition can influence the role of an individual across settings,

such as in family, work and school. The context also includes the broader social/political

landscape in which the transition occurs. The various contexts for transition affect how an

individual reacts to it (Anderson et al., 2012).

According to Anderson et al. (2012), when an individual is undergoing a

transition, the most important aspect to consider is the impact of the transition, rather than

the actual event or the nonevent. Many transitions change one's daily life through

relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles. The more the transition alters a person's

life, the more supports it requires and the longer it can take to adapt to the changes.

Anderson et al. (2012) states the transition process identifies where a person is in the

transition. A person may be moving in, through or out of a transition. It is common for

the perspectives of the transition change over time.

Schlossberg's Transition Theory cites four major sets of factors that influence the

ability of an individual the cope with a transition. These are known as the 4 S System:

situation, self, support, and strategies. The variables in the 4 S System can serve as assets or liabilities.

The situation refers to the characteristics of the event or nonevent. Important factors include the transition's trigger, timing, and permanence. There may be parts of the transition the individual can control that can drive the individual's role to change. As previously stated, the person's perception of the situation as positive, negative, or neutral is vital to how they deal with it. Any concurrent stress that is associated with an experience such as the transition to postsecondary school, impacts how an individual faces the transition.

The individual, or self, also brings personal and demographic characteristics to the transition. Socioeconomic status, gender, age, and ethnicity are examples of factors that influence how individuals deal with the change. The self is also guided by more subjective characteristics such as outlook, values, commitment, spirituality, resiliency, and military culture.

Support is a major factor in handling a transition since social support is often noted as being the key to handling stress. Individuals may receive support from a variety of places: relationships, family, friends, communities, and institutions. Social support can also be derived from less likely sources such as neighbors, co-workers, and those providing professional services.

During a transition, individuals utilize strategies for coping with their new situation. These strategies can be defined as things that an individual does on his or her

own behalf to help deal with the changes. Coping strategies are related to an individual's self-esteem and vary among people and situations.

Schlossberg's Transition Theory offers a lens to view the postsecondary experiences of veterans with disabilities. It is vital to know how they prepared for postsecondary institutions, how they've adapted to their new roles, and how they perceive their experience overall. A student's situation, self, support, and strategies all influence the success of a transition and thus postsecondary experience. Researching the assets and liabilities of veterans with disabilities can help universities better serve them in the future.

Ecological Systems Theory. Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory was utilized as a second theoretical basis for exploring the experiences of veterans with disabilities in postsecondary education for this study. According to Bronfenbrenner (1977; 1979), research in human development should incorporate the entire ecological system by examining the changing relationships between the individual and the environment. The shifting environments where the individual lives and grows include immediate settings and the larger social context. Bronfenbrenner's system is comprised of four subsystems that guide human development: the microsystem, mesosystem, macrosystem, and exosystem. Each system reveals the complexity of the experiences of veterans with disabilities and provides a comprehensive account of their involvement in postsecondary education.

The microsystem is comprised of the relationships between the individual and the settings he or she comes in direct contact with (Bronfenbrenner, 1977; 1979). The elements of a setting include the "place, time, physical features, activity, participant, and

role" the individual has there (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, p. 514). For veterans with disabilities in postsecondary institutions, the components of the microsystem include: family, peers, faculty, Disability Support Services (DSS), the Veterans Support Office (VSO), and the Student Veterans Program (SVP). The mesosystem is the interactions between two or more of these microsystems, such as the interaction between the SVP and faculty, which can lead to increased awareness and training in working with veterans.

Veterans with disabilities do not interact directly with elements of the exosystem and the macrosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1977; 1979). The exosystem is an extension of the mesosystem and characterizes the larger social system. The application of federal policy and laws that pertain to veterans with disabilities in postsecondary institutions is one element of the exosystem, as are the administrative policies of the institution. The macrosystem is composed of "the economic, social, educational, legal and political systems, of which micro-, meso-, and exosystems are the concrete manifestations" (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, p. 515). The federal policies and laws impacting veterans with disabilities in postsecondary institutions are parts of the macrosystem. Other elements include society's beliefs about veterans and disabilities and how disabilities are diagnosed, all of which shape the other systems. The study used the macro- and exosystems to provide the historical context for understanding the larger context of the study, while citing relevant research relating to the elements in the micro- and mesosystems.

There are many layers of the postsecondary experiences of veterans with disabilities that can be captured through the Ecological Systems Theory. Researching the

various ways these factors relate to each other and influence veterans provide a complete understanding of the study. Figure 2 below presents a visual diagram of the Ecological Systems Theory.
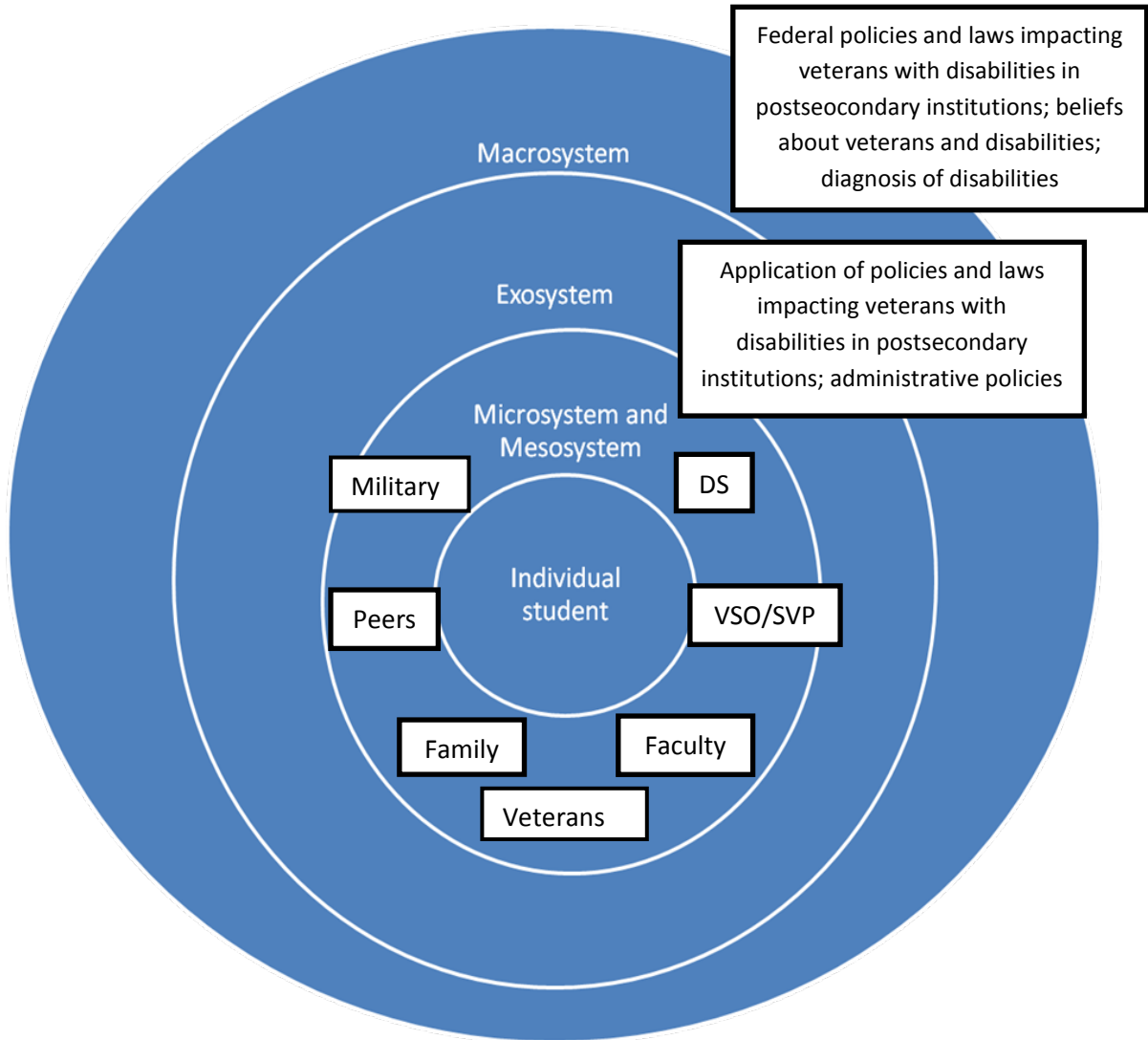
Figure 2: Visual Diagram of Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory

Background Data Regarding Veterans with Disabilities

For more than a decade (2001-present), the United States has been involved in operations that have led to an increased number of veterans; the U.S. has been present in Afghanistan since October 2001, as part of Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF), and in Iraq from March 2003 to 2011 for Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) (U.S. Department of Defense, 2012; Garamone, 2011). To meet these demands, there has been an increased use of the National Guard and reserves in the all-volunteer military (Institute of Medicine, 2010). The troops have also been susceptible to multiple deployments, with about 40 percent of service members being deployed more than once (Institute of Medicine, 2010).

To date, about 2 million U.S. troops have been deployed in Afghanistan and Iraq, who are part of the growing population of veterans (Institute of Medicine, 2010). According to federal law, a 'veteran' is defined as "a person who served in the active military, naval, or air service, and who was discharged or released there from under conditions other than dishonorable" (38 U.S.C.§101). Of the 2 million troops, there have been more than 6500 casualties and more than fifty thousand wounded in action (U.S. Department of Defense, 2012).

Advances in medicine and body armor have led to more service members surviving injuries that would have resulted in death previously (Warden, 2006; Institute of Medicine, 2010). Many veterans are returning with traumatic brain injuries, amputations, burns, post-traumatic stress disorder, and mental health impairments (Tanielian & Jaycox, 2008; Institute of Medicine, 2010). The Pew Research Center

conducted two surveys, one about military veterans and one of the general public. Over 1,800 veterans were surveyed, about 700 of which served in the military after September 11, 2001. About 37 percent of post-9/11 veterans say they believe they have suffered from post-traumatic stress, regardless of whether they were formally diagnosed (Pew, 2011). Veterans who were in combat have the highest prevalence rates of psychological and emotional problems, with around half of them reporting having experienced an emotionally traumatic experience (Pew, 2011). Further, 16 percent of veterans have been seriously physically injured while serving in the military (Pew, 2011).

The Government Accountability Office (GAO) released a report on VA education benefits (2013) to examine the challenges veterans face in postsecondary education and how the VA supports these students. Eleven institutions participated in the study, with each institution having a focus group with between three and 10 participants who were veterans who received VA education benefits. The findings reveal that service-related disabilities pose challenges when pursuing postsecondary education. For example, physical limitations can make it difficult to get to class or sit for extended periods of time. Veterans may also have trouble concentrating or managing stress due to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or traumatic brain injury (TBI), two prevalent types of disabilities in returning veterans.

The Department of Veterans Affairs defines disabilities as "injuries or diseases that occurred or were aggravated during active military service" (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2012). The diagnoses of disabilities are elements of the macrosystem that ultimately determine whether veterans qualify as having a disability. Cultural beliefs

about veterans and the military are also part of the macrosystem that shape the services and experiences of veterans in postsecondary education. Post-traumatic stress disorder and other mental health impairments, and traumatic brain injury are three of the most common types of combat-related disabilities found in veterans. Statistics and information about each are presented in the next three subsections.

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders 5 (DSM-5) defines PTSD as "exposure to actual or threatened death, serious injury, or sexual violence" by 1) directly experiencing the event, 2) witnessing the event in person, 3) learning about a traumatic event occurred to a person who is close with you, or 4) repeated exposure to aversive details of the traumatic event. As a result of the event, at least one of the following symptoms occurred: recurring memories and dreams, dissociative reactions (flashbacks), psychological or physiological distress to cues remind the individual of the event (DSM-5, 2013). Additional criterion includes: persistent avoidance of stimuli associated with the traumatic event, negative alterations in cognitions and mood, alterations in arousal and reactivity, duration lasting longer than 1 month (DSM-5, 2013). Common symptoms of PTSD include the following: negative emotional state, reckless or self-destructive behavior, hypervigilance, irritability, difficulty concentrating, and problems sleeping (DSM-5, 2013). Studies have shown varying estimates of the prevalence of PTSD in veterans, ranging from 14 to 30 percent (National Institute of Mental Health, 2007; Tanielian & Jaycox, 2008; Morgan, 2008).

According to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (2010), PTSD and other neurological impairments are among the 4 most prevalent service-related disabilities. The

usual rate of PTSD for people exposed to war is about 30 percent (National Institute of Mental Health, 2007). An estimated 14% of Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) and Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) veterans experiences PTSD, with approximately 40 thousand cases being diagnosed from 2003-2007 (Tanielian & Jaycox, 2008; Morgan, 2008). PTSD is more common in troops who have multiple deployments because exposure to combat is the primary predictor of PTSD (Church, 2009).

The Center for Military Health Policy Research conducted a telephone survey of almost 2 thousand previously deployed veterans from across the United States (Tanielian & Jaycox 2008). The survey estimated that about 18 percent, or over 300,000 service members, exhibited symptoms of PTSD or depression. The risk of developing PTSD is higher among those who have endured trauma before deployment, such as sexual or physical abuse during childhood. About half of those surveyed who were diagnosed with PTSD or depression sought professional help within the past year (Tanielian & Jaycox 2008). If left untreated, PTSD can have a negative impact on veterans' lives, with many struggling with employment, income, relationships, and aggressive behavior (Stiglitz & Bilmes, 2008). PTSD is classified as mental disorder.

Mental Disorder. According to the DSM-5, "a mental disorder is a syndrome characterized by clinically significant disturbance in an individual's cognition, emotion regulation, or behavior that reflects a dysfunction in the psychological, biological, or developmental processes underlying mental functioning" (p. 20). While no definition can capture all the aspects of mental disorders, they are "usually associated with significant distress or disability in social, occupational, or other important activities" (DSM-5, 2013,

p.20). Mental disorder is an umbrella term that encompasses many disorders common to veterans. In addition to PTSD, veterans are often diagnosed with depression and anxiety, and have an increased risk of substance abuse (Institute of Medicine, 2010). There is a high rate of comorbidity among PTSD and anxiety and substance abuse (Church, 2009). The suicide rate among veterans has increased and surpassed the number of service members killed in combat in 2012 (Tanielian & Jaycox, 2008; Williams, 2012). Veterans with mental disorders are more likely to commit suicide (Institute of Medicine, 2010).

Like PTSD, other mental disorders are associated with repeated deployments; 27 percent of service members deployed more than once are diagnosed with anxiety or acute stress, compared to 12 percent of those deployed once (Institute of Medicine, 2010). There is also a high correlation between combat exposure and depression, though the VA does not consider it a combat related injury (Tanielian & Jaycox, 2008). Depression rates in the military can range from 5 to 37 percent and negatively impact future employment (Institution of Medicine, 2010).

Hoge, McGurk, Thomas, Cox, Engel, and Castro (2008) studied over 300 thousand service members and found about 20 percent of OIF and 11 percent of OEF veterans have mental disorders. The research also revealed that 65 percent of soldiers with mental disorders fear they would be perceived as weak if they pursued treatment. More than half believe seeking treatment would result in both leaders and their fellow service members having less confidence in their abilities and treating them differently. Such perspectives suggest reasons why only 23 to 40 percent of soldiers with mental disorders seeking treatment within a year of being diagnosed.

Other studies also support the notion that there is a stigma for service members seeking treatment for mental disorders. The military has a long-standing "policy of reporting mental health and substance abuse problems to the chain of command," thus creating a disincentive to seeking care (Institute of Medicine, 2010, p. 6). Consequently, there are treatment gaps for mental disorders that can lead to increased problems with families, employment, and education (Tanielian & Jaycox, 2008). Individuals with mental disorders are at a greater risk for attempting suicide and having other psychological problems (Tanielian & Jaycox, 2008). They also engage more frequently in unhealthy behaviors like overeating, having unsafe sex, and smoking, which may contribute to high amounts of physical health problems and mortality (Tanielian & Jaycox, 2008). People with mental disorders are also more likely to miss work, be unproductive, experience problems in relationships, and be homeless (Tanielian & Jaycox, 2008). Such consequences negatively impact both individuals and society at large.

Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI). The DSM-5 defines a traumatic brain injury as "an impact to the head or other mechanisms of rapid movement or displacement of the brain within the skull" with at least one of the following symptoms: loss of consciousness, posttraumatic amnesia, disorientation and confusion, or, in severe cases, neurological signs (DSM-5, 2013, p. 624). TBI can cause a major or mild neurocognitive disorder and the outcomes vary considerably to impact complex attention, executive ability, learning, memory, processing speed, and disturbances in social cognition. In severe TBI, individuals may also have brain contusion, intracranial hemorrhage, or penetrating injury, which can lead to additional neurocognitive deficits (i.e. aphasia,

neglect, and constructional dyspraxia) (DSM-5, 2013). Individuals with a mild or major neurocognitive disorder due to TBI can have the following symptoms: disturbances in emotional function (i.e. anxiety and irritability), personality changes, physical disturbances (i.e. headache and fatigue), and neurological signs (i.e. seizures) (DSM-5, 2013).

Veterans of OEF and OIF are susceptible to blast injuries, motor vehicle accidents, and gunshot wounds that can lead to brain cell death and TBI (Church, 2009; Ostovary & Dapprich, 2011). Several estimates find between 10 and 20 percent of these veterans are diagnosed with TBI, making it the signature wound of these wars (Institute of Medicine, 2010; Tanielian & Jaycox 2008). Other studies report more than 44,000 or one third of veterans have TBI (Corby-Edwards, 2009; Jaffe & Myer, 2009).

TBI is associated with a decline in brain functioning, dementia, attention, and processing speed (Institute of Medicine, 2010; Ostovary & Dapprich, 2011). Those with TBI can also experience changes in personality, apathy or a lack of spontaneity that can lead to adverse social outcomes such as unemployment, depression, aggression, and strained relationships. Some neurocognitive outcomes can improve over time, though psychiatric outcomes become more evident several years after the injury occurred (Institute of Medicine, 2010).

Social Policy Affecting Veterans with Disabilities

The transition model recognizes the importance of contextual factors on an individual's transition. The context includes the political landscape and societal

circumstances that occur during a transition. Such factors can both influence a veteran's decision to attend postsecondary institutions and the types of experiences he or she has as a student.

Federal assistance, policies, and laws pertaining to veterans with disabilities are ecological factors within the macrosystem that indirectly impact their experiences in postsecondary institutions. The particular institutional application of these policies and laws comprise the exosystem. Elements in the exosystem and macrosystem shape the varying postsecondary experiences of veterans with disabilities.

Federal Assistance for Veterans in Postsecondary Education

Post-9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Act of 2008. The Post-9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Act of 2008 (Post-9/11 Government Issued Bill) took effect in August of 2009 (Radford, 2009). The Post-9/11 GI Bill offers more generous financial benefits than other VA education benefit programs and disperses funds to both students and postsecondary institutions (Radford, 2009; Bertoni, 2011). The benefits to students are based on the length of active-duty service; eligibility requires at least 90 days on active duty after September 10, 2001 (Bertoni, 2011). Students are required to have been on active-duty for a total of 36 months to be eligible for the maximum benefits; students with less than 36 months receive a percentage of the maximum based on the length of their active duty service (Bertoni, 2011; Radford, 2009). Based on these stipulations, students generally receive up to 36 months of entitlement under the Post-9/11 GI Bill. Students are eligible for education benefits for up to 15 years from the time they get off active duty (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2012). While 71% of veterans use the

Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits, only 6% exhaust them (Field, 2008). In fiscal year 2011, the VA provided almost education benefits to almost 1 million veterans and beneficiaries (GAO, 2013).

Under the Post-9/11 GI Bill, the tuition goes directly to the university for all in-state students attending a public university. Students who attend private or foreign institutions have their tuition capped at the national maximum rate. Many postsecondary institutions participate in the "Yellow Ribbon Program" that assists students attending a private institution or who are out-of-state students. If an institution participates in the Yellow Ribbon Program, it contributes a specific amount of the additional expenses (not to exceed 50% of the difference) and the VA will match the contribution (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2012). It is common for colleges and universities to call themselves "military-friendly" or "veteran-friendly." This phrase lacks a comprehensive definition and is frequently used as a marketing tool to attract military service members and can be used by schools which have been approved by the Veterans Administration (VA) for using the GI Bill (Dakduk, 2014).

Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment Program. Veterans with disabilities may also receive educational benefits through the VA's Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment (VR&E) program. The majority of veterans in this program seek employment through education. There are several differences between this program and the Post-9/11 GI Bill: the Post-9/11 GI Bill pays tuition up to a certain rate, while the VR&E program pays full tuition, including attending private institutions. Veterans who receive Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits are no longer eligible for receiving VR&E program

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benefits (Bertoni, 2011). It is more difficult for veterans to be found eligible for the

VR&E program than the Yellow Ribbon Program. To qualify for the VR&E program, the

VA must determine that the veteran has at least a 20 percent service-connected disability

and an employment handicap (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2010). An

employment handicap is defined as "an impairment of the individual veteran's ability to

prepare for, obtain, or retain employment consistent with his or her abilities, aptitudes,

and interests" (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2010).

Federal Postsecondary Disability Policy

Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. Section 504 of the Rehabilitation

Act of 1973, now a part of the Workforce Investment Act of 1998 PL 105-220, directs

that no individual with a disability be discriminated against, excluded from, or be denied

the benefits of any program or activity receiving federal funding (Section 504, Sec. 794.a;

Stodden, Jones & Chang, 2002). Postsecondary institutions fall under the programs or

activities specified in Section 504 (Section 504, Sec. 794.b). Since all public and most

private colleges receive federal funds, they must comply with Section 504 (Katsiyannis,

Zhang, Landmark & Reber, 2009).

Under Section 504, postsecondary education programs must provide accessibility

and academic modifications to ensure students with disabilities are not subjected to

discrimination (Section 504, Sec. 104; Katsiyannis et al., 2009). Individuals who qualify

as having a disability cannot be denied admission on the basis of their disability

(Katsiyannis et al., 2009; Stodden et al., 2002). Students with disabilities may be not be

excluded from, discriminated against, or denied the benefits of academic, research, counseling, recreation, or transportation services, among others (Section 504, Sec. 104).

Academic accommodations are necessary to ensure that requirements do not discriminate against students on the basis of disability (Section 504, Sec. 104). Such modifications may include "increasing the length of time allowed for the completion of degree requirements, allowing course substitutions, and providing changes in course delivery" (Katsiyannis et al., 2009, p. 37). Institutions, however, are not required to modify essential academic requirements or provide auxiliary aids if equity is possible without them (Katsiyannis et al., 2009).

The Americans with Disabilities Act and Amendments. The Rehabilitation Act of 1973 provided the basis for the 1990 Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), which addresses the requirements for postsecondary institutions to be accessible to students with disabilities (ADA, 1990; Burke, Friedl & Rigler, 2010). The ADA expanded discrimination protection from discrimination to include all students with disabilities attending postsecondary institutions, even those that do not receive federal funds (American with Disabilities Act, 1990).

The ADA was amended in 2008 and is now the Americans with Disabilities Act Amendments Act (ADAAA) PL 110-325. Up until this point, the definition of disability was outlined in the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 as an individual who "(i) has a physical or mental impairment which substantially limits one or more major life activities, (ii) has a record of such an impairment, or (iii) is regarded as having such an impairment" (Section 504, Section 104). The ADAAA expanded the definition of disability to include a greater

number of individuals than were previously covered under 504 or ADA (Grossman, 2009). For example, a disability now includes any impairment that is episodic or in remission, and major life activities now include bodily functions, such as the immune system and neurological functioning (U.S. Department of Labor, 2008).

The ADAAA also broadened the definition of what constitutes a major life activity to include those such as reading and communicating (ADA, 1990; Burke et al., 2010; Grossman, 2009). Another crucial change is the role "mitigating measures" (i.e. medication, assistive technology, hearing devices, mobility devices, et cetera) play in defining a disability (Grossman, 2009). Under the ADAAA, mitigating measures cannot be considered in determining disability (Burke et al., 2010). This change is important to veterans with combat injuries, such as amputees who have prostheses that are considered a mitigating measure (Grossman, 2009). Prior to the ADAAA, an amputee with a prosthetic limb would not automatically qualify as having a disability, but the new definition of mitigating measures means he or she could meet the criteria.

Institutional Application of Disability Policy and Regulations

Implementing federal assistance program for veterans in postsecondary education. There are variations among how postsecondary institutions serve veterans (Cook & Kim, 2009). Since the enactment of the Post 9/11 GI Bill "there have been reports of aggressive and deceptive targeting of service members, veterans, and their families by some educational institutions" (Executive Order, 2012, p.1). Many colleges and universities recruited veterans without providing then with important information such as veteran graduation rates (Executive Order, 2012). In some cases, veterans with

disabilities were encouraged to enroll, but were not provided with any academic support (Executive Order, 2012). Numerous institutions also encouraged veterans to seek loans rather than benefit from federal programs (Executive Order, 2012).

To address these issues, President Obama issued an Executive Order in April of 2012 directing his Administration "to develop Principles of Excellence to strengthen oversight, enforcement, and accountability within these benefits programs" (Executive Order, 2012, p.1). The Department of Education was one agency decreed to provide guidance to postsecondary institutions receiving funding from Federal veterans educational programs (Executive Order, 2012; U.S. Department of Education, 2012). These Principles of Excellence include the directive for an institution to provide an educational plan for all veterans receiving federals funds (U.S. Department of Education, 2012). The educational plan details how they will fulfill all the necessary requirements for graduation, expected graduation dates, and what transfer credits are awarded, if applicable (U.S. Department of Education, 2012). The Principles of Excellence also call for institutions to designate a person or office as a point of contact to provide veterans with information about academic advising, financial aid counseling, and student support services (U.S. Department of Education, 2012).

Historical context of federal postsecondary disability policy. Section 504 and the ADA only provide general information about postsecondary supports and services for students with disabilities (Stodden et al., 2002). As a result, institutions have an extensive amount of flexibility in implementation, thus causing disparities among institutions (Stodden et al., 2002; Dukes & Shaw, 2004). To receive services at the postsecondary

level, students must self-identify as having a disability by providing appropriate

documentation (Stodden et al., 2002). Institutions typically support students with

disabilities through accommodations based on the type of disability and the minimal

definition of "reasonable," as dictated by federal policy (Stodden et al., 2002). A

reasonable accommodation is interpreted as one that does not: pose a threat to the health

and safety of others; require making a substantial change to the curriculum; present an

undue financial or administrative burden (Jarrow, 1997). These accommodations are

similar to a "menu" of services and are typically limited and based on available funding

at the institution (Stodden et al., 2002; Dukes & Shaw, 2004). While there has been an

increase in the amount of supports available, they are rarely well planned or proven to be

effective (Dukes & Shaw, 2004). An important component in providing valuable services

is to professionally prepare the staff serving students with disabilities (Dukes & Shaw,

2004).

The Association on Higher Education and Disability (AHEAD), the largest

professional organization for postsecondary personnel who work with students with

disabilities, has provided guidance for implementing federal legislation (AHEAD, n.d.).

AHEAD's professional standards offer direction in the following areas: administration,

direct service, consultation/collaboration, institutional awareness, and professional

development (AHEAD, n.d.). The standards emphasize that the institutions develop

program services, procedures, and policies, including what documentation is required to

qualify a student as having a disability (AHEAD, n.d.). There is a great deal of

subjectivity on behalf of the university as it "interprets court/government agency rulings

and interpretations affecting services for students" (AHEAD, n.d., p.1). Service providers

also determine the appropriate individualized accommodations and auxiliary aides for students, as well as provide personal counseling on issues relating to disabilities (AHEAD, n.d.). Disability service professionals assist the institution in developing policies and procedures relating to students with disabilities, provide necessary faculty training, and consult with other departments on campus to best serve students (AHEAD, n.d.). While AHEAD's professional standards set a high benchmark for disability service professionals to enhance their work, they are not mandated by postsecondary institutions (AHEAD, n.d.).

The HEATH Resource Center is another professional organization that also produces and disseminates information on postsecondary education for individuals with disabilities (HEATH, n.d.). HEATH was established in 2000 and is managed by the George Washington University Graduate School of Education and Human Development (HEATH, n.d.). The George Washington University has partnered with The HSC Foundation to further develop HEATH's resources; HEATH is now the official website of the National Youth Transitions Center at The HSC Foundation (HEATH, n.d). HEATH functions as a clearinghouse that provides information in the form of modules, fact sheets, directories, and various resource materials concerning individuals with disabilities in postsecondary education (HEATH, n.d.).

Current supports and resources provided by postsecondary institutions. A recent survey conducted by the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) collected information from postsecondary institutions on students with disabilities in the 2008-09 academic year (Raue & Lewis, 2011). The study examined

enrollment, services and accommodations, documentation of disability, accessible

materials, and Universal Design (Raue & Lewis, 2011). It reported that 79 percent of

institutions distribute materials to encourage students with disabilities to self-identify

(Raue & Lewis, 2011). Of the institutions that enroll students with disabilities, 93 percent

provide additional time on examinations as an accommodation (Raue & Lewis, 2011).

The other prevalent accommodations, in descending order, are as follows: classroom

notetakers (77 percent), assistance with learning strategies/study skills (72 percent),

faculty notes on assignments (72 percent), alternative examination formats (71 percent),

and adaptive technology (70 percent) (Raue & Lewis, 2011).

Another study by the National Center for the Study of Postsecondary Educational

Supports (NCSPES) at the University of Hawaii at Manoa (2000) yielded similar findings

(Stodden, Whelley, Chang, & Harding, 2001). More than 650 Disability Support Services

(DSS) coordinators from across the U.S. completed a survey about the educational

supports and accommodations offered at their institutions (Stodden et al., 2001). Like the

NCES study, testing accommodations were the most frequently used educational support,

with 84 percent of institutions offering them more than 75 percent of the time (Stodden et

al., 2001). Other common supports included personal counseling (69 percent), advocacy

(68 percent) and career/vocational assessment and counseling (61 percent) (Stodden et

al., 2001). The widespread supports documented in the NCES and NCEPES studies are

also part of AHEAD's 50 plus professional standards (AHEAD, n.d.; Raue & Lewis,

2011).

Veterans in Postsecondary Education

While there is a dearth of research pertaining to veterans with disabilities receiving postsecondary education, several studies address veterans in general. This research contains the transition model's 4 S System that influence the ability of an individual to cope with a transition: situation, self, support, and strategies. This body of literature also includes many elements of the microsystem that can directly influence veterans including peers, faculty, Disability Support Services (DSS), Veterans Program Office (VPO), and Students Veterans Program (SVP). The interaction among these elements is defined by the mesosystem and is also discussed.

Characteristics and experiences of veterans attending postsecondary institutions. According to the Department of Veterans Affairs, there were approximately 23 million veterans living in the United States in 2008. About 3 percent of them (more than 650,000) were enrolled in college during the 2007-2008 school year, making up 4 percent of all undergraduates (Radford, 2009). The U.S. Department of Education published a report in 2011 that drew upon two nationally representative studies of postsecondary students to explore the characteristics of veterans (Radford, 2011). Both studies, the 2007-2008 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS:08) and the 2004/09 Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study (BPS:04/09), were conducted prior to the enactment of the new GI Bill. Since the new GI Bill's benefits led to an increase in the number of veterans attending postsecondary institutions, it can be assumed that the number of student veterans have increased. These studies do not exclusively look at veterans, but rather military students, 75 percent of which are veterans

(Radford, 2009). Military students included veterans as well as those who are on active duty and in the reserves.

Racial and ethnic demographics are similar for military and non-military undergraduates. About 60 percent of military students are white, 18 percent black, 13 percent Hispanic, 3 percent Asian, and 6 percent are another race. Studies show 73 percent of military undergraduates are men, though the number of females in the military continues to increase (Radford, 2009; 2011). Military students are more likely to be older and have family obligations than traditional students; about half are married and are commonly in their mid to late twenties or over the age of 40 (Radford 2009; 2011).

Military and nonmilitary undergraduates share the three most common reasons for selecting their postsecondary institution: location, affordability, and program (Radford, 2011). The majority of military undergraduates favored public institutions, with 43 percent attending a public 2-year college and 21 percent attending a 4-year; only 13 percent a 4-year private, non-profit school (Radford, 2011). Military undergraduates frequently have more responsibilities than traditional students, and therefore about 60 percent are part-time students (Radford, 2009). Such obligations influence military students academically, who are more likely to enroll in distance and online classes (Radford, 2011). A higher percentage of military undergraduates major in the computer sciences and engineering than non-traditional students; they are also less likely to study education or health care (Radford, 2011). The typical path for veterans who have been enlisted in the military is to attend a community college, an online for-profit or regional public or private university. Service members who are enlisted in the military are only

required to have a high school diploma. There are very few veterans attending highly selective colleges and many of these institutions are creating programs to recruit veterans (Sander, 2012).

Other studies have examined the impact military culture has on a service member's mental state; these findings can also effect the experiences of veterans attending postsecondary institutions. A service member's self-esteeanm is usually associated with their unit and the military's reputation and tradition (Church, 2009). Service members are trained to keep their work and personal life separate, and to keep up the appearance of stoicism at home (Hall, 2011). To help maintain this persona, many soldiers feel the need to keep their feelings and fears to themselves, which can perpetuate a reluctance to seek assistance (Hall, 2011). Consequently, veterans in postsecondary education can be pushed beyond their limits both personally and academically (Hall, 2011).

Postsecondary Supports for Veterans. It is standard practice for all veterans to enroll with the Veterans Service Office (VSO) upon entering postsecondary institutions (Burnett & Segoria, 2009). The services offered at the VSO vary among institutions and can include financial, counseling, academic, and social support (Burnett & Segoria, 2009; GAO, 2013). To support veterans with disabilities, the VSO should have a strong relationship with Disability Services and refer students to that office (Burnett & Segoria, 2009).

Cook & Kim (2009) conducted the first survey to assess the current state of programs and services for veterans on 723 campuses across the United States (Cook &

Kim, 2009). The study found that public 4-year institutions were more than twice as likely as private 4-year institutions to have programs specifically designed for veterans. There was "great diversity in how institutions serve veterans, the variety of services and programs offered, and where services/programs are housed within the administrative infrastructure" (Cook & Kim, 2009, p. VIII). Approximately 48 percent of the universities offer academic advising in addition to other services. About 70 percent of public and 40 percent of private 4-year institutions offer counseling services to assist veterans with issues such as PTSD. Few institutions have established programs specifically for veterans with disabilities and only 33 percent of public and 23 percent of private institutions have staff trained to assist veterans with physical injuries and TBI.

Universities with a large population of veterans are more likely to offer programs than those with a smaller amount of student veterans (Cook & Kim, 2009). Of the institutions that offer such programs, 49 percent have an office dedicated to assisting veterans (Cook & Kim, 2009). These colleges are more likely to employ strategies to attract and recruit veterans, increase and train the number of staff who serve veterans, and increase counseling services (Cook & Kim, 2009).

Veterans need to connect with others who share their experiences and consider participation in veterans' organizations a high priority to ease the transition to postsecondary institutions (Cook & Kim, 2009). Nevertheless, only 32 percent of institutions that provide services for veterans also have organizations and clubs devoted to them (Cook & Kim, 2009). Student Veterans Program (SVP) offices are instrumental

in supporting veterans and 75 percent of campuses with a SVP office increased numerous programs since September 11, 2001 (Cook & Kim, 2009).

The GAO report (2013) on VA education benefits also addressed the services veterans received on campus. Findings show that among the eleven institutions that participated in the study, most are building their own on-campus support services and resources for veterans without guidance and support from the VA. Examples of support services for veterans include: veterans' office, orientation program, veteran specific courses, academic and career counseling, and on-campus counselors trained to work with veterans.

In 2013, the U.S. Department of Education and the Institute of Education Sciences' (IES) National Center for Education Statistics conducted the first nationally representative survey on the prevalence and characteristics of services and support programs for military service members in postsecondary school (Queen & Lewis, 2014). Participants including military service members, veterans, and dependents who attended both 2-year and 4-year degree granting postsecondary institutions. Findings showed the percentage of institutions that provide various supports specifically for military service members and veterans: academic advising (27 percent), career planning/services (24 percent), mental health counseling (22 percent), and academic support/tutoring (17 percent). Additionally, fourteen percent of the institutions in this study reported having a formal mentoring/advising program with military service members and faculty. This research also examined the transition supports that postsecondary institutions offered to military service members. Twenty-one percent of these schools offered custom

orientation programs for military service members and seventy-six percent awarded some academic credit for military training. These supports can serve to ease the transition to postsecondary school for veterans and service members.

A recent dissertation studied the essential practices of student veteran programs (SVP) at 2 and 4-year public and private postsecondary institutions (Miller, 2011). The purpose of the study was to address the lack of agreed-upon essential practices in serving veterans in higher education. An expert panel of 17 directors of student veteran programs (SVP) ranked 93 different supports for veterans with and without disabilities. The panel identified 13 essential practices to working with veterans with and without disabilities. They also reached a consensus of 6 unique practices to working with veterans with disabilities: 1) ensuring physical access to facilities, 2) assisting veterans in making contacting with Disability Support Services (DSS), 3) training faculty on veterans' issues, 4) providing career service support, 5) assisting in transferring credits, and 6) assessing each veteran's educational goals. While Miller's research offers the perspective of SVP directors, it does not include the veterans' voices.

Postsecondary Supports for Veterans with Disabilities. Veterans with disabilities may require additional services and supports during their enrollment at a postsecondary institution to meet their unique needs. Nevertheless, veterans with disabilities are frequently not willing to seek out Disability Support Services (DSS) for several reasons (Madaus, 2009). Veterans with combat related disabilities do not necessarily have a history of receiving disability support during secondary school and therefore may not be aware of what DSS entails. Many veterans associate the word

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"disabled" with weakness and inadequacy and do not want to associate themselves as such (Burnett & Segoria, 2009). Non-disclosure of disabilities is a widespread issue because of stigmatism from the cultural norms carried over from military experiences (Church, 2008; Shackelford, 2009). In addition, veterans are susceptible to psychological disabilities that are yet to be understood (Shackelford, 2009). Once a veteran does have a documented disability, obtaining copies from the VA is often a daunting and challenging task, in part because of poor management in the VA (Shackelford, 2009).

The organization AHEAD (2009) conducted a study to learn the role Disability Support Services (DSS) played in providing services to veterans with disabilities and the effective practices (Vance & Miller, 2009). The DSS coordinators from 237 colleges completed an online survey; 78 percent of the respondents were from public colleges, 21 percent from private, and 1 percent were from other types of institutions. The DSS coordinators reported that 34 percent of male veterans and 11 percent of female veterans with disabilities had psychological disabilities, making it the most prevalent type of disability among this group. Burns and mobility issues impacted about 25 percent of male and 5 percent of female veterans, and 16 percent of all veterans registered with DSS had learning disabilities. The study did not indicate whether these disabilities resulted from military service. See Table 2 below on reported disabilities of student veterans (Vance & Miller, 2009).

Table 2

Reported Disabilities of Student Veterans (Vance & Miller, 2009)

	Psychological Disabilities	Burns and Mobility Issues	Learning Disabilities
Male Veterans with Disabilities	34%	25%	9%
Female Veterans with Disabilities	11%	5%	7%
All Veterans with Disabilities	45%	30%	16%

N= 1,202

Despite the increasing numbers of veterans with disabilities in postsecondary education, only one third of DSS coordinators felt prepared to serve them (Vance & Miller, 2009). Respondents were primarily concerned with inadequate funding and the lack of faculty and staff training to serve veterans with disabilities. DSS provides a variety of academic services to support veterans with disabilities, with about 21 percent of these students requiring curricular adjustments, such as life credits and veterans-only classes, and 17 percent requiring academic adjustments, such as priority registration and reduced course loads. Other customary curricular supports are online and evening courses, with about 22 of veterans with disabilities utilizing them through DSS. Survey respondents reported that it was important for an institution to appoint a person to assist veterans' transition to the classroom and to create a veteran-friendly environment. This priority should include effective referrals from DSS, facilitating connections to other student veterans, ensuring smooth transitions, and coordinating services.

The Postsecondary Experience of Veterans with Disabilities

The postsecondary experience of veterans with disabilities includes transition, academic, and social issues. Schlossberg's model specifically addresses transition and social aspects of the veterans' experiences. As previously stated, these experiences are shaped by the 4 S system and the following elements in the microsystem: peers, faculty, Disability Support Services (DSS), Veterans Program Office (VPO), and Student Veterans Programs (SVP). The mesosystem explains how the relationships among these factors shape the veterans' experiences.

Transition to civilian life. The challenges veterans face when they transition back to civilian life vary from person to person. Struggles may surface immediately upon return or appear down the line (IAVA, 2011). Military service members who have been deployed more than once face a greater of risk of experiencing problems transitioning back to civilian life (NVTSI, 2013).

Forty-four percent of veterans who served after 9/11 say their re-entry into civilian life was somewhat or very difficult. The majority of the veterans who say they had an easy time transitioning did not suffer from PTSD (82 percent) and they did not experience flashbacks (72 percent). Veterans who have experienced a traumatic event, are seriously injured, served in combat, or knew someone killed or injured are at a greater risk of having a more difficult transition to civilian life. Conversely, veterans who are college graduates understood their missions, served as officers, or are religious are more likely to have an easier time adjusting (Pew, 2011).

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It is common for veterans to have difficulty letting go of their combat experiences. Military service members are flooded with adrenaline during war and frequently attempt to recapture the feeling of being "amped-up." The result can be untargeted aggression in the form of unsafe driving, engaging in fights, and lashing out at those around them. Many veterans struggle to turn off their fighting instinct when they return home (IAVA, 2011).

A major challenge some veterans face when returning home is finding employment, in part because not all jobs in the military are readily found in civilian life (NVTSI, 2013). The military offers a shared sense of purpose and camaraderie with peers that is difficult to replicate in most employment settings. Consequently, many veterans find their new work meaningless and miss being deployed. They can also feel more connected to their fellow soldiers than their own families. All of these changes can lead to frustration, depression, and anger (IAVA, 2011).

Transition to postsecondary education. The transition from the military to postsecondary education poses unique challenges that impact student veterans. Transition supports vary drastically in quality and effectiveness among the branches of the military (Ackerman et al., 2009). The military's Transition Assistance Program, which is run by the U.S. Department of Defense in conjunction with the U.S. Department of Education and other government agencies, is criticized for providing inadequate information about college options (Sander, 2012).

The transition experience of veterans also varies greatly among postsecondary institutions. A study conducted by DiRamio, Ackerman, and Mitchell (2009) explored the

challenges veterans face during college and the types of support services that facilitate success. The participants included 25 veterans who were enrolled in three research universities throughout the United States, six of who were female and 19 who were male. While there is a lack of research on the experience of veterans with disabilities in postsecondary institutions this study included three students who identified themselves as having disabilities. DiRamio et al. used interviewing to encourage student veterans to tell their unique stories. The study found that veterans view the transition differentially, mostly due to the variability in the quality of programs. Some students enrolled in postsecondary education immediately after returning from active duty, without taking time to adjust to civilian life. It was common for veterans to experience grief during this transition period and several noted that a waiting period would have been helpful. Additional findings from this study are presented in subsequent sections.

Numerous students in the military are deployed when they are enrolled at a postsecondary institution, which poses additional challenges relating to transition. In a 2013 study, Osborne conducted two focus groups and 14 interviews with services members attending a four year university to examine transitional experiences. The study found that veterans found it difficult to ask for assistance from faculty after they came from a military environment that expected self-sufficiency and resourcefulness. Despite all the participants being at the same university, there was a significant variation in level of support they received during their transition. The veterans also noted that they felt separated from the larger study body because of their age and work-life commitments.

Zinger and Cohen (2010) interviewed 10 veterans attending community college about their overall adjustment post-deployment from their transition from the military to college. Veterans in this study were frequently coping with PTSD, depression, and physical injury. They were also challenged by the lack of structure in civilian life and had problems with personal relationships and social functioning. Upon entering community college, several participants discussed feeling overwhelmed as a student and had difficulty concentrating on their studies. Consequently, some of the veterans related that they had to drop classes from the time when they first enrolled. Many also felt isolated, vastly different from others on campus, and had trouble identifying with other students. Unfortunately, most of the participants reported that had to self-navigate the enrollment process, which exacerbated their stress. These participants would have appreciated more guidance and help from their universities. One beneficial resource that several of the veterans noted was the Veterans Club on campus that provided emotional support, comradery, and referral information.

In a dissertation by Livingston (2009), 15 veterans were interviewed about their academic and social experiences of reenrolling in college after being deployed for 3-48 months. Veterans who were enrolled at the same university tend to find the transition easier than those who are entering a new institution. Most veterans had little trouble academically, though they were susceptible to forgetting material and information relating to their coursework. Accordingly, they may experience temporary frustration and need some initial support to assist them in accessing key concepts they may have forgotten during deployment. Student veterans also undergo social changes upon returning from deployment, since many of their friends have graduated. Livingston found

that a positive connection with student advisors might facilitate a successful transition. Other studies have also found that it is beneficial for students who are deployed to be able to complete courses online and maintain a connection with their campus (Ackerman et al., 2009; Mangan & Wright, 2009).

Academic. Military service greatly impacts veterans' academic performance in postsecondary institutions as they adjust to collegiate life's lack of structure and lack of a clear chain of command (Mangan & Wright, 2009). Student veterans need to learn how to structure their own schedule, how to act autonomously, and how to challenge authority, all of which are adverse to military preparation (Bauman, 2009). Nevertheless, many aspects of military life also contribute to veterans' academic success in postsecondary institutions, since veterans are more mature and focused because of their experiences (Livingston, 2009). Consequently, veterans have an increased emphasis on academics that frequently translates into high academic performance (Livingston, 2009).

Initially, many veterans are overwhelmed by their transition into civilian life and have a difficult time concentrating on their coursework (Zinger & Cohen, 2010). Combat experiences in particular can result in disturbing memories and trouble attending to academic content (Elliot et al., 2011). Academic studies also present frequent challenges since many student veterans are not prepared for college, with many reporting poor study habits, lack of focus, and a decrease in attention span and patience (Di Ramio et al., 2008; Ackerman et al., 2009).

Ness and Vroman (2014) studied the effects of traumatic brain injury (TBI) or posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) on self-regulated learning and academic

achievement for military service members enrolled in postsecondary education. Over 190 students from eight regionally diverse universities across the United States disclosed information about their self-regulation strategies including effort, time/environment regulation, academic self-efficacy, and grade point average (GPA). The results revealed no effect of TBI or PTSD on GPA, effort regulation, or time/environment regulation strategies. However, these participants reported lower academic self-efficacy that was found to be the strongest predictor of GPA among those in this study.

Veterans with disabilities may experience pain and other symptoms that lead to unpredictable attendance, or may take medication that can impair academic performance (Church, 2009). They may also have issues with physically accessing the campus and attending class for an extended period of time (Mangan & Wright, 2009). Despite these challenges, student veterans are often reluctant to seek academic support from campus resources and instead turn to fellow veterans, particularly those who have knowledge of their area of study (Livingston, 2009).

Student veterans do not require special status or unusual accommodations, nor do they feel comfortable being call upon during class based on their military background (DiRamio et al., 2008; Ackerman et al., 2009; Livingston, 2009). Instead, veterans would like faculty to appreciate their life circumstances and endeavor to understand them as a population (DiRamio et al., 2008; Ackerman et al., 2009). Veterans often describe their relationships with professors as ambivalent, though faculty members are commonly impressed by veterans' maturity, focus, and discipline (DiRamio et al., 2008; Ackerman et al., 2009; Livingston, 2009).

Social. The postsecondary educational system lacks a transparent chain of command, making adjustment after military service difficult (Lighthall, 2012). Solitude is rare in the armed forces and veterans often feel vulnerable and anxious when they enter civilian life (Lighthall, 2012). This transition can also bring a loss of friendships, purpose, identity, structure, and income, further exacerbating social relations (Lighthall, 2012). Consequently, veterans can find it difficult to reconnect with family and friends when returning from combat (Bauman, 2009; Zinger & Cohen, 2010).

Student veterans tend to downplay or conceal their veteran status from the campus community to help them assimilate (Lighthall, 2012; Livingston, 2009). Veterans' socialization on campus is best explained as "blending in" by being a neutral presence (DiRamio et al., 2008). Student veterans usually have difficulty identifying with their peers who are younger and less mature (Zinger & Cohen, 2010; DiRamio et al., 2008; Livingston, 2009). Veterans have described their civilian peers as emotionally weak, self-absorbed, having a tendency to make crises out of trivial matters (Lighthall, 2012). In addition, peers are depicted as being less respectful of authority, ignorant to military service duties, and critical of the wars (American Council on Education, 2008). Veterans struggle to deal with public discontent towards the war and military, which leads them to be guarded towards civilians (Zinger & Cohen, 2010). Subsequently, student veterans feel other students and faculty cannot relate to them and they feel alienated and lonely (Zinger & Cohen, 2010; Lighthall, 2012).

A study by Elliott, Gonzalez, and Larsen (2011) examined causes of alienation on campus among student veterans through a questionnaire administered to 104 veterans

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attending a public university. More than half of the veterans reported feeling that they do not fit in on campus, with the primary predictor of alienation being exposure to combat. Many veterans described offensive classroom experiences when professors or peers denounced the military, which led veterans to feel distressed and disengage from the university.

Student veterans have a strong desire to connect with other veterans for several reasons (DiRamio et al., 2008; Ackerman et al., 2009). As Elliott et al. (2011) reports, it is paramount for student veterans to be around people who do not make judgments about their military service (Mangan & Wright, 2009). Combat veterans frequently miss the intense bonds they had with their fellow soldiers and being around people with a shared mindset, and may consider re-entering the military for the camaraderie (Lighthall, 2012; DiRamio et al., 2008; Ackerman et al., 2009). Because the military is a familiar setting, veterans often seek each other formally, through veterans' organizations, and informally, through chance meetings on campus (Livingston, 2009).

The experiences of veterans with disabilities in postsecondary education are varied and complex. Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory serves as a framework for analyzing and understanding this research. A heightened awareness of this pertinent population will guide postsecondary institutions in supporting them.

Summary

There is a twofold gap in the literature that addresses the postsecondary experiences of veterans with disabilities. First, there is a gap in the literature that fails to

explore the experiences of veterans with disabilities. While several studies include interviews and surveys of student veterans, none specifically focus on veterans with disabilities so the findings elucidate the experiences of veterans in general (DiRamio et al., 2008; Elliott, Gonzalez & Larsen, 2011; Livingston, 2009; Zinger & Cohen, 2010). Second, though studies have addressed the postsecondary services provided to veterans from the perspective of the institution, there is a gap in the literature on how student veterans perceive these services (Cook & Kim, 2009; Miller, 2011; Vance & Miller, 2009). By giving veterans with disabilities a voice through examining their experiences in postsecondary education, supportive practices for this group can be developed to further their success.

Chapter III

Methodology

Overview of Methodology and Epistemological Stance

In this study, the perspectives of veterans with disabilities during their enrollment at a four-year university were described using a qualitative approach. A qualitative inquiry with an emphasis on constructivism was utilized in order to begin to create a knowledge base that takes into account veteran perspectives. Qualitative methodology allowed for deeper and broader understanding of veteran perspectives.

According to Merriam (2009), "a central characteristic of qualitative research is that individuals construct reality in interaction with their social worlds" (Merriam, p. 22). This study was informed by a constructivist perspective to help describe, understand, and interpret the postsecondary experiences of veterans with disabilities. Constructivism is based on the belief that there are multiple realities and therefore "there is no true or valid interpretation" (Crotty, 1998, p. 47; Merriam, 2009). Qualitative research is utilized to form a "complex, detailed understanding of the issue" (Creswell, 2007, p. 41). Qualitative methodology was chosen for this study in order to extract rich and extensive data to better inform practices of supporting veterans with disabilities in postsecondary education, and to contribute to research surrounding this growing student population,.

When utilizing a constructivist paradigm, it is the role of the researcher to interpret "the meanings others have about the world" (Creswell, 2007, p. 21). Through qualitative interviews, the postsecondary experiences of veterans with disabilities are

revealed; this data was analyzed through the lenses of Schlossberg's transition model and Bronfenbrenner's ecological model described in Chapter Two.

Schlossberg's transition model is based on a qualitative methodology because it is designed to promote an understanding of individuals' experiences with transitions through conversing (Anderson et al., 2012). The model dissects a transition into essential elements that capture both breadth and depth to yield a rich perspective. The 4 S System serves to expand the view of the transition beyond the individual. Bronfenbrenner's ecological model supports this method due to the interactionist nature of the model's assumptions. According to the theory, individuals are interdependent and cannot be considered apart from others in the environment. The ecosystem is comprised of the individual in interaction with his or her environment and is based on the premise that a change in any part of the system will also affect the system as a whole (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). The postsecondary experiences of veterans with disabilities extend beyond the individual and are best captured by exploring the complexity of the different environments as described by Bronfenbrenner and Schlossberg's 4 S System. Qualitative research, the transition model, and the ecological model are all ideal for analyzing, describing, and explaining events or phenomena (Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 2009). Concurrently these served to generate rich data that highlights the complexity of the perspectives of veterans with disabilities.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study was to explore and describe the perspective of veterans with disabilities who were currently enrolled in, or have graduated within 5 years from, a

four-year postsecondary institution. The goal of this study was to elucidate the university experiences of veterans with disabilities in order to improve postsecondary supports and provide recommendations for other institutions, in addition to contributing to the research literature.

Research Questions

The major research question guiding this study is listed below, followed by four subquestions.

What were the experiences of veterans with disabilities during their enrollment at a four-year university?

1. How did veterans with disabilities describe their postsecondary educational experiences?

2. How did veterans describe their situation and self?

3. What were the challenges veterans with disabilities experience in pursuing postsecondary education?

4. What were the supports veterans with disabilities utilize in postsecondary educational settings?

Research Design: Qualitative Interviews

An interview is referred to as "a conversation with a purpose" that is employed to access specific data (Merriam, 2009, p.88). This study utilized qualitative semi-structured interviews to answers the research questions; formal questions drove the interview and

informal questions were used as probes during the interview. The use of a semi-structured interview allowed the researcher to tailor the questions and follow-up probes based on the nuances revealed during the interview process. Rubin and Rubin (2005) equate qualitative interviews with night goggles by "permitting us to see that which is not ordinarily on view and examine that which is looked at but seldom seen" (p. vii). The interview questions were guided by Schlossberg's 4 S System: situation, self, support, and strategies. The researcher strived to complete 10-12 interviews since data saturation is regularly obtained within 10 individual interviews in qualitative research (Kerr, Nixon & Wild, 2010).

Study Sample

The study population from which the sample was drawn consisted of veterans with disabilities who were currently, or were recently graduated as far as 5 years ago (2008 -2013), full- or part-time, in a four-year postsecondary education undergraduate program. The researcher chose to include veterans who had recently graduated to expand the pool of potential participants. The researcher's sampling goal strived for an ethnically diverse sample of participants that includes both male and female veterans who had a variety of disabilities. The demographic characteristics of the study population are included in the report of the findings.

This study utilized purposeful selection to identify ten veterans with disabilities who were currently enrolled, or recently graduated from a four-year postsecondary program. Purposeful sampling refers to "particular settings, persons, or activities [that] are selected deliberately in order to provide information that can't be gotten as well from

other choices" (Maxwell, 2005, p. 88). The researcher set up plans for participants to be referred to the researcher by the George Washington University's Disability Services Coordinator, Student Veterans' Organization president, and a faculty counselor for veterans. The purpose was for the researcher not to directly contact potential respondents and rather work with these three referral sources to mitigate the risk of interviewing veterans who may undergo distress from discussing their experiences.

The researcher provided the Disability Support Services (DSS) coordinator, Student Veterans Organization president, and faculty counselor for veterans with a description of the study to distribute to veterans with disabilities. The study description that was distributed to veterans can be found in Appendix B: Letter to Participants. Selection criteria for the participants was established as part of purposeful sampling (Merriam, 2009). Hence, to participate in the study, the student must have been: a) a current university student or have graduated within the past five years, b) a veteran of the United States military, and c) disclosed having a disability as defined by the Veterans Administration or Disability Support Services (DSS).

The researcher worked with these referral sources for three months and no veterans volunteered for the study. Therefore, the researcher amended the study through the university Institutional Research Board (IRB) with the goal of attracting participants. The study was modified to use a convenience sample that was obtained through a referral source outside of the Disability Services Coordinator, Student Veterans Organization president, and faculty counselor for veterans. The researcher secured a new referral

source, Janet[1], has worked at the Department of Defense for more than 10 years and is currently a Program Manager with the U.S. Army Intelligence and Security Command.

The referral source circulated the study information sheet via email to veterans and informed potential participants to contact the researcher directly. This measure guaranteed that the veterans who were interested in participating remained confidential and that there was no need for them to disclose their disabilities to the referral source. Veterans who wanted more information about the study contacted the researcher via phone or email. The researcher then discussed the terms of the study with them and scheduled a time for the veterans to give their consent and complete the interview. Every veteran who contacted the researcher chose to complete the interview at a later time via phone or in person.

Snowball sampling was then used to recruit additional participants from four-year accredited universities. Snowball sampling is the most common form of purposeful sampling and involves the researcher asking each participant who qualifies for the study to refer him or her to other participants (Merriam, 2009). After the interview, each participant could chose to share information about the study with other veterans who may be interested. Again, veterans who were interested contacted the researcher directly via phone or email to ensure confidentiality. Table 3 below outlines participants' referral sources and interview methods.

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[1] Pseudonyms have been used in this study to protect the identities of the participants.

Table 3

Participants' Referral Sources and Interview Methods

Name	Referral Source	Interview Method
Hannah	Megan	Phone
Christopher	Jason	Phone
Megan	Lucy	Phone
Rick	Gina	Phone
Madison	Lucy	Phone
Jason	Janet	Person
Lucy	Janet	Phone
Sam	Lucy	Phone
Gina	Janet	Phone
Ellen	Megan	Phone

Calendar of Events

Table 4 indicates the timetable for study recruitment, selection, data collection, transcription, and analysis.

Table 4

Timeline of Events

IRB Approval	Study Recruitment & Selection	Data Collection	Transcription	Analysis and Study Completion
August 2013	August 2013-December 2013	December 2013-March 2014	March 2014-May 2014	June 2014 - December 2014

Description of Interview Protocol

The protocol consisted of five sections, which had a total of thirty-three questions, and can be found in Appendix A: Interview Protocol. The first section contained general demographic background information, such as age and living situation. Next, the students were asked to discuss their situation at the university and responded to questions about college credits and reasons for selecting their institutions. The interview protocol then addressed the students' transition to postsecondary education, academic, and social experiences at the university. Finally, the participants were asked about plans following graduation. The interview concluded with an opportunity for the student to share other information, ask questions, and offer recommendations.

Data Collection Procedures and Administration of the Interview Protocol

The interviews were conducted privately in-person or on the telephone, over a secure line. The majority of the interviews were conducted over the phone to accommodate the participants' schedules and allow those who lived in other regions of

the country to participate (See Table 3). All 10 interviews were recorded both digitally and using a tape recorder. They each lasted approximately one hour.

Pretesting

According to Maxwell (2005), the researcher should pilot the interview with someone who meets the criteria for participation in the study. Therefore, a pilot interview was conducted with a veteran with a disability who had recently graduated from a four-year postsecondary institution to see if the questions are appropriate; modifications were made as necessary, thus increasing the validity of the study. All modifications were noted for final reporting. In addition, the referral sources also reviewed the protocol and offer comments and suggestions; the protocol was modified accordingly.

Credibility

Validation in qualitative research is "the correctness or credibility of a description, conclusion, explanation, interpretation, or other sort of account" (Maxwell, 2005, p. 106). In this study, the researcher employed several strategies to increase the validity of this study. First, the researcher addressed the issue of researcher bias by writing analytic memos throughout the study. These memos were written during and after data collection and included the process of collecting data, emerging patterns, summaries of findings, reflections and comments (Creswell, 2007). Memo writing enabled the researcher to monitor and reflect on personal biases and presence in the study that may impact the results. Second, the researcher solicited peer reviews to both reduce researcher bias and verify interpretation of the findings. In addition to committee members, another

special education colleague and someone who works with veterans on campus read the analysis to facilitate reflection and alterations to increase the study's credibility. Third, the researcher sought feedback from the participants after the interviews were transcribed. The researcher sent each participant an electronic copy of his or her interview transcript and solicited feedback. Participants were given the opportunity to confirm, modify or add information to increase the validity of the study, although no participants requested for any changes to be made.

Data Analysis

As mentioned earlier, the interviews were recorded using both a digital and traditional tape recorder; the audio was then used for transcription. The researcher use analytic memos throughout the process to assist in the critical analysis of data. After the interviews were transcribed, the researcher read them several times to try to gain a complete understanding of them as a whole. The researcher wrote notes in the margins to support this process (Creswell, 2007).

The researcher then interpreted the data through coding (Creswell, 2007). The purpose of coding is to notice the relevant phenomena, collect samples of them, and analyze them for similarities, differences, and patterns (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). While the researcher allowed independent themes to emerge through this process, Schlossberg's 4 S System was also employed to organize, analyze, and report the findings. The researcher coded the data according to the situation, self, support, and strategies of veterans with disabilities during their enrollment at a postsecondary institution. The findings were guided by the research question: *"what were the experiences of veterans*

with disabilities during their enrollment at a four-year university?" Table 5 depicts how each of the three subquestions were answered through the interview protocol.

Table 5

How Interview Subquestions Were Answered Through the Interview Protocol

Research Question	Interview Protocol Sections Addressing Research Question
1. How did veterans with disabilities describe their postsecondary educational experiences?	Section I. Background at the University Section II. University Experience Section IV. General Background
2. How did veterans describe their situation and self?	Section I. Background at the University Section IV. General Background
3. What were the challenges veterans with disabilities experience in pursuing postsecondary education?	Section I. Background at the University Section II. University Experience
4. What were the supports veterans with disabilities utilize in postsecondary educational settings?	Section I. Background at the University Section II. University Experience Section III. Graduation (Current Student) Section III. Graduation (Former Student)

Ethical Issues

The researcher gave the referral sources a study information sheet to disseminate to the students (found in Appendix B: Letter to Participants). If the veterans were interested in participating in the study, they contacted the researcher directly via

telephone or email, or completed a form that gives the researcher permission to contact

them and return it to the referral source. The researcher then reached out to those veterans

who express interest by their indicated preferred method of contact. This study was

entirely voluntary and participants could withdraw at any time. If any participant

experienced distress during the interview, the researcher would have stopped and provide

an appropriate referral to a counselor who had agreed to serve in an on-call role during

the study period. The risk of distress is expected to be minimized because of the use of

referral sources who served to screen candidates. No information was asked about the

veteran's military experiences of any information outside of what is contained within the

interview protocol.

The data was kept confidential (including the identity of participants) to insure

privacy. All identifying information was kept confidential and separate from the data;

pseudonyms were used in the analysis and reporting. The researcher exercised extreme

caution in handling the data files to ensure confidentiality, such as storing it in password-

protected digital folders. The computer used was also password protected. The data was

backed up on a portable computer storage device that was used exclusively for this study.

The storage device was password protected and stored in the researcher's private home

safe. All data was deleted upon completion of the study. The data remained anonymous

through utilizing pseudonyms and removing any identifiable information.

All students who volunteered to participate were asked to sign a consent form, or

provide verbal consent, prior to beginning the study. Each participant received a $50 Visa

gift card as a token of appreciation for their time and for sharing their experiences, as

approved by IRB. This information is provided on the Informed Consent document in

Appendix C.

Chapter IV

Findings

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to examine the experiences of veterans with disabilities who were currently enrolled in, or had graduated within 5 years from, a four-year postsecondary institution. The goal of this study was to provide recommendations that would improve supports and services to ensure the academic success of veterans with disabilities. Data analysis showed that participants experienced transitional, academic, and social challenges that they addressed in various ways. This section provides an overview of each of these areas and the supports the veterans utilized in response to the challenges, including narrative of the participant interviews and analyses.

Demographic Data

A total of ten veterans were interviewed for this study, four males and six females. Nine of the veterans were between 27 and 34 years of age. While six of the veterans were based in the DC metro area, the other regions of the country included California, Texas, Tennessee, and Illinois. Eight of the veterans were married and seven of them had children. This sample of veterans included a wide variety of professions, including three stay at home moms.

The veterans represented four of the five branches of the United States military: Army, Navy, Marines, and Air Force (U.S. Department of Defense, 2014). Their time served in the military ranged from five to 23 years, with the average being 9 years. Seven of the ten veterans were deployed in combat zones.

The term "disability" in this study was defined by the veterans' disclosure and their Veterans Administration (VA) rating. Nine veterans were rated by the VA and one was in the process of becoming rated. Three veterans had post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and one had a traumatic brain injury (TBI). Six veterans had physical disabilities, which may include hearing and visual impairments. Rick had both physical disabilities and a TBI. Two of the ten veterans disclosed that they had a disability, but did not specify the type. All of the veterans were full-time students with three of the veterans only attending classes on campus, four enrolled in only online classes, and three opting for a hybrid model of both in person and online courses. Table 6 below provides an overview of the veterans' gender, where currently live, military branch and time served, served in combat zone, disability as defined by the Veterans Administration (VA), Enrollment Status.

Table 6

Overview of Study Participants

Name[2]	Where Currently Live	Military Branch & Time Served	Served in Combat Zone	Disability as Defined by the VA	Current Enrollment Status
Hannah Female	Virginia	Navy 8 years	Yes	In the process of becoming rated by VA	Campus
Christopher **Male**	Illinois	Army 6 years	No	Physical Disability	Hybrid

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[2] Pseudonyms have been used in this study to protect the identities of the participants.

Megan Female	Maryland	Air Force 7 years	No	PTSD	Online
Rick Male	District of Columbia	Marines 11 years	Yes	Physical Disability & TBI	Hybrid
Madison Female	California	Army 6 years	Yes	Physical Disability	Online
Jason Male	Virginia	Army 5 years	Yes	Physical Disability	Campus
Lucy Female	Virginia	Army 10 years	Yes	PTSD	Online
Sam Male	Texas	Army 7 years	No	Rated by VA, but did not disclose disability	Campus
Gina Female	Virginia	Army 23 years	Yes	Physical	Online
Ellen Female	Tennessee	Army 8 years	Yes	Physical	Hybrid

This study was guided by the research question, "What are the experiences of veterans with disabilities during their enrollment at a four-year university?" It specifically addressed the following subquestions:

1. How do veterans with disabilities describe their postsecondary educational experiences?

2. How do veterans describe their situation and self?

3. What are the challenges veterans with disabilities experience in pursuing postsecondary education?

4. What are the supports veterans with disabilities utilize in postsecondary educational settings?

The findings revealed themes in each of these areas: educational experiences, situation and self, challenges in pursuing postsecondary education, and supports utilized in postsecondary educational settings.

Research Question 1: Educational Experiences

The educational experiences of veterans with disabilities varied among the participants, although themes emerged in their transition, academic, social, and graduation experiences. The veterans' transitions included a range of reasons for selecting their university and the majority had transferred from other institutions. Findings showed that all of the participants enrolled in coursework full-time and most opted to take online classes. The social experiences revealed that the participants had minimal social interactions on campus with both veteran and non-veteran students. In discussing their graduation plans, the majority of the veterans had identified their expected career field.

Transition experiences. The transition experiences of veterans are unique because they are frequently still adjusting to civilian life. Findings indicated that a number of factors influence veterans' selection of which university to attend. Veterans also have to secure funding through the Post 9/11 GI Bill and are more likely to transfer

from other colleges, thus needing additional assistance in receiving credit for previous coursework and military service.

Most of the veterans in this study began taking college courses within two years of leaving the military. Rick was the earliest participant to begin preparing for postsecondary school, as he was recruited by a University of Maryland, University College representative when he was a patient at Walter Reed National Military Medical Center. The representative approached him about applying for college when he was in the process of getting medically discharged from the Marines. Other veterans had a significantly longer amount of time pass before entering postsecondary school. In this study, the veteran who had the longest lapse of time between leaving the military and starting coursework was Jason, who began five years later because his "wife forced him to." Jason was the only veteran who had already graduated when he participated in this study. The number of years the other veterans had been attending their universities ranged from one to three years.

Various reasons for selecting college. The veterans had a variety of reasons for selecting their postsecondary institutions. When asked, the most frequent answer was the location of the school, with four veterans citing it. Two of the veterans, Gina and Lucy, specifically sought schools with a large number of military students. Gina noted, "I just felt comfortable with a lot of the retirees and active soldiers." Lucy's experiences at a previous institution directed her towards a military-friendly institution:

> Looking at different schools that seemed like a school would be kind of geared towards military students and kind of understanding if I had to deploy or go to a

field exercise. I felt like if there were a lot of military students in attendance, they would understand that these things happen and there wouldn't be a hassle if I decided to drop a course.

Lucy sought a university that had a large number of military students with the hope that the staff would be accommodating of veterans' needs. Each of the other four participants selected their college for a variety of other reasons: academic major, online coursework, good postgraduate employment rates, and being recruited by a university while receiving services at a military medical facility.

Likely to transfer colleges. Veteran students are typically older and have more work and family obligations than traditional undergraduate students, which can lead to them attending more than one university. Eight of the ten veterans interviewed had transferred from other colleges. Of these, five had attended a community college to save money or to bolster their academic records to enable them to transfer to a four-year institution. Four of the veterans were currently at their third university. Sam was the only veteran who had attended college prior to enlisting; he was a student at a community college for one semester when he was eighteen before joining the Army.

Universities have different standards about which credits will transfer from a previous institution. As such, the veterans had a wide range of experiences in obtaining credit for their earlier classes. None of Hannah's coursework transferred to her new college, while Gina, Sam, and Ellen received credit for all of their classes. Lucy received credit for a few of the classes she had taken previously, but none for her military service. She voiced her frustration:

I wish I could get more credit for the work I did studying and analyzing the things

I had. There are a lot of military kids out there and their whole thing is the study

of a region and to discuss everything from weapons, military defense, political

issues. Like you don't get college credit for that. So much value is put on a

degree, but experience can sometimes give you better understanding of how you

use that information versus just reading it in the textbook and then moving onto

another class the next semester.

Lucy felt that her work in the military was relevant to what she was studying in school,

therefore she should receive college credit for it. Hannah described being in the same

situation, "a lot of my military experience didn't transfer—so that kind of kicked me in

the butt because I'm starting all over again." It is up to the discretion of the university to

grant credit for military service depending on the type of work the veteran was involved

in. Fortunately, Ellen's institution gave her credit for her time in the Army and her

classes; she noted that her community college and four-year university had a good

relationship in supporting student veterans.

Academic experiences. The academic experiences of veterans vary greatly,

although many report a period of adjustment upon entering college. The majority of

participants in this study balanced work with being a full-time student. Many opted to

enroll in online classes to help them accommodate their responsibilities.

The veterans' major areas of study varied greatly. Only two veterans, Christopher

and Rick, had the same major of Business Administration. Table 7 below illustrates the

participants' major areas of study, enrollment in online courses, and employment status.

Table 7

Participants' Major Areas of Study, Enrollment in Online Courses, and Employment Status

Name	Major	Enrolled in Online Courses	Employment Status
Hannah	Veterinary Medicine	No	Full-time
Christopher	Business Administration	Yes	Full-time
Megan	Legal Studies	Yes	Part-time
Rick	Business Administration	Yes	Full-time
Madison	Nursing	Yes	Does not work
Jason	Systems Engineering	No	Full-time
Lucy	Political Science	Yes	Full-time
Sam	Mass Communications	No	Full-time
Gina	Sports and Health	Yes	Full-time
Ellen	Liberal Arts, but specifics undecided	Yes	Does not work

Full-time students. Veterans may be enrolled in part time or online classes to accommodate additional responsibilities such as working and having a family. All ten veterans in this study were full-time students who were enrolled in 12 to 18 credits per semester. Seven of the veterans also held full-time jobs.

Three of the veterans only attended classes on campus, four enrolled in only online classes, and three opted for a hybrid model of both in person and online courses. Regardless of what type of classes they were enrolled in, the veterans all noted that these

were their preferred schedule. Eight of the ten veterans selected the schedule that would allow them to work and spend the most amount of time with their families; the other two veterans provided different perspectives. Hannah said that she would prefer not to work so that she could concentrate on her coursework, but she needed to help support her family. It was important for Lucy to take classes with other military students, hence she opted for online classes since military service members who were deployed throughout the world were enrolled in them.

 Likely to enroll in online classes. Online classes provide students with the flexibility they need to balance work and family responsibilities. Seven of the veterans opted to enroll in online courses at their postsecondary institution. Some veterans also have unique situations that make online courses the best option. Megan explains:

> My husband is also active duty so that affects my life in a big way because that is also one of the reasons I am doing online classes—it is because we have to move every few years. That makes a difference for me because even though I'm a veteran, I'm still kind of doing the moves of an active duty person.

Megan's situation was indicative of the six female veterans interviewed, as five were married to men who served in the military and the other was single. Online coursework is more conducive to the military lifestyle which can be unpredictable. Megan finds online classes more challenging and prefers to attend classes in person, but is unable to do so.

Ellen would also rather take classes on campus, "I have noticed that if I'm in the classroom, I score a lot better than I do if I'm online." Christopher shares the same view as Megan and Ellen:

> Classes online are actually more challenging than a classroom class. The structure of a few of them, you have to participate in these discussions. It is time consuming having to read everyone else's discussion post and formulate my opinion or whatever…I don't like sitting in front of a computer that much anyway, so that adds another part of the frustration.

While online courses provide convenience and flexibility, they also present challenges for some students like Christopher. Conversely, there are veterans who prefer the online model for other reasons.

> Lucy preferred taking courses online so that she could connect with other veterans around the world:

> The best part is when I'm actually logged into the classrooms and a lot of other students there are also vets—people could be in Iraq, all over the states. And it makes the discussion a little bit more interesting because some people can talk about different life experiences in other countries or give a little bit more thought or add a little bit more experience. You get responses from all over the world, so if you are awake at 2AM and you decide to do a discussion board, chances are there is someone on the other side of the globe that is also responding because they happen to be up. You can really kind of feel like you bond with people.

Lucy mentioned throughout her interview that she preferred to be around other veterans because she related more to them than traditional students. She struggles with PTSD that can keep her awake at night. Online coursework is a vehicle for her to connect with other service members during these times.

Gina was apprehensive about taking classes online, but quickly found that there were benefits as well:

> Being intimidated by not being able to raise your head up or your hand up in a class and ask a question—I was very nervous right there. It was awesome when you are online and you can see all this and it stays there to where you can go back and refer to the questions that maybe happened two weeks ago.

Gina was able to use aspects of online coursework to her advantage by reviewing the class discussions to help her study. Regardless of how the veterans felt about online classes, the majority of them opted to enroll in them because they best fulfilled their needs.

Social experiences. The social experiences of veterans in postsecondary school are diverse and multifaceted. They may participate in student veterans groups on campus or choose to connect with each other more informally. However, findings showed that their relationships with civilian students were strained due to differences in age and life experiences. These interactions influenced whether a veteran opts to disclose his or her military service to professors and classmates.

Not involved in student veterans' organizations (SVO). Many universities with a large number of military students offer a student veterans' organization (SVO) on campus. However, none of the veterans in this study participated in this type of group at their postsecondary institutions. One of the big deterrents to joining a SVO was time. Jason said, "I was a little bit interested, but I didn't have much time." With a full-time job, a wife and two children, Jason was already struggling to find enough time for all of his duties. Christopher had a similar situation:

> I would have to say no, strictly because of my lack of time. I work full-time, I have four classes that I am doing, and also I have two boys that are in sports and all kinds of stuff, so I am go, go, go constantly.

It was not that Christopher was not interested in joining a veterans group, but that his schedule did not allow for it. Rick shared a similar viewpoint toward student veterans groups, "I'm not on campus enough and just the time that it would take. I wouldn't be able to—I don't want to short change things and the group." Like Jason, Rick also had outside obligations that kept his free time at a minimum.

Other veterans chose not to participate in SVO for a variety of other reasons. Sam explained, "I wouldn't say they don't appeal to me, but I really don't know what kinds of groups are out there—this may be my fault for not even looking." Sam's university never provided an orientation that featured the organizations and veteran supports that were available on campus. Meanwhile, Hannah said that she may look into student veterans groups, but she preferred to keep to herself while on campus. Ellen is the only participant who said that she would never get involved in a veterans group, "I'm really just not

interested, though I know the university has it—is that wrong?" While none of the veterans participated in student veterans' groups on campus for a plethora of reasons, nine of the ten veterans said they would consider joining a similar group under different circumstances. Time was decision factor for participating in veterans' group on campus.

No participation in social activities on campus. Postsecondary school provides an opportunity for students to meet new people and get involved in countless social activities. However, none of the veterans in this study participated in any social activities on campus. One veteran, Lucy, was actively involved at her previous institution as a student ambassador and a member of a Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender (LGBT) group. She was currently taking most of her classes online and said she was not more involved socially because, "I would rather just get online. As far as I'm concerned, this degree is just a piece of paper so that I can get paid more later. It might make me more competitive." Lucy's attitude towards school limited her involvement in experiences outside of the classroom.

Six veterans, Rick, Hannah, Madison, Megan, Christopher, and Ellen, all defined their social experiences on campus as negligible. As with the student veterans' organizations, Rick's personal and professional commitments limit his participation in social activities on campus. His primary focus was on academics:

I just go there and get my work done. Like I said, there is so much stuffed on my plate right now. I kind of wish I did this when I was younger so that I can be more involved in stuff. Living in DC now, you realized one of the biggest challenges

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around here especially—not only is an education, but networking. Getting to know people and making connections.

Rick's responsibilities extend far beyond those of traditional undergraduate students and he recognized the potential benefits of interacting with and getting to know other students on campus. Hannah described similar feelings about participating in social activities at her university, "I see myself eventually doing it, but right now I'm consumed in a whole bunch of different things. So it's kind of difficult." Like Rick, Hannah's busy schedule does not allow her to have a lot of time to socialize.

Many of the veterans struggled to maintain relationships with their classmates. Hannah gave details about her experience with her peers:

It was really hard for me to acclimate, because I don't trust that easily. So when they would be giving a group project, I would kind of stay to myself. But I worked through it….It is a personal thing, eventually it takes me awhile to open up to people, but once I'm open it's fine…I'm a very outgoing person, but you put me in a room, I try to evaluate the situation first.

Hannah was cautious by nature and opened up about being apprehensive toward females, since she is used to working in a male dominated field. She felt comfortable speaking with men, but said it was more difficult for her to shift to speaking with female peers. Likewise, Madison noted that her personality affected her social experiences, "they are minimal—I interact with other students and stuff like that, but I don't have friends that I know or anything like that. I am kind of shy." Madison's portrayal of her on-campus

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socializing is similar to Megan, Christopher, and Ellen's. Megan has not had any social interactions outside of contacting other students for classwork; Christopher is only on campus "for the required amount of time;" and Ellen says, "I'm happy just going into my class and then moving on with my day." Eight of the veterans emphasized that socializing with their peers on campus was not a priority for them at this point in their lives.

   Minimal interaction with non-veteran classmates. Jason was the only veteran who discussed seeing his classmates outside of school socially; he revealed that he had friends in his classes and got along well with his peers. The other nine veterans described having minimal social contact with their classmates outside of speaking about their studies and projects.

   The veterans shared mixed feelings about their civilian classmates; seven of the veterans viewed them differently. Christopher, Jason, and Sam were the three veterans who regarded veteran and civilian students in the same manner. Christopher tried not to judge people for any reason, including their military service, and strived to "give everyone a fair shake until I meet them and get to learn a little bit about them." Similarly, Sam viewed all students identically, though he did notice the age difference: "I just keep in mind that a lot this—I am like eight years older than them, anywhere between eight and ten—and they are doing the exact same thing that I am by just trying to get a good grade." Sam focused on all students being in the same position, regardless of their age. Jason shared these perspectives and commented that civilian students were younger and did not have a strong grasp of how the real world works.

Ellen, Madison, and Megan also commented on how the age difference and experience of their non-veterans peers made it difficult to form relationships with them. Ellen explained:

> There is nothing in common—I have a mortgage and two children and I'm married and I spent eight years in the Army and here comes some eighteen year old whose mummy is paying for college, and no, we have nothing in common! And it is not to say that I was rude or anything, we had small talk, but beyond that I had no interest in socializing with the kids there. I think a lot of teenagers view every professor as evil. They don't realize we have to put the work in too. I would take a complaint from a veteran much more seriously than I would a teenager.

Ellen had very strong feelings about the differences between her and civilians, thus limited her conversations with them, whereas she respected the perspectives of fellow veterans more so. Madison made similar remarks about non-veteran students in her classes, "You can definitely tell that just being older and being in the military definitely changed my perspective from the other students…sometimes you just have to put your head down and move on or kind of shake your head at something." Madison learned to adapt when her peers made juvenile or inappropriate comments in class. Likewise, Megan noted, "I feel like maybe they [non-veterans] wouldn't understand my life quite as much as the students who are veterans, the kind of difficulties I incurred." The veterans tended to stick together in school because they had more in common in terms of their life experiences. Consequently, veterans such as Megan and Lucy directly specified that they would rather be in classes with students who have a military background.

Ellen disliked her time at the university's main campus, where the predominant age was about eighteen and she did not socialize with anyone in her classes. However, her experience was very different when she took classes on another campus that was located on the Army base:

> The on post campus is great because most of the students in there are military, so you would have that ten minutes before the teacher shows up to sit around and share war stories or different experiences in the Army. It's different than doing the main campus—I enjoyed being around other veterans.

Ellen appreciated being around other military students who she could relate to about their shared experiences. Similarly, Rick took classes on a military base before he transferred to his current university where he still benefited from being around a large number of veterans, "I feel like there is a lot of similar people with my story, so it makes it a little bit easier, I think." While there are advantages to veterans taking courses together, correspondingly it has it risks. Lucy cautioned:

> Working with other vets like tempers can flair very quickly. Like you can tell students who are having like PTSD or stressed out or in that anger because sometimes discussions can escalate really quickly into who has the most experience or the most access to information.

Lucy explained that even casual conversations among veterans who were battling with underlying issues could lead to a heated debate. Fortunately, veterans can recognize problematic signs in each other and can assist in alleviating some of these challenges.

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Rick was the only veteran who shared his experiences working on projects with his non-military peers. He explained the challenges:

> The biggest thing is if you get put into a group with someone who didn't want to carry their weight and someone who isn't a team player. Being from the military, you don't survive without your team. So that part was frustrating.

This problem can plague any college student, though Rick's military experience made it very disturbing. Veterans have adapted a standard of collaboration and teamwork that was essential for their survival in the military.

Graduation. There is little information about the academic success and graduation rates for veterans with disabilities. These students may be entering a new career field or using their degree to advance in a field they are currently working. Some veterans may also take advantage of the opportunity to attend school under the Post 9/11 GI Bill without a firm career plan in mind. The veterans who participated in this study were all working toward an expected graduation date, or had already achieved it.

Likely to know career field prior to graduation. The majority of the participants in this study had decided their career field prior to graduation. Table 8 below shows the veterans' expected career and graduation date.

Table 8

Participants' Expected Careers and Year of Graduation

Name	Expected Career	Expected Graduation
Hannah	Veterinarian	2020
Christopher	To be determined	2015
Megan	Paralegal	2015
Rick	Government Contractor	2015
Madison	Nurse in operating room or emergency room	2016
Jason	Systems Engineer	Graduated in 2011 with BS Graduated in 2013 with MS
Lucy	Will remain a Civilian Contractor for the Department of Defense)	2015
Sam	Sports Broadcaster	2016
Gina	Government Contractor and part time Fitness Instructor	2015
Ellen	To be determined	2016

Jason was the sole veteran who had already completed his undergraduate degree and he continued with his education to receive a master's degree in science two years later. Eight of the graduates anticipated graduating in 2015 or 2016, and Hannah expected to graduate in 2020 with her doctorate in veterinary medicine. Most of the veterans knew what career field they would enter upon graduation except for Christopher and Ellen who were still determining their options. Ellen was having a tremendously difficult time finding work in Nashville, Tennessee and was therefore open to a number of options as

she explained, "honestly, at this point I would take any job, but nobody here is hiring short of McDonalds." Lucy was the only veteran who was planning to stay in her current line of work and would use her degree to help her advance in this capacity.

The veterans would benefit from support finding employment from their universities prior to graduation. Seven of the veterans attended postsecondary institutions that offered these services; three of the veterans were unaware of any programs like these at their colleges. None of the nine veterans who were currently enrolled in college had starting utilizing the career transition support. However, Jason, the one veteran in this study who had already graduated, used career services at his university that were not specific to veterans when he was conducted his job search. The staff provided him with feedback on his résumé and scheduled an interview with an outside company for him. While Jason ultimately accepted a different position, he realized the value of transition supports and recommended that students employ them to the maximum extent possible. Career services can help facilitate future success of all students and can be particularly useful for veterans who are qualified for a number of specialized positions.

Research Question 2: Situation and Self

The situation surrounding the veterans has a direct effect on their experiences in postsecondary school. Specifically, concurrent stress such as family responsibilities and work obligations can put a strain on the veterans' academic focus. The self refers to the veterans' personal and demographic characteristics that influence their postsecondary experiences such as their age and professions. Themes emerged in this study about the struggle to balance work, school, and family commitments, and an indifference about

being identified as veterans. Personal characteristics about the participants are displayed in Table 9 below including age, family status, and profession.

Table 9

Participants' Age, Family Status, and Profession

Name	Age	Family Status	Profession
Hannah	29	Married with 1 stepchild	Professor at a Technical College
Christopher	32	Married with 2 children	Policeman
Megan	30	Married with 2 children	Stay at home mom and part time yoga instructor
Rick	33	Married with a baby on the way	Executive Assistant at Department of Homeland Security
Madison	28	Married with 2 children	Stay at home mom
Jason	34	Married with 2 children	Operations Research Analyst
Lucy	32	Single with no children	Civilian Contractor for Department of Defense
Sam	27	Single with no children	TV producer and audio engineer for local sports
Gina	50s	Married with no children	Intelligence analyst and part time personal trainer
Ellen	29	Married with 2 children	Stay at home mom

With the exception of Gina, all of the veterans were in their late twenties to early thirties, making all of them older than traditional college students. Eight of the participants were married and seven of them had children, therefore placing additional responsibilities on them. The veterans currently had a wide variety of professions, with the most common being a stay at home mom, with three of the participants citing this as their job.

Struggle to balance work, school, and family commitments. Veterans who are postsecondary students routinely have to balance work and family obligations that traditional students may not have. All ten veterans in this study were full-time students; seven of them also worked full-time; eight of them were married with children. These veterans struggled to find enough time in the day to manage all of their responsibilities. Five of the veterans talked about their struggles to find a balance between school, work, and family: Hannah, Christopher, Rick, Ellen, and Madison.

Hannah said that her biggest challenge at the moment was "just trying to get the time to be able to study while supporting a family on a full-time job and a full-time school schedule." Hannah had one child and worked as a professor at a technical college for about 40 hours a week. Madison experienced similar feelings:

Usually it feels like I am playing Tetris with my husband's schedule, just kind of finding everything to fit in because he goes to school as well. I have a son and a daughter, so I have a lot to worry about with childcare and things like that.

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Even though Madison was a stay at home mom, she still had difficulties managing all of the activities for her family. Her husband was also using the Post 9/11 GI Bill to go to school, therefore making it necessary to coordinate everything from transportation to studying independently.

Rick, a soon-to-be father, was already anticipating the impact that his child would have on his already chaotic life:

> I think that the biggest challenge is coming up here shortly. My wife is due with her first baby—it is our first baby—during spring classes. So I feel it is one more thing that I am putting on my plate that I think is already overflowing.

Despite the added challenges that having a child would create in his life, Rick remained optimistic and was determined to continue working and going to school full-time.

Indifferent about being identified as a veteran. Veterans often have mixed feelings about whether they would like to disclose that they are veterans to their professors and peers at their universities. Eight of the veterans were indifferent toward being identified as a veteran for a variety of reasons; one veteran wanted to be recognized as a veteran; one veteran did not. As such, it is impossible to determine a strong preference among the veterans who participated in this study.

Hannah, Madison, Christopher, Jason, Sam, Ellen, Gina, and Lucy did not have a preference about whether they were identified as a veteran. Hannah captured the conflict many veterans felt about having their service in the military divulged to their professors and classmates. When asked if she wanted to be identified, she explained:

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It kind of depends on the situation, I think yes and no. I'm one of those who kind

of get tired of everyone saying 'thank you for your service' and all that. And you

get the other ones who are like, 'you are a baby killer' and what not. So I kind of

stay to myself and just think of me as a student.

Hannah attempted to avoid the subject of being a veteran altogether due to the various

responses she had encountered from people. Madison experienced similar reactions as

she said, "sometimes other students are like, 'oh cool,' and sometimes, 'oh did you kill

anybody—did you have a gun?'" Consequently she did not volunteer this information

unless she used it to increase her credibility on a given topic. Christopher had not

experienced any negative reactions from others at his university, despite their political

beliefs. Jason and Sam were both ambivalent about whether people found out about their

military service.

Conversely, Rick would have liked his professors and peers to know about his

service in the military. He disclosed:

I'm very proud of my service and proud to be a veteran. I think they have a better

understanding of my approach and the way that I do things. And not only that, but

a Marine veteran.

Rick's identity is closely related to being a service member and he was immensely proud

of how he supported the United States throughout his three tours in Iraq. Meanwhile,

Megan does not want to reveal that she was in the military as she does not want to receive

any special treatment.

Research Question 3: Challenges in Pursuing Postsecondary Education

Veterans frequently face numerous challenges upon entering postsecondary school. As previously stated, they tend to be older than traditional students, thus having additional family responsibilities and work commitments. Furthermore, veterans may encounter challenges with their transition to colleges and academics since they typically have not attended school for many years. The veterans who participated in this study also had disabilities that may require medical attention or other forms of management. Military service members who are enrolled in college classes may need to take a leave of absence from work relating to the military, such as deployment. Table 10 below outlines the challenges participants faced transitioning to postsecondary school. It specifically addresses if the veterans needed to take remedial courses, spoke about their disabilities impacting their academic performance, and if they encountered a disruption in their coursework at any time.

Table 10

Participants' Challenges Transitioning to Postsecondary School and Academically

Name	Challenges Transitioning	Challenges Academically: Remedial Courses, Disabilities, Disruption in Coursework
Hannah	Yes	Yes: Remedial Courses
Christopher	Yes	Yes: Remedial Courses Disruption in Coursework
Megan	Yes	Yes: Remedial Courses Disruption in Coursework
Rick	Yes	Yes: Remedial Courses
Madison	No	Yes: Disruption in Coursework
Jason	No	No
Lucy	Yes	Yes: Disabilities Disruption in Coursework
Sam	Yes	Yes: Disruption in Coursework
Gina	No	Yes
Ellen	Yes	Yes: Disruption in Coursework

Transition challenges. Many veterans experience difficulties transitioning from the military to civilian life as a student. Seven veterans in this study had challenges transitioning to postsecondary school. Many of the struggles stemmed from no longer having the structure, management, and social culture that the military provided. Others veterans had difficulties adjusting to their academic class schedule.

The majority of veterans had trouble transitioning from the military to academia for a plethora of reasons as discussed below. Lucy described the frustration she felt during this time:

> Once you leave the military and go back to your hometown or wherever you live, you don't have your automatic group of friends who looks out for you and makes sure you settle in okay. Then you have to go back and integrate into the regular world again. Then the frustration of going to school on top of that is a whole other lifestyle. Suddenly there is a lot of frustration there.

Lucy felt that the stress of transitioning to civilian life can add more challenges to beginning college coursework.

The military provides a structured environment that dictates a routine for service members. When they leave the military, veterans may have trouble adjusting to a flexible schedule. Four veterans, Christopher, Lucy, Rick, and Sam, all cited time management as a challenge they had while transitioning.

Lucy expanded on some of the frustration that she felt when she left the military and started her coursework:

In the military I felt so regulated with things and my schedule that it was very easy for me to go, 'okay, now do this.' Then as a veteran outside, I have more time to work on school, but I was left unorganized. My time management wasn't as good as it could have been. I kind of don't like it now. Like I kind of miss the regimented schedule that I had when I was in the military versus now. I like things regimented where every day was a little bit planned out for a little bit more.

Lucy felt unorganized and lacked strong time management skills. She did not need to develop these skills when she was in the military and therefore had to adjust to managing her time in an unstructured environment as a civilian. Rick echoed these feelings:

One of the biggest [challenges]…I'm a very structured person. I get up in the morning at the same time every day. I think that it can be helpful to most veterans if they have that regimented structure of the military. It's just restructuring that structure that is key.

Rick was faced with the same challenges as Lucy and taught himself how to create a regimented schedule as a civilian.

Sam quickly learned that the responsibilities of being a student are not restricted to a traditional workday:

I definitely have had to kind of manage my time off wisely because in the Army, for the most part, it's like a nine to five job, and then once you're off, you're off. There is no homework or anything like that. And then back at the school, it's like you have your day at classes, then you have to go home and do your homework.

You have to study and prepare for tests and make sure you have all the supplies you need.

Sam needed to adjust to allocating time for attending classes, doing homework, studying, and preparing his materials.

These veterans also found it difficult to shift from the military's management style where there is someone giving orders, to the self-directed style of being a student and managing oneself. As Lucy explained, "I think the hardest part as a veteran going back to school is that in the military there is always someone to kind of look over you—there is always someone you are accountable to for pretty much everything." In addition to not having someone to answer to, the veterans missed the professional mentorship that the relationship provided. Rick also found it to be the most difficult part of becoming a student:

> I would say that the biggest challenge was just changing my way of thinking. Because with the military and even through high school, I felt challenged, but I understood the challenges and I had people around me who had been through this before and were there to kind of mentor me. With school, it is up to you to meet the challenge and there are people there who are professionals to help you along the way, but it is just a whole different way of looking at it.

Rick and Lucy each described the metamorphosis of becoming more self-reliant and holding themselves accountable. Rick was in the Marines for 11 years and Lucy was in

the Army for 10. It was challenging for them to change their ways and develop new skills after being accustomed to a different model for so long.

This military order also influenced interaction between peers and leaders. Hannah struggled to get used to the college dynamics:

It was so hard for us to transition because we are so used to everything being precise and everybody answering when they need to, and stuff like that. I know it is one of the issues in my class. One of the fellow students was like, 'hey, you know, next time don't answer so many questions.' The whole class is sitting there silent while the instructor is talking to you and trying to get you to answer and interact and nobody is interacting. So I pretty much, as far a veterans and stuff, just do what you do and answer the questions. If you are wrong, you are wrong. We have that self-confidence in us.

This statement shows Hannah's self-confidence in bringing her military habits into the academic environment. Despite noticing that traditional college students have perspectives that are different from her own, she chose to remain loyal to the military values, in which she believes.

Two veterans, who were both stay at home moms, faced challenges with the types of classes they enrolled in. Ellen had trouble adjusting to attending classes on campus, which took away time she needed in other areas of her life:

I absolutely hated the main university campus. I hated it and I think that's not just a veteran thing. I believe that any working adult, any adult that has been in the

workforce and then goes back to school [would have problems]. I don't want to show up an hour early for class to find parking. Like in the back of my mind, I have laundry and I have dishes and I have things to do. I don't want to spend all this time on campus, to me wasting time. I'm not in the classroom, I'm sitting there and wasting time finding parking.

Conversely, Megan, who enrolled in courses online so that she could be home with her children, noted that she had difficulty transitioning from being a traditional student who attended classes on campus.

Despite all of the challenges these veterans faced, their outlook remained positive. As Sam said, "It's been a somewhat rough transition, but it's getting less so over time. Overall it is for the better—I am improving myself and I am happy to be doing it." This attitude and perseverance facilitated his transition into civilian life as a student.

Academic challenges. Veterans can experience challenges with their academic coursework by lacking prerequisite knowledge or study skills, as nine of the participants in this study encountered. They specifically expressed struggling with the academic content, time management, and completing the amount of coursework. Despite these difficulties, merely four of the veterans enrolled in remedial coursework. While all of the veterans in the study had disabilities, only one discussed how her disabilities affected her academically. The findings also revealed that it was common for the veterans to experience a disruption in their coursework. Jason was the only veteran who did not report having any academic challenges as a student.

The participants faced challenges with the course content, regardless of whether they were required by the university to take preliminary courses. For example, though Ellen did not need to take any remedial classes, she found that she had difficulties with her writing:

> One thing that I found really frustrating…I get into my first writing class and they are like, 'okay, go home and write five pages on whatever.' And I got a lot of marks off and like nobody taught me how to write. I went through public high school and here I am in college and you have these expectations of me and I have no idea what I am doing. I feel like I missed something somewhere that I'm not understanding the English language and how to use commas. I screwed up pretty bad and I do find that frustrating.

Ellen and other veterans often enter college with academic deficits that impact their current performance. Professors assume that their students can work at a certain level, but some of these veterans need additional support to assist them in getting there.

Veterans frequently have difficulty concentrating on coursework while assimilating into civilian life. Time management was a problem that extended beyond the transition period for some of the student veterans. Three veterans, Sam, Lucy, and Gina, all struggled with time management throughout their coursework. Gina also revealed that she felt intimated around her professors and other students and how she had to work hard to overcome it. Additionally, Lucy still struggled with holding herself accountable and organized at the time of the interview.

Madison was surprised by the amount of classwork and assignments she received and struggled to complete it with all of the other responsibilities she had in her life. As a stay at home mom with two children ages two and one, she had limited free time that she could devote to her academic studies. Likewise, Rick grappled with the quantity of work for which he was responsible.

Remedial courses can prepare veterans academically. Many veterans have not worked on academic studies for a number of years and begin postsecondary school needing to take remedial courses. Six of the veterans in this study considered themselves to be prepared for their coursework and did not need to enroll in any remedial classes: Ellen, Sam, Madison, Jason, Lucy, and Gina. Lucy cited that the reason she felt prepared was because she selected a major area of study that played to her strengths. She would have needed to take remedial mathematics and science classes had she chosen to pursue a business or a science degree. Gina did not have to enroll in any remedial courses, although she mentioned that mathematics was a challenge.

Four veterans, Hannah, Christopher, Megan, and Rick, all felt somewhat prepared, but needed to take a remedial mathematics course. Three of these veterans found that the remedial classes helped prepare them for later coursework; only Megan continued to have problems with math throughout her time at the university. Megan said that one of the reasons that she struggled is because she did not have resources that she could utilize for help outside of the textbook. Nevertheless, Megan felt that these initial courses were a good fit for her, "I felt confident, I felt prepared, and I felt academically

ready to start the courses that they had recommended." None of the veterans needed to take any supplemental English classes.

Minimal discussion about disabilities impacting academics. Although all ten veterans in this study had disabilities, only one spoke about how they interfered with her academic experiences in postsecondary school. Lucy candidly expressed how her PTSD was triggered by other events in her life and impacted her academically. She touched on the long wait she encountered with the VA to see a doctor for her disability:

> The fact that my disability had been there for almost two years and I still hadn't been seen by the doctor…I had to put my dog down and just like I had a lot of stressful events happening, so I was having a lot of anxiety. And the classroom was frustrating because when I started school again in the spring, everything was just kind of different. I had too much going on and my PTSD was triggered and I started getting—not anxiety attacks, but like pain in my chest and all sorts of stuff.

The situations in Lucy's life, compounded by not receiving medical treatment, propelled her PTSD to flare up. She needed to manage her disabilities, whether it is through medical treatment or making other accommodations.

Disruptions in coursework are common. It is common for veterans to need to take a leave of absence for personal reasons since many of them have family responsibilities. Five participants in this study experienced disruptions in their coursework because of this and other reasons. Megan, Madison, and Ellen all took leaves

of absence from school to have their children. While a lot of the male participants also had children, none of them took leaves of absence as a result. Another life event that can lead to taking time off from coursework is moving to a new area. When Christopher transferred from Virginia to Illinois, he took a leave of absence because he "got lazy." At this time Christopher was also working as a police officer full-time and raising two sons.

Lucy's PTSD propelled her withdrawal from some of her classes. She remarked on her experiences:

> I have had some stressful events where I had to kind of like drop out of some of the classes midway that I wish I hadn't I think I would have been a little bit more resilient if I was still in the uniform to kind of get it done, but I don't know. I am a civilian, I was like, 'oh, I don't care anymore.'

Lucy also touches on a feeling of pride she had when she was in the military and how it was great a source of strength for her.

Sam also left school when he was eighteen years old and attended a community college. He explained, "I wasn't really doing well and I don't think I was ready for it yet, so I joined the Army." In this case, Sam's break from school led him to his service in the military. After serving for seven years, Sam returned to school feeling more prepared for collegiate responsibilities than when he was younger.

Conversely, Gina was counselled by her advisor never to take a leave of absence from school, "he would try to talk to you so you don't break. He would try to keep you up in there, to where you would now break, because you know how a lot of people are—

when they break, it's done." Gina was aware that veterans can find it difficult to return to college after taking a leave of absence. As such, she made sure that she never left school, regardless of the circumstances in her life.

Some participants relayed experiences when they were active duty military service members. When active duty military service members (not veterans) take college classes, there can be times when their service can interfere with their coursework. Some students may be deployed in the middle of a semester, while others are in extreme situations that can impact their ability to complete their schoolwork. Lucy explained such an experience that she had while in school:

When the earthquake in Haiti happened my unit was responsible for pretty much Latin America, South America, and the Caribbean. We were rushing to get all these people down to Haiti to help out with the cleanup and just organization and everything down there. That had a huge impact because I didn't have any time for school or as soon as I got home, I was just exhausted because I knew we had to go back to work at 6AM the next morning. I was trying to explain all this to my professor, that I didn't have time to do certain things. So it was really frustrating because it didn't seem like she was trying to work with me. The Army is the first priority, like I couldn't make school the priority and frankly, I didn't have time for it for two weeks. My professor was able to give me an extension, but I lost a lot of points for having to turn in assignments late because essentially like almost everything I did had to be about two weeks late. So it was one of those things

where I felt something that could have been easier…it was difficult and it was

frustrating because she could've been nicer about it.

Military students who take online courses can be anywhere in the world and it is possible

that they will be working on projects that will impact the time they have for studying.

These students can be discouraged if their professors are unwilling to make allowances

when they are unable to complete their work due to circumstances that are outside of

their control.

Research Question 4: Supports Utilized in Postsecondary Educational Settings

Veterans discussed the supports they utilized as students at their universities.

Themes emerged about the following: enrollment, orientation, transition, personal

strategies and supports, Disability Support Services (D), and relationships with faculty.

Table 11 below provides an overview of the supports the participants utilized in

postsecondary school.

Table 11

Supports Veterans' Utilized in Postsecondary Education

Name	Easy Enroll-ment	Attended Orientation	Smooth Transition	Utilized Personal Strategies & Supports	Utilized Disability Supports & Services	Positive Relation-ships with Faculty
Hannah	No	No	No	Yes	No	Yes
Christopher	Yes	No	No	Yes	No	Yes
Megan	No	No	No	Yes	No	Yes
Rick	Yes	No	No	Yes	No	Yes
Madison	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
Jason	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
Lucy	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	Yes
Sam	Yes	No	No	Yes	No	Yes
Gina	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
Ellen	Yes	No	No	Yes	No	Yes

This section concludes with a discussion of the participants providing recommendations for veterans and universities based on their personal postsecondary experiences.

Ease of enrollment. Enrolling in postsecondary school can be especially challenging for veterans who may be transferring from another institution or grappling with the nuances of the Post 9/11 GI Bill. Eight of the veterans in this study had no difficulties enrolling in courses at their universities and most of the veterans attributed

this ease of enrollment to the support they received from the colleges. For example, Christopher and Ellen both transferred from community colleges to four year universities that had partnerships that facilitated their transitions. Gina received even more support since every veteran at her school was assigned to a representative that did everything for them, including contacting the finance department. Gina described her representative as being, "like a counselor that would monitor your grades and the submission of your papers and everything. So I did not have one problem and I would recommend them." Like Gina, Rick had a representative that worked directly with him during his time at Walter Reed National Military Medical Center. He had a very positive experience working with her:

> When I was getting retired medically, there was one of the – they have them at the hospital, Walter Reed Hospital in Bethesda, that is where I was at—the woman there worked with me to help me and that just ended up, that is the school I chose [University of Maryland, University Park]. She was very helpful…I had to do some placement testing so she helped me with that and everything and got me started on my path. She helps a lot, getting me signed up and getting my high school transcript. She is getting me to water so that I can drink it, per se.

Rick was dealing with medical issues and was able to enroll in college immediately following his medical retirement because of the support he received. Though Rick described his transition to college as difficult, he nevertheless managed to work and go to school full-time despite medical challenges. This support augmented his determination and success.

Madison's university in California had a well-developed system in place to support veterans entering college. She attributed her easy enrollment to her university's support system for veterans:

> They have a veteran representative and they seem to have a whole office that works with us when it comes to the enrollment and during their classes and things like that. Basically you contact them that you are going to attend the university and – it has been awhile – then they basically enroll you. Actually it seems there are less requirements because you are a veteran. Like I didn't have to give my SATs, write an essay or tell them why I wanted to go that school.

Madison provided many examples of ways that her university assisted veterans who were applying. Her college sought to make the enrollment process as simple as possible to attract a large veteran population.

While the majority of veterans had an easy enrollment process at their postsecondary institutions, two of the veterans, Hannah and Megan, had problems enrolling in their colleges. Hannah explained, "at first it was kind of difficult because I wasn't really sure what I needed to do;" subsequently it took her two months to figure out the enrollment process on her own. Megan's enrollment was held up because her university kept saying that her transcripts were incomplete without telling her why. It took months for her to realize that the college needed her language tests scores, which she only figured out because she was proactive in calling to pursue an answer. Both of these veterans said that they were eventually successful because of their own persistence, not because of any supports that their institutions provided.

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Orientation is an underutilized support. Orientation is one way that a university can support veterans in their transition to postsecondary school. The majority of the veterans in this study did not attend an orientation either because they did not think that it would be helpful or their institutions did not offer one. Only three of the veterans attended orientations at their current institution and all of them had positive experiences.

Hannah and Christopher's universities both offered orientation programs for new students, but they chose not to attend because they did not think that would be beneficial to them. Both of them transferred from other universities. Ellen and Sam also attended other universities where they had participated in orientations. Madison could not remember if she attended an orientation.

Megan and Rick attended colleges that did not offer orientations, though they both would have liked to attend one. Megan thought that an orientation would have prepared her to know about what she should expect as a student. Rick would have found an orientation useful that included current students and past graduates sharing their experiences:

> [I would've liked to hear] it is not going to be so easy and these are some things that you are going to do. Kind of explain to me how it works. I think that would help just preparing myself and knowing what is expected of you.

Rick is like many veterans who do not have anyone they can talk to about college experiences and expectations. Therefore, connecting them with recent students is a beneficial way to prepare them.

While Gina and Lucy had both previously attended colleges, they still went to the orientations at their current schools. Gina said that her orientation was mandatory and described it as a great way to prepare her for the program. Lucy's orientation was also helpful in that it introduced her online coursework.

Jason's orientation was exceptionally useful to him and shaped his academic experience for the next four years:

> At first I was going to [major in] Information Technology (IT), but during the middle of orientation, I decided to switch to Systems Engineering. I knew it was crazy, but when they called that group, I went and I met this guy, Dr. Butch. It turned out that he was a retired [Army] Colonel and he actually got me onto some of [the university's] projects because he knew that I had been to Iraq and dealt with Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAV) and stuff. We had a lot of similarities: he was in the Army, I was in the Army…I just showed up in his office during orientation that day and things just kind of fell in place. As a matter of fact, when I graduated he was like, 'you are my favorite student here. I tell everybody the story about that day you walked into my office and showed me your transcripts and not one [course] would transfer. And then you won the most outstanding undergraduate award.' He made a huge stand and I need to write him a letter to thank him.

Jason's orientation provided an overview of his school's major areas of study, therefore leading him to a new field that he has made his career. It also provided him with the opportunity to connect with military faculty and find a mentor. His mentor recommended

him for a position as a research assistant on a military based project in the Engineering school, something very difficult for an undergraduate student to obtain. Years later, the mentor also nominated Jason for the "Most Outstanding Undergraduate Award" at his university that he was honored to win. Jason's orientation provided him with valuable information and opportunities that influenced his life.

Smooth transition. Transition supports vary widely among institutions and can have a significant impact on the ease of the transition. Fortunately, there are some veterans who transition from the military to postsecondary school without any challenges. Madison, Jason, and Gina were three such veterans who had smooth transition experiences; the remaining seven veterans experienced challenges. Madison attributed her success transitioning to her veteran representative. Jason thought his major area of study helped him move into being a student:

> It depends on your major. A lot of the engineering students were big nerds- they weren't your average college kids, like bringing you to a party and stuff like that. So I think I fit in well and it was easy transferring into study mode.

For Jason, the academic mindset of his peers bolstered his commitment to be a hardworking student. Madison and Jason emphasized the importance of a strong support system of people around you, whether they are representatives from the university or classmates.

Personal strategies and supports. Veterans who employ effective strategies and receive ample support are more likely to be successful in postsecondary school and

graduate in a timely manner. The veterans expressed gratitude for the opportunity to go to

college and for the help they received from other people who supported them. Madison

commented, "I always feel pretty enlightened after I take a certain class—the teachers are

good and I am always thankful. I don't have to pay for schooling and you can't get

anything better than a free education." The veterans valued going to college and faced

their challenges directly. Five themes surrounding personal strategies and supports

emerged that are addressed in Table 12: Utilized Time Management Strategies,

Commitment to Education, Self-Reliance, Asking for Help, and Support from Family and

Friends.

Table 12

Participants' Personal Strategies and Supports

Name	Utilized Time Management Strategies	Commitment to Education	Self-Reliance	Asking for Help	Support from Family & Friends
Hannah	Yes	No	No	Yes	No
Christopher	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
Megan	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No
Rick	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes
Madison	No	No	No	No	Yes
Jason	No	Yes	No	No	Yes
Lucy	No	No	No	No	No
Sam	Yes	No	No	No	No
Gina	No	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Ellen	No	No	No	Yes	Yes

Utilized time management strategies. Five veterans, Sam, Hannah, Christopher,

Rick, and Megan, all credited time management as being one of the most effective

strategies they developed at their postsecondary institutions. Sam tackled his time

management challenges by scheduling time during the week for studying. Hannah had a

similar strategy in that she would spend one day over the weekend catching up on all of

her school work. Rick also planned ahead so that he was able to set aside ample time for

studying. Additionally, he started taking one course at a time until he felt prepared to be a

full-time student. Meanwhile, Lucy took her textbooks everywhere to study in order to minimize her downtime at work and when she was running errands.

Commitment to Education. Three veterans, Christopher, Gina, and Jason, all described their commitment to their postsecondary education as one of the most vital strategies they employed. Christopher's determination came from having "mentally committed to attending and getting this done and accomplished." As such, he refused to let anything stand in the way of his academics. Gina refused to make excuses for not being studious, regardless of the circumstances:

I had computers all the way and I never missed a beat when I was on the road. I stayed right in synch with the classroom—I never had to call in and say, 'oh well, I don't have a connection, I am going to Korea.' But I would tell my professors that I am going to Korea and then I would say my time zone would be this, but I tried not to use that as a crutch because in my mind I would also think, 'okay, there are people in Afghanistan, there are people in Iraq, there are people that are here, so I need to stay focused.' So when we go to Korea and Germany, wherever, all of my co-workers they would be like, 'oh, let's go get a schnitzel at a restaurant.' I would have to turn that down because my main focus would be my studies. You have got to shut it down, we have to study. You just have to tell them. Then you know, after being with your coworkers for a while, they understand and stop harassing you. If you lose that commitment then you are done.

Gina used other servicemen who were in Iraq and Afghanistan as her inspiration to continue with her coursework when she was traveling abroad for work. She was firm in her resolve to stay focused, even when her peers wanted to spend time with her. Gina believed that her commitment to her program gave her the strength to stay focused and without it she would not be able to complete her degree.

Jason also mentally committed to his coursework and enjoyed rising to the challenge. He explained his resilience:

> I saw school as a challenge. I have always been stubborn and really competitive, so usually if I put my mind to something, I can do anything. It was my drive…growing up, I didn't do well in school because I wasn't interested. I just played sports and chased girls, so people never expected me to do this, but that kind of fueled me. I think anybody could do it, as long as your mind is in the right place.

Jason enjoyed stepping out of his comfort zone and was excited to prove to himself that he could succeed academically. This commitment paid off when he won the award for Undergraduate Student of the Year at his university. He advised other veterans to make the same vow to themselves to not just graduate from postsecondary school, but to thrive when they are there.

Self-Reliance. Veterans who lack necessary supports from the university can be resourceful and serve as their own educators. In this study, two veterans, Christopher and Megan, both turned to themselves to strengthen their math skills when they were

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struggling in classes. Christopher allotted time daily for him to review key concepts and strengthen his mathematical knowledge. Megan abandoned her textbooks and conducted her own research so that she would be able to teach herself vital math concepts. She explained:

> I actually turned to doing internet searches and I found websites that would explain the concept we were supposed to be learning, but would do it in a way that I understood better than the textbook was doing. I ended up doing my own kind of helping myself in that way—I was just figuring it out on my own. I don't have a very wide institutional network right now.

Megan resorted to teaching herself because she did not have anyone at the university or in her personal life that she could turn to for help. Megan was unable to take advantage of services on campus, since she was enrolled in online classes and was located far from the main campus.

Asking for help. Findings revealed that many veterans received support by seeking assistance from a professor, friend or family member. Five of the veterans in this study revealed that they reached out to people around them to assist with their coursework. Gina found it challenging to overcome this hurdle:

> I am not a math whiz whatsoever and when you start talking statistics and stuff like that, I was very intimidated right there. But then I had to bow down to the things I was scared about, otherwise going out there asking for help on areas that I was short of knowledge to succeed in that area. So I really had to say, 'okay,

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Gina, put on your big girl pants and go ask questions, go find someone to help

you.' So once I got past that, then I was on a roll.

For Gina and other veterans, it can be daunting to be in an academic environment when they are struggling to succeed. This was also a challenge for Rick, who attributed his success to changing his attitude:

Attitude is the biggest thing. Don't be afraid to seek out. That was one of my big

things, especially being a veteran. It was just going out there and saying, 'I don't

understand this.' Don't be afraid to ask a question, raise your hand. That was one

of the difficult things because I'm used to going and doing it. You don't ask

questions, just know what needs to be done and go and do it. I would get home

and I would work on my homework and I wouldn't know where to turn. It took

me awhile to figure it out, to seek help.

Rick elucidates why asking for help is unfamiliar to veterans who are familiar to the military's style of completing orders without asking questions. In postsecondary school, veterans have to become comfortable with monitoring their understanding and seeking assistance when needed.

Ellen was another veteran who took the initiative to ask for help with her coursework. She took responsibility for her success and asked her professor if she could resubmit her work:

That wasn't just my professor being totally cool, but I put that initiative, 'hey, will

you help me?' So I'm not walking away with the crappy grade and well my

teacher sucks! I have asked for the help and the professors are generally willing to give that help if you ask.

Ellen and others noted that professors and other people are happy to take the time to explain the material in ways that are more accessible.

Hannah was the only veteran in this study who utilized the university's tutoring services to assist her with math and writing. She found these supports to be very helpful, especially when she sent her essays to the tutoring center to receive feedback before they were due. Likewise, Megan was interested in the tutoring supports at her college in the same subject areas. However, she was unable to access these services since they were only offered in person and Megan was taking classes online, thus contributing to her academic difficulties.

Lucy, another veteran enrolled in online courses, haphazardly connected with another student online, when her professor advised students to visit the online lounge areas where they had opportunities to connect with other students. Lucy connected with a civilian student and they continued to stay in touch throughout her studies. Even though this student did not have a military background, he informally served as her mentor and helped her develop realistic expectations for her experiences at the university.

Support from family and friends. Six of the veterans turned to their family and friends to assist them at their postsecondary institutions; Ellen, Madison, Jason, Christopher, Rick, and Gina all shared stories of support. Ellen was one of these six veterans who had family and friends edit her work, particularly her writing:

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I should have probably gone down and do the writing workshop. Instead I edit it

and I generally send it to—I have a good friend that does well with writing and

my sister—and I'm like, 'you guys help me edit this' and I get by. That's nice to

have that kind of support.

Ellen is only "getting by" in her classes by looking to her family and friends to edit her

writing, like so many veterans. Madison believed her husband was her greatest resource

since he was also a veteran and a student at the same university. Other veterans also

looked to their spouses for support throughout their academic coursework.

Every male participant who was married cited his wife as a support throughout his

program. Jason credited his wife for encouraging him to go back to school, "I always tell

everybody my wife is the reason I went back to school, a large part of it. She is the reason

so I have to thank her for that." Jason's wife supported him consistently in the application

process and during his coursework. Similarly, Christopher's wife influenced him, "I have

a very wonderful wife who is very understanding, but motivating in the same sense. She

kind of puts a foot in my ass so to speak, and kind of makes me do what I need to, to get

done." Christopher's wife pushed him to graduate as soon as possible and pressed him to

stay with it when he was feeling discouraged. Rick's wife supported him both

emotionally and academically:

My wife is extremely intelligent—she has two master's degrees. If I have a

question, I ask her because she knows how to understand better. It is important to

find someone who knows stuff and knows some of the stuff that you are going

through and can give you help.

Rick praised his wife for her encouragement and commitment to him throughout the interview. Her support extended beyond that to assisting him with coursework and even proofreading his papers for him. When Rick's wife was unable to help, he sought other resources:

> Sometimes I just couldn't get what my professors were saying. Usually when I went back to somebody else who knew how to better explain things to me, I would get it. It just helps sometimes to hear it more than one way. Accounting was a huge hassle for me. I had so much trouble and I still don't think that I understand it. I had it explained to me through a friend at work because my wife doesn't know anything about accounting either. She said it helped to use resources like people you work with and just talk to people—because most people want to help you and to see you succeed.

Rick was resourceful and looked to people around him for support like many veterans do, including Gina. Gina was part of a study group at work where the participants studied together even though they are enrolled in different courses; they bounced ideas off of each other and provided encouragement and accountability. Gina also believed in assisting other veterans who were in a similar situation of returning to school, and she mentored another man that she worked with.

No participants utilized Disability Support Services (DSS). One way students can get support and accommodations for their disabilities is through Disability Support Services (DSS) programs at postsecondary institutions. These services can vary based on

the needs of the student. Since all of the veterans in this study reported having disabilities, it was anticipated that some of them would utilized DSS at their universities.

However, none of veterans in this study registered with DSS at their respective institutions. Five of the veterans, Megan, Ellen, Sam, Rick, and Lucy, said that they did not even know that those services existed and may be available to them. Rick explained, "I don't remember receiving any information on that [DSS], but it doesn't mean that I didn't. It means that it is something wasn't entirely focused on, I guess." Rick was recruited by a representative of his college when he was at a military medical center. Nevertheless, he was still unaware of such services despite the personalized attention he received from the university.

Two veterans, Megan and Lucy, did not know about DSS services, but said that they would be interested in using them. They both said that they had problems transitioning to the university and DSS may have helped. The other veterans did not express any interest in DSS for a variety of reasons.

Ellen and Sam said that they would not like to use DSS. Ellen did not feel like her disability warranted DSS:

I guess if I had an academic disability where maybe I had PTSD or something, then I might look into that [DSS]. But having a physical disability, I am sitting at home on my computer and it doesn't matter if my knees hurt or not- I don't need extra time for that.

Ellen was enrolled in online coursework at her postsecondary institution. Her needs may change if she needed to start attending classes on campus.

Madison was not interested in enrolling in DSS because she did not want to take away resources from other students who may needed them. She related:

> I didn't feel like I was at a disadvantage to need any extra help when it came to any of my academic problems. I feel like the problems that I had were something that affected others in different ways. I didn't want to use their resources when I didn't need them.

Madison was rated by the VA for physical disabilities and it was clear that she did not find that they warranted any additional resources. Jason also did not want more support, "because that would almost be treating me like I was handicap, and for me, I don't feel like I need that." Likewise, Christopher did not consider himself to have special needs despite his physical disabilities: "I am not physically disabled to the point, like I don't have any amputations or anything like that, so I am not really like considered special needs." Seeing fellow servicemen in worse situations has tempered Christopher's view of his own disabilities.

Many of the veterans were proud and did not want to be treated as if they had a disability or want any extra help. Hannah mentioned, "I think I denied it [DSS] for the simple fact that I wanted to see if I could do without it…I'm kind of one of those—I'm headstrong—if I can't do it [without support], I shouldn't be doing it." Rick also echoed this determination to do it on his own, "I'm not the type of person who likes any special

treatment because of whatever. I realized everyone else is doing the same thing." The veterans' attitudes about DSS are connected to their feelings towards their disabilities.

Rick shared his views on veterans with disabilities during the interview. In the military he observed:

I found some people, especially when I was going to be medically retired, expected things to be handed to them, like they were owed something. I never felt that way. Your life, the decisions you made, and I don't think anything should be given to anybody. There is something to say about earning it, making it worth more. If you just give it to everybody then it is worthless.

Despite suffering from physical injuries and a traumatic brain injury (TBI), Rick had strength and self-determination that propelled him forward in his life. He was proud of his service and viewed college as an opportunity for him to continue challenging himself. Rick refused to let his disabilities define or hinder him.

Positive relationships with faculty. All ten veterans reported having positive relationships with faculty at their postsecondary institutions. For example, Hannah's professors were very understanding and flexible in allowing her to turn in assignments late. Ellen had similar experiences with her professors who helped her edit papers so that she can improve in various areas and resubmit them. Christopher also believed that his professors have been understanding although he had not needed to ask for any accommodations. Sam, Gina, and Madison described good relationships with their instructors, and Madison thought that they took her more seriously when they found out

that she was a veteran. She observed that her professors, "reached out and encouraged me to use my experience to help with the projects or papers I was writing." Though Madison did not believe that her professors gave her any special accommodations because she was a veteran, she appreciated feeling like her experiences were valued. Gina also had strong relationships with faculty at her institution and said they encouraged students to finish their degrees, "they would try to boost you up, to bring you up, instead of 'oh, this is an F.' They were the type of people who help a lot of people to stay in there, to keep them from running away from it." According to Gina, supportive professors were essential for veterans to be able to complete their degrees. Jason also had overwhelmingly positive experiences with his professors, especially Dr. Butch, a faculty member with a military background who served as his mentor throughout his time at the university.

A few of the veterans had experiences with faculty that they thought could be improved upon. While many of Megan's professors provided excellent feedback, were flexible about due dates, and interested in seeing the students succeed, others posed some difficulties. She described about half of the faculty as intimidating and lacking consistency, flexibility, and availability. Lucy also had a couple of professors who were not accommodating and did not go out of their way to support the student veterans. Rick preferred that his professors would reach out more to students who have "blank stares" in class to check for understanding. Rick advised:

> If teachers just talk to students one-on-one, you can tell if they are getting it or
> not, set them up for success. Just try to point them in the right direction and make
> sure they know that it is going to be work. Don't give them any breaks as far as

that goes. Like 'well, you don't have to write ten pages on it, you can only write 5. It's okay, I understand.' Because that is not helping anybody. You should expect from them just like any other student.

Rick wanted his professors to support him in doing his best work, but not by giving him modified assignments or any breaks. He wanted to be held to the same high standards as any student. Sam also wanted his professors to treat him the same as other students, "they treat me like anybody else in their class. I didn't received any special treatment or anything like that. I really don't expect to get any special treatment." Sam and Rick do not want to receive any accommodations because they were veterans with disabilities.

Nevertheless, three of the veterans with disabilities noted that faculty needs to exercise caution when working with veterans with disabilities, as sensitive issues can arise across subject areas. Jason explained:

Maybe some veterans that had been at war and lost friends or maybe they have lost limbs. If the class has anything to do with politics or literature, they might want to be careful about what they say. Because those veterans that have been through war and lost friends may have PTSD—who knows what would happen. Something like that can set them off.

Jason recognized the unpredictability of what can trigger PTSD and how the veterans may react as a result. Hannah suggested that professors should receive training on how to work with these students:

They have got to be careful, especially with guys that have PTSD—they could

trigger a memory. Staff should be trained at least a little bit so that they can

understand, 'oh wait—he has got a blank stare on his face. Let's see what's going

on. Are you okay?' or something like that. Because I know a couple of my guys—

talking about airplanes draws back memories.

The veterans believed that professors should be able to recognize the signs of PTSD and

anxiety in their students in order to refer them to counseling services. Lucy explained,

"[veterans] shouldn't be stressed out over this assignment like it is life or death. Maybe

what you did over there is life and death, but this is not. So they [professors] could

recognize things and be able to refer some of their vets to services that might be helpful."

Lucy suggested a strategy that faculty could use when they observed a student grappling

with PTSD to help assuage the student and keep things in perspective. Strategies such as

these can be part of faculty training geared towards veterans.

Jason and Hannah offered advice for professors who were working with veterans

and believed faculty training could help them in responding both proactively and

reactively. It is also important for professors to know that veterans do not expect to be

treated differently from other students. They appreciated when their professors are

accommodating, flexible, and checked in with students to make sure they were on the

right track.

Recommendations for veterans based on participants' experiences. Several of

the participants offered advice for other veterans about transitioning to postsecondary

school and the workload they could expect. Rick recommended that veterans begin

thinking about college before they leave the military to facilitate their transition to college. He explained that many veterans do not realize how much work goes into being a student, "they just see with the new GI Bill they give you money to go to school, so I think a lot of people will think, 'oh, I will go and get the money' and they don't realize how much work is involved." Rick warned veterans about the workload in order for them to be prepared when they start their courses.

When veterans enter college, Sam suggested that they remain patient and open minded, especially about their classmates:

> Probably about 99% of the class didn't have the same experiences that they had over the past five years being deployed and up in the military. It's just a transition and you have to get used to that transition, moving back to the civilian life and being constantly around other people who haven't had those types of experiences they've had.

Although Sam did not view civilian students any differently than veterans, he recognized that there were noticeable contrasts between the two groups that required time to adjust to.

Recommendations for universities based on participants' experiences. Many universities describe themselves as veteran-friendly to attract and show their support for veteran students. All of the veterans interviewed had positive or neutral feelings about their university being considered a veteran-friendly institution. Nine of the veterans described their college as veteran-friendly. One veteran, Jason, was neutral and said he

wouldn't describe his institution as friendly or unfriendly. Ellen thought her university

was veteran-friendly because "it has an office specifically for veterans…there is a special

customer service window for veteran affairs because veteran affairs can be a nightmare."

Megan believed her institution was military-friendly since they advertise that they are and

have a veteran support section on student advising.

Both the positive and negative experiences the veterans had at their

postsecondary institutions prompted them to provide recommendations for how

universities can better support veterans. While the veterans would appreciate and benefit

from various methods of support, they do not expect special treatment. Rick summarizes:

> There is only so much universities can do to get you on the path. It's your job to
>
> take the reins and go with it. They can get you to the water, but it is up to you to
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> drink the water—we have to put the work in. I think if you do the job getting us
>
> there and try to find different ways to work with us…of understanding that
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> different people have different disabilities and not every case is the same.

Veterans are used to taking responsibility and persevering in times of resistance—facing

college as a student with disabilities is no different. Three of the participants offered

suggestions about ways universities could assist veterans in getting off to strong start.

Madison recommended that veterans should receive priority registration in order to

access required courses since they receive funding under the Post 9/11 GI Bill for a

limited amount of time. During the enrollment process, Gina believed that the university

should ask veterans if they have a disability, "in the beginning is where it should all come

out, because even though they [the university] didn't ask me if I had a disability, maybe

there should have been that question to push me, just in case I was too nervous to tell them that I might be slow in class." Additionally, this practice would prompt the university to share information about Disability Support Services (DSS) on campus, supports that most of the veterans in this study did not know about. The university could also use the enrollment process to connect veterans with each other through various opportunities offered on campus or virtually. Lucy proposed that veterans who are taking classes online should have access to a virtual lounge where they could connect with other service members. This would enable veterans to ask each other questions about their experiences at the university and to discover what veterans' organizations others are joining outside of class.

Five veterans, Jason, Rick, Gina, Madison, Megan, and Ellen, all suggested that universities connect each veteran with a "mentor/advisor." Jason, Rick, Gina, and Madison each had someone who filled this role in some capacity, which they cited as contributing to their success. Jason recommended a model similar to the one he had:

> Each school maybe has a military advisor, or if possible, each department could have one. That could be too many, but I think that might help. I think that is kind of what George Mason did anyways with my advisor. He was a retired Colonel and he sort of took on all those military veterans and became their advisor.

Jason's advisor took it on himself to informally mentor veterans; a formal program similar to this one could benefit even more students. Megan suggested that:

Each student should have one advisor that would be the point of contact so you are speaking with the same person all the time. It would make things more personable and less confusing. A mentor who advises with courses and checks in.

Megan would have liked to have a mentor that provided her with the personalized attention and support that she needed. Veterans are accustomed to reporting to someone in the military and a mentor would give them the accountability that they are used to.

Gina's university had an office dedicated to supporting veterans, though she was never assigned an individual mentor. She described the staff in the office as being exceptionally diligent:

You did not go a month without someone calling you, harassing you on the phone. But they weren't harassing you, they were just saying, 'how are you doing? How do you feel about your studies? Do you have any problems with your studies? Do you recommend that I get somebody to help you with your studies? Do you want to go see a counselor or find someone to study with?' They were not silent people at all.

Though Gina never felt it was necessary for her to utilize any of these supports, she valued them and appreciated having people hold her accountable for her academics.

The veterans also noted that it would be useful if their mentor/advisor had experience in the military. Madison expressed, "Sometimes non-veterans don't understand—when they look at you like you are speaking another language—a representative who has been in the military or had family that were in the military…it is

easier to work with somebody who has done what you have done." The veterans found it easier to relate to other veterans and therefore trusted them more.

Ellen thought that it would also be beneficial for the advisor to, "start talking about careers at least a year before students' graduate—to make sure they are constantly in contact with someone about placement." The veterans were concerned about their next career steps, especially those who had the responsibility of supporting a family. Furthermore, they would value extra transition support and career placement services.

The veterans shared that they would also like universities to consider giving them credit for their time in the military, since there is frequently an overlap with content areas. Lucy explained, "here are a lot of military kids out there and their whole things is the study of a region and to discuss everything from weapons, military defense, political issues—experience can sometimes give you better understanding of how you use the information versus just reading it in the textbook and then moving onto another class the next semester." Even though the subject matter may not be a perfect fit, veterans bring invaluable real life experience and knowledge of a variety of topics that their time in uniform taught them.

Summary

In general, this diverse sample of veterans with disabilities had positive experiences in postsecondary school, despite their challenges. Their transitions to college were exacerbated by simultaneously adjusting to civilian life, where they specifically had issues with accountability and time management. Veterans who had an advisor at their universities during this time reported having smoother transitions. The majority of the

veterans experienced academic challenges in some capacity and struggled to balance school, work, and family commitments. Their primary source of support resulted from asking for assistance from professors, family, friends, and coworkers.

None of the veterans in this study were registered with Disability Support Services (DSS) and half of them were unaware that such programs existed. Nevertheless, the majority of veterans did not want to receive any supports or accommodations because of their disabilities. They did not see their disabilities holding them back and largely had strong attitudes of personal responsibility and determination. Although they did not wish to receive special treatment, they believed that professors needed to receive training on the issues of veterans with disabilities to so they can be both proactive and reactive.

None of the veterans participated in student veterans' organizations (SVO) or any other groups on campus, mostly because of their limited amount of free time. They enjoyed taking classes with other military students and reported strained relationships with non-veteran students. The vast majority of the veterans did not want or care if they were identified as a veteran to their peers and professors.

Jason was the only outlier in this study for a plethora of reasons. He was the only participant who had already graduated from college, and since that time also completed a Master's degree. As a student, he did not struggle, but rather achieved great academic success by winning the award for "Undergraduate Student of the Year" at his university. Jason was the only veteran who engaged in social activities on campus and had friends in his classes.

The next Chapter will examine the findings of this study through

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory and Schlossberg's Transition Theory. This

discussion will be used to provide recommendations for practice and for future research

opportunities.

Chapter V

Discussion and Recommendations

Introduction

Since 2001, there has been an increase in the number of veterans attending postsecondary institutions under the Post 9/11 GI Bill. These students may encounter unique challenges that traditional undergraduate students do not, thus requiring supplemental services. While there has been research on the postsecondary experiences of veterans, there is a dearth of literature on those of veterans with disabilities. This particular group is growing as the result of veterans returning from war and they are more susceptible to face difficulties as students.

The purpose of study was to conduct a qualitative analysis of the experiences of veterans with disabilities at a four-year postsecondary institution in order to identify the supports and services that contributed to their academic success. The ten veterans selected for the study participated in semi-structured interviews where they reflected on their experiences as undergraduate students. They attended ten different universities throughout the United States and had a broad range of disabilities, branches of service, and combat exposure, as depicted in Table 4 of Chapter 4. Largely, the participants struggled during their transition to school and faced challenges academically, though they did not register with Disability Support Services (DSS) or participate in student veterans' organizations (SVO). All of the veterans reported that their primary method of support was asking people around them for academic assistance, especially family, faculty, and university mentors.

Transition Model and Ecological Systems

The results of this study were analyzed through Bronfenbrenner's Ecological

Systems Theory that is based on the premise that individuals are a part of an always

shifting ecology that is comprised of the macro-, exo-, meso-, and micro- systems

(Bronfenbrenner, 1977; 1979). The macrosystem consists of the federal laws, policies,

and social norms that shape all of the other systems, such as attitudes towards disabilities.

The exosystem is the application of these laws and policies at the students' postsecondary

institutions. The veterans with disabilities in this study did not directly interact with

elements of the exo- and macrosystems. The mesosytem is the interaction between two or

more elements in the microsystem such as the relationship between Disability Support

Services (DSS) and faculty. Other parts of the microsystem include the association

between the veterans with disabilities and the individuals and settings they come in

contact with including family, peers, faculty, and the Veterans Support Office (VSO).

Each of these ecological layers influence the postsecondary experiences of veterans with

disabilities and provide an illustration of a more comprehensive understanding.

Schlossberg's Transition Theory was also utilized to frame the discussion of the

findings, particularly at the level of the microsystem (Anderson, Goodman, &

Schlossberg, 2012). Two parts of this transition model, approaching transitions and

factors that influence transitions, have served as the theoretical basis in recent studies of

the postsecondary experiences of veterans (Ackerman et al., 2009; DiRamio et al., 2008;

Livingston, 2009). The term 'approaching transitions' denotes the type and context of the

transition, and how the individual perceives it. The factors that impact transitions can serve as assets or liabilities, and are defined by the 4 S System, four primary sets of factors that impact an individual's ability to cope with a transition: situation, self, support, and strategies. The situation refers to the circumstances surrounding the transition and includes timing and familial obligations. The self alludes to personal characteristics like age that can have a direct or indirect effect on veterans' transition experiences. Support includes all social systems such as family, friends, coworkers, and faculty, all of which are essential to managing stress. Strategies are methods employed by veterans to facilitate coping with their transition to postsecondary school such as self-advocacy and joining student veterans' groups. Each of these can act as an asset or a liability that influences the success of transitions to postsecondary school for veterans with disabilities.

Macrosystem and Exosystem. Elements of the macrosystem and exosystem are aligned with the contextual factors of an individual's transition to postsecondary school as defined by Schlossberg's Transition Theory. These components include the political landscape and societal circumstances framing the postsecondary experiences of veterans with disabilities. Policy and social norms directly and indirectly shape the accommodations that students with disabilities receive at their postsecondary institutions.

Implementing federal assistance programs for veterans in postsecondary education has led to the aggressive recruitment of veterans (Executive Order, 2012). Research has shown that these policies have resulted in the encouragement of veterans with disabilities to enroll in universities that did not provide them with adequate

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academic support (Executive Order, 2012; Cook & Kim, 2009). In this study, Rick was recruited by a university while he was receiving treatment at Walter Reed National Military Medical Center. Despite having apparent disabilities, the recruiter did not offer any information to Rick on how the university could provide accommodations and services to assist him with his coursework.

Federal guidance on postsecondary supports and services for students with disabilities does not provide specific guidelines, thus giving institutions extensive flexibility in their implementation (Stodden et al., 2004). Students must self-identify as having a disability in order to receive Disability Support Services (DSS) at postsecondary institutions. A prior survey on postsecondary institutions conducted by the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) found that 79 percent of postsecondary institutions distribute materials to encourage students with disabilities to self-identify (Raue & Lewis, 2011). However, this study on veterans with disabilities reported contradictory outcomes, as five of the ten veterans interviewed were unaware that their universities provided supports and services for students with disabilities. Furthermore, of the five veterans who were uninformed about DSS, two of them expressed an interest in utilizing such services, believing that the accommodations would have made their transition to college easier.

The remaining five veterans' perceptions of disabilities impacted their willingness to receive DSS. Two of the veterans had physical disabilities and did not feel that they warranted any additional support, but recognized that people with different types of disabilities may benefit, whether they are physical or not. A deeper understanding of DSS

may have altered this perspective. Other veterans declined services because they did not feel as though they deserved to be in college if they needed additional supports; they wanted to challenge themselves to see if they could succeed without any accommodations in order to "earn" their degrees. Many of the veterans believed that DSS would offer them preferential treatment, and they did not want to be regarded as different or in need of anything special. Again, further information about DSS could serve to lessen the stigma associated with it and help veterans comprehend that these services do not alter the value of their degrees. These findings were supported by previous research that found veterans with disabilities frequently do not seek out DSS because they are unaware of the services or associate disabilities with weakness (Madaus, 2009; Burnett & Segoria, 2009). This results in an extensive treatment gap for veterans with disabilities not receiving DSS at their postsecondary institutions; none of the veterans in this study registered with DSS.

Mesosystem and Microsystem. The elements of the mesosystem and microsystem can directly influence the postsecondary experiences of veterans with disabilities and includes Schlossberg's 4 S System. The situation, self, support, and strategies all work as assets or liabilities for veterans coping with their transition to postsecondary institutions.

Situation. The results show that the influence of the situation surrounding veterans with disabilities extended beyond the transition period and also affected their schedule and enrollment in classes. The additional responsibilities of family and work influence veterans academically as they are more likely to enroll in distance and online

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courses. Accordingly, seven of the veterans who participated in this study were enrolled in online classes for reasons of scheduling and convenience. Extenuating conditions can also propel veterans to take a leave of absence, such as a family emergency or increased responsibilities at work. In this study, life circumstances prompted three of the female veterans to take a leave of absence to have their children. Another veteran needed to take a leave of absence when her Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) began impacting her schoolwork.

These results support research about the circumstances that can affect veterans with disabilities during postsecondary school. Research shows that about half of veterans who attend college are married and are more likely to have family obligations than traditional students (Radford, 2009; 2011). Eight of the participants in this study were married with children, and five of them discussed their struggles to find a balance with their school, work, and family situations. All ten of the veterans were full-time students and seven of them also worked full-time. Consequently, finding the time to excel at school was a common theme throughout the study.

The situation surrounding the transition of veterans' with disabilities includes the timing of when they entered civilian life and postsecondary school. Nine of the participants in this study described having challenging transitions after leaving the military. These outcomes are significantly higher than previous research that found four-four percent of veterans who served after September 11, 2001 reported having a difficult time re-entering civilian life (Pew, 2011). This discrepancy may be attributed to all of the veterans in this study having disabilities, which fosters additional challenges.

Self. Eight of the ten participants in this study were completely indifferent about being identified as a veteran and only one veteran opted not to disclose this information. While these veterans were not forthright about their military backgrounds, they did not try to conceal them and were open to talking about it if it pertained to the course. This finding is different from previous research on veterans attending postsecondary institutions that found they tend to downplay or hide their status as a veteran to help them assimilate on campus (Lighthall, 2012; Livingston, 2009).

Nine of the veterans in this study ranged between 27 and 34 years of age, and they discussed having strained relationships with classmates due to differences in age. Seven of the veterans explained that they had trouble relating to their younger peers and viewed them differently because of their lack of life experiences. Accordingly, the veterans felt that they did not fit in a traditional postsecondary environment. These veterans were slightly older than those in earlier studies where veterans are commonly in their mid- to late- twenties, or over the age of 40 (Radford, 2009; 2011). The results surrounding age support multiple studies that have reported that student veterans usually have difficulty identifying with their peers who are younger and more immature (Zinger & Cohen, 2010; DiRamio et al., 2008; Livingston, 2009). The three themes regarding 'self' that emerged in this study all shaped the participants' experiences in postsecondary school: identity as a veteran, attitude, and impact of age.

Support. Themes of support emerged in this study through family, faculty and advisors, peers, and other veterans. Seven of the ten veterans in this study cited support from people around them as being instrumental to their academic success. Six of these

veterans noted that their family members, particularly their spouses, assisted them in school both emotionally and academically. Every male participant who was married discussed the role his wife played in his education by encouraging, motivating, and helping to manage his coursework.

Every veteran in this study described having positive relationships with the professors at their postsecondary institutions that provided support. This finding differs from several previous studies that reported veterans frequently described relationships with faculty as ambivalent and did not form close relationships with them (DiRamio et al., 2008; Ackerman et al., 2009; Livingston, 2009). The parameters of the study may have contributed to this theme since all of the participants were currently enrolled, or recently graduated from a four-year institution, and therefore may be more likely to have positive experiences with faculty than veterans who have left school.

Three of the veterans explicated that he or she each had a faculty member who served as a mentor to them throughout their time in school. Accordingly, each of these veterans were the only participants who related that they were able to transition from the military to postsecondary school without any challenges. This outcome expands on a previous study that found a positive connection between student advisors and a successful transition for veterans (Livingston, 2009), to include veterans with disabilities.

Only one veteran in this study utilized academic resources on campus and none of the veterans sought the help of their peers. This finding is a stark contrast to earlier research that has shown veterans are reluctant to seek academic support through campus resources and rather opt to solicit the assistance of other veterans, particularly those with

knowledge of their area of study (Hall, 2011; Livingston, 2009). The participants in this study did not engage with other students socially either, as none of them partook in any social activities on campus. Moreover, nine of the veterans lacked any social relationships with their peers and eight of them emphasized that building these relationships was not a priority for them at this point in their lives.

These veterans reported that they viewed their non-veteran peers differently and preferred to be around other veterans. However, none of the participants formed social relationships with veterans or joined any student veteran groups on campus, despite nine of them noting that this may interest them under different circumstances. Though the veterans felt more at ease around other service members, they were nevertheless disinterested in building relationships with any of their peers, including veterans, which is contrary to previous literature (Lighthall, 2012; DiRamio et al., 2008; Ackerman et al., 2009). Social support could have served as an asset to the veterans in postsecondary school.

Strategies. Schlossberg's fourth S refers to the strategies veterans use to help them cope with their transition to postsecondary institutions. Nine of the ten veterans in this study struggled with their coursework during postsecondary school. This finding contradicts other research on veterans who are enrolled in college that showed they have little trouble academically (Livingston, 2009). This outcome may be attributed to the fact that all of the veterans in this study had disabilities and therefore were more likely to require academic supports and services. Their struggles were also compounded by the fact that they did not receive the supports and services that they needed at their

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universities, either because they were unaware of their options or because they did not want to receive any special treatment.

All ten veterans in this study expressed feeling somewhat or completely prepared for their academic coursework, although nine of them struggled academically and four of them needed to enroll in remedial coursework. This result supports earlier research that revealed many veterans with and without disabilities entered college unprepared and lacked strong study skills and focus (DiRamio et al., 2008; Ackerman et al., 2009). This lack of preparation may be attributed to the gap between graduating from high school and enrolling in college. However, none of the participants in this study discussed having weak study skills or an absence of focus. These results suggest a theme of disconnect between feeling prepared versus being prepared. Therefore, while the veterans with disabilities perceived themselves as being prepared academically, they may have needed additional supports to bolster their achievement such as Disability Support Services (DSS), remedial coursework, or tutoring services.

The majority of veterans in this study faced academic challenges and consequently developed strategies to overcome them. Seven of the veterans with disabilities used time management and scheduling as a strategy to address the lack of structure in postsecondary school. Seven of the veterans credited learning how to be self-reliant and asking for help with coursework as a method to coping with not having a military officer of higher rank to lead them. Both of these strategies emerged as themes throughout the study and were utilized by the majority of the veterans with disabilities. Similarly, prior research similarly shows that there were two areas that veterans struggled

extensively with academically: lack of structure and a clear chain of command (Mangan & Wright, 2009; Osbourne, 2014). Upon entering postsecondary school, these students faced self-management that was strikingly different from the military, such as determining their schedule and acting autonomously.

A personal characteristic that emerged as a theme in this study was the veterans' commitment to succeeding in postsecondary school. Three of the veterans explained that this drive was one of the most important things that contributed to academic success. Similarly, all ten of the veterans exhibited a positive attitude towards college and were determined to persevere regardless of the challenges they faced. This finding is in part due to the fact that all of the participants in the study had graduated from, or were currently enrolled in, postsecondary institutions; the results would have likely been different had the veterans attended a postsecondary institution at an earlier point in time but stopped attending. This theme aligns with a previous study that found self-efficacy among military service members to be a strong predictor of academic success, as determined by grade point average (GPA) (Ness & Vroman, 2014).

Limitations of These Findings

The veterans with disabilities who participated in this study were all currently enrolled in, or had recently graduated from, four-year postsecondary institutions. Therefore, the parameters excluded veterans who had left their programs for personal or academic reasons. As such, the findings elucidate the experiences of veterans with disabilities who were successful at their postsecondary institutions, and do not capture the challenges of other veterans who found it necessary to leave their universities.

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Additionally, the results of this study are not statistically generalizable due to the small sample size and purposive sampling.

Recommendations for Practice

While this study was limited to ten participants, it aligns with preexisting literature on veterans in postsecondary school and provides additional insight into the experiences of veterans with disabilities. It offers guidance for universities to better serve veterans with disabilities, though is not representative of all veterans with disabilities who enroll in four-year postsecondary institutions.

Strengthen transition services. Schlossberg's Transition Theory elucidated the transition experiences of veterans with disabilities entering postsecondary programs and yielded suggestions for improving transition services for these students. Specifically, these services can be strengthened when students are transferring to the university and by offering a robust orientation for all students.

Research shows that the majority of veterans transfer to their four-year postsecondary institutions, which can cause difficulties in receiving credit for previous coursework. Universities should provide formal assistance in transferring credits for students who previously attended another college in order to maximize the credit they receive for their previous classes. In this study, two of the veterans were left to enroll in courses without any guidance and it caused in problems such as registering for unnecessary courses. It is up to the discretion of the university if veterans can receive credit for their military service, since some of the work can translate into credits for various courses, such as International Relations. Veterans can have a deeper

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understanding of world events due to their real life experiences and the participants in this study expressed a desire to receive credit for their work in the military. The need for veterans with disabilities needing assistance in transferring credits is also found in previous research on essential practices for directors of student veteran programs (Miller, 20110). Another way to improve services for transfer students is through four-year universities partnering with local community colleges to facilitate the transition of students. In this capacity, the institutions can align some core classes to make transferring credits easier for students and to streamline other support services. Two participants who reported having an easy transition attributed it to the strong partnership between their community colleges and four-year institutions, noting that it bolstered their early success in school.

Most of the veterans opted not to attend orientation at their universities because they felt like it was unnecessary, especially for those who had attended orientation at a previous institution. However, the veterans who went to an orientation revealed that it gave them a firmer grasp on what to expect at their current universities. Therefore, it would be beneficial for four-year institutions to require all students, including those enrolled in online classes, to attend an orientation before classes begin. One veteran in this study attended an orientation that was sponsored by the particular school he was attending within the college (Engineering), and it enabled him to learn about his particular program and connect with professors and students who he would be working with as a student. He attributed his long-term success as an undergraduate to the opportunities that he encountered during this orientation. Orientations on a smaller scale such as this one create a sense of community for the veterans and can offer them an

introduction to various majors and study habits that are particularly beneficial to those students.

Orientations need to include the basics about campus resources, study skills, time management, and self-reliance, as all of these are areas that new veteran students frequently struggle with. It is advisable that universities include more information than traditional students may find necessary in order to fully assist veterans in "restructuring" and designing their collegiate lives. It is also a time to discuss Disability Support Services (DSS) to facilitate veterans' understanding about what it does, who is eligible, and the types of accommodations it can provide. It is extremely important for postsecondary institutions to provide information about DSS in multiple ways since half of the participants in this study were unaware of DSS and it can greatly improve student outcomes.

Several participants in this study communicated that they appreciated having opportunities to connect with current and former students about their experiences at the university. Orientation is an ideal time to have other students discuss how they juggled family, school, and work commitments, and it would especially beneficial if they were veterans as well. Some of the veterans in this study did not know anyone who had attended college and this would provide them with the chance to ask a seasoned student veteran what to expect to ease their transition to postsecondary school.

Improve the identification veterans with disabilities. On the postsecondary level, students with disabilities self-identify and are responsible for registering with Disability Support Services (DSS) to enable them to receive the necessary

accommodations. Many veterans only recently became eligible for such services during combat and are unaware of what options are available to support their academic work on campus as found in prior research (Church, 2009; Shackelford, 2009). Therefore it is recommended that universities provide students with ample information about DSS throughout the enrollment process. When completing paperwork for the university, all students can be required to check a box stating whether they would like to identify a disability or not, and whether they are interested in DSS or are refusing them. Making it compulsory for students to answer both questions helps guard against veterans being unaware that DSS may be available to them. The findings of this study strongly support this recommendation given the gap in services for every veteran with disabilities who participated.

Provide each veteran with a mentor/advisor. In this study, the three veterans who had seamless transitions to postsecondary school all worked with mentors/advisors; the majority of participants reported that they would have benefited from a mentor's support. Mentors can help throughout the enrollment process and beyond by providing veterans with disabilities with personalized support throughout their time at the postsecondary institution. This recommendation is supported by a previous dissertation that revealed a positive connection between faculty advisors and facilitating smooth transitions for veterans. Upon entering school, each veteran can be assigned a mentor who ideally has a background or association with the military. The mentor's role extends far beyond assisting in transferring credits and designing a course plan, to include strengthening their academic success. In this capacity, mentors can discuss learning strategies, study skills, self-advocacy, and time management, as well as direct veterans to

university resources. For example, mentors can refer veterans with disabilities to student veterans' organizations (SVO), Disability Support Services (DSS), or counseling services for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, among others. Mentors can also provide accountability through weekly check-ins to ensure that any issues which arise are addressed immediately and do not become magnified. Finally, mentors can facilitate veterans' transition to the workplace by providing career support and guidance.

Bolster faculty training on veterans' issues. Faculty needs to be prepared to work with the growing number of students who are veterans with disabilities, as noted by the participants in this study. Faculty should be trained on the background of veterans, including their potential characteristics and challenges. This recommendation is supported by previous guidance issued by the Association on Higher Education and Disability (AHEAD), the largest professional organization for postsecondary personnel who work with students with disabilities (AHEAD, n.d.). This guidance for includes DSS facilitating an institutional awareness of students with disabilities and providing necessary professional development and faculty training. Queen and Lewis (2013) reported that select 2-year and 4-year postsecondary institutions offered various trainings for faculty in the following areas: mental health issues associated with military service (21 percent), physical health issues resulting from military service (14 percent), and student transition from military to civilian life (21 percent). Approximately half of these training programs were mandatory for faculty members. Other literature on student veteran programs (SVP) also determined a need to train faculty on veterans' issues (Miller, 2011). One participant in this study suggested that professors should check in with veterans who may not be accustomed to asking for help if they need it. Furthermore,

faculty should be trained to identify academic disabilities and symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) in order to refer veterans to the appropriate resources on campus. Faculty are in an advantageous position where they can readily assist veterans with disabilities if they are trained to do so.

Connect veterans to each other online. The literature cites that participating in veterans groups and engaging with other veterans can be beneficial to the academic success of veterans (Cook & Kim, 2009). While none of the veterans in this study participated in a student veterans' organization (SVO), nine veterans expressed interest if their schedules allowed them time to participate. Time was also a factor in their coursework and led the majority of participants to enroll in online classes because of their flexibility. One veteran recommended that universities offer virtual spaces for veterans to connect with each other at their convenience. By creating a virtual veteran world, veterans could participate in online groups, chat rooms, ask questions, and also have resources at their disposal that are pertinent to veterans, such as restrictions on the Post 9/11 GI Bill. Based on the results of this study, veterans with disabilities would utilize and benefit from this type of support.

Provide online academic supports. Only one veteran in this study took advantage of her university's academic supports by utilizing tutoring services to assist her with math and writing. Another participant who was taking classes online noted that she would like to use such university services, though she was unable to travel to campus to do so. As such, it would be advantageous for postsecondary institutions to offer online academic supports to encourage more students to pursue help with their learning. Online

supports may include assistance with math, study skill support, scheduling/time management training, and a writing center. Having these resources available online would enable students to seek assistance when their schedule allows and relieve veterans with disabilities who may have mobility issues. This recommendation is particularly valuable to veterans with disabilities who may be reluctant to ask for assistance with their coursework; they may be more inclined to seek help online since it is more anonymous than being face-to-face.

Summary of recommendations. The researcher proposed the following recommendations for practice in the university setting:

- Strengthen transition services

- Improve the identification of veterans with disabilities

- Provide each veteran with a mentor/advisor

- Bolster faculty training on veterans' issues

- Connect veterans to each other online

- Provide online academic supports

Recommendations for Future Research

This study bridges a gap in the current literature on veterans with disabilities' reflections of their postsecondary academic experiences, though it is only a snapshot in time. Further research is necessary to augment the scope and depth of this understanding.

Academic performance of veterans with disabilities. Although this study provided the veterans' perceptions of their experiences in postsecondary school, additional research on the academic performance of veterans with disabilities is still needed. This recommendation is supported by previous research that cites the lacks the academic performance and graduation rates of veterans with disabilities (Fain, 2013; Cate, 2014). Such data would yield grade point averages (GPA), repeated courses, number of veterans enrolled in remedial classes, and subject areas of weakness. It can also boost previous research on the link between self-efficacy and GPA (Ness & Vroman, 2014). Comparison groups between veterans with disabilities who are registered with Disability Support Services (DSS) and those who are not, would ascertain the benefits of veterans utilizing those supports. Furthermore, connecting student outcomes with methods of support used could guide postsecondary institutions towards bolstering programs.

Graduation rate of veterans with disabilities. A nationally representative study on the graduation rate of veterans with disabilities is needed. Universities are serving an influx of veterans with disabilities, though there is no comprehensive data on their retention rates or how long they are enrolled in classes before graduating. Qualitative research in these areas from the perspectives of the veterans may elucidate the story behind the numbers. The results could be utilized by postsecondary institutions to direct requisite supports and services, and could influence limitations on the Post 9/11 GI Bill that provide funding for a specified amount of time.

Veterans' transition to careers. This study used Schlossberg's Transition Theory to elucidate the experiences of veterans with disabilities entering college, though it is critical to also understand their transition after college to careers. Further research is needed in the following areas: the supports veterans received from their postsecondary institutions and their effectiveness, the jobs veterans accepted and how long it took to secure employment, and how veterans acclimated to the civilian workforce. This information would equip postsecondary institutions with the knowledge to design better career and transition services for veterans with disabilities. Additionally, the data could drive improvements on a national level by shaping policy on hiring veterans in the workplace.

Summary of recommendations. The researcher proposed the following recommendations for future areas of research:

- Academic performance of veterans with disabilities

- Graduation rate of veterans with disabilities

- Veterans' transition to careers

Conclusion

This study contributed to the existing body of literature on veterans with disabilities through the participants' reflections on their experiences at a four-year postsecondary institution. It is one of the few studies that reported the findings of veterans with disabilities' postsecondary experiences separately from veterans in general (Miller, 2011; Vance & Miller, 2009). Additionally, this study filled a gap in the

literature by interviewing the veterans about the supports and services they utilized, as opposed to university service providers such as Disability Support Services (DSS) or Student Veterans Programs.

The study revealed that nine of the ten veterans encountered transition, academic, and/or social challenges at their postsecondary institutions. The one veteran who did not face issues in these areas credited his success to a mentor/advisor that he met at orientation and worked closely with throughout his undergraduate career. It is crucial to note that the mentor/advisor had served in the military, which heightened the student's comfort level. While this finding is limited to only one person's experience, it illustrates the importance of student veterans working closely with mentors/advisors who have a military background, and the impact it can have on the student's success.

Seven of the ten veterans in this study experienced difficulties transitioning to their postsecondary institutions; six of these veterans did not attend an orientation at their current university. Conversely, two of the three veterans who had smooth transitions attended orientations at their institutions. These findings suggest that orientations can ease a veteran's transition to a four-year institution and led to the recommendation that postsecondary institutions should require veterans to attend an orientation. Students who are taking courses exclusively online can utilize virtual orientations.

Nine of the ten veterans with disabilities in this study experienced academic challenges. Students with disabilities may qualify for Disability Support Services (DSS) at their postsecondary institutions that would provide them with support and accommodations. However, none of the participants in this study registered with DSS

and five of them did not even know that such supports were available. The majority of the veterans disclosed that they would not want any help from DSS, although they were unclear about what DSS provided. These findings indicate that veterans with disabilities underutilize DSS, are frequently unaware that DSS exists, and do not understand what DSS offers. As such, postsecondary institutions should ensure that veterans with disabilities are aware of DSS, regardless of whether they take advantage of these supports. This conclusion could have implications beyond the scope of this study for veterans with disabilities who dropped out of postsecondary school due to academic struggles.

Nine of the veterans did not have a lot of social interaction with other students on campus or online. Seven of the ten veterans viewed their civilian peers differently and nine expressed a desire to connect with other veterans. Nevertheless, none of the veterans participated in a student veterans' organization (SVO) because of their hectic schedules. Interestingly, that is also the reason why seven of the veterans took at least some postsecondary courses online. Therefore, providing an online forum for veterans to connect to each other could allow for more veterans to participate in veteran oriented programs that can also benefit their academic success (Cook & Kim, 2009).

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory and Schlossberg's Transition Theory were utilized to frame the discussion of the findings. Bronfenbrenner's macro- and exo- systems included policy and social norms that influenced the services that veterans with disabilities received at their postsecondary institutions. The meso- and micro- systems included Schlossberg's 4 S System that elucidated the postsecondary

experiences of veterans with disabilities through the perspectives of the situation, support, strategies, and self. The issues in the veterans' situation extended beyond their transitions to postsecondary school and impacted their academic experiences as well. The data pertaining to the self from the veterans provided insight into both the challenges and the supports they faced. While findings revealed that the participants did not use Disability Support Services (DSS) and Student Veterans Organizations (SVO), Schlossberg's support and strategies indicated the types of assistance the veterans' employed instead.

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A Study of the Experiences of Veterans with Disabilities in Postsecondary Education

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Interview Protocol

Background on Project: This purpose of this study is to understand your university experience as a veteran with a disability. I will interview several individuals and analyze the responses as a group so that I can understand how colleges and universities can serve veterans better. My goal is to find out what is working and what is not in terms of best serving student veterans with disabilities. The basic research question guiding this study is: What are the experiences of veterans with disabilities during their enrollment at a four-year university?

As I indicated on the Informed Consent document, everything you share with me during this interview is strictly confidential. Your name and other identifiable information will not be used in this study, nor will it be shared with anyone else. The interview should take about one hour to complete. You may choose not to answer a question, and you may choose to end participation at any point. Our interview will be recorded and transcribed so I can refer back to it when I analyze the data.. As mentioned on the consent form, the transcriber will sign a confidentially agreement, and tapes will be destroyed after transcription.

There are five parts of this interview:

I. *Background at the university.* In this section we will talk about your college background, like why you chose this university and how many credits you are taking (took).

II. *University experience.* In this part of the interview, we will discuss your transition to college and what your academic and social experiences are (were) like.

III. *Graduation.* Here I will ask you about graduation, such as when you expect to graduate and what your plans are (former students: Here I will ask you about graduation, such as when you graduated and where you found employment).

IV. *General background.* Here I will ask you general questions about yourself, such as your age and living situation.

V. *Conclusion.* We will wrap up the interview with you having the chance to share anything else you would like and to ask questions.

Do you have any questions before we begin?

I. Background at the university. These questions will help me understand more about your college background.

1. Can you share the top 3 -5 reasons you selected this university?

   Could you rank the reasons and explain why?

2. When did you begin as a student at this university (year and semester)?

   a. What were some of the challenges in enrolling at this university?

   b. How were those challenges met?

      i. By the university?

      ii. By you?

3. Did you previously attend another institution?

   a. If so, what were the main reasons why you did not continue at that institution?

   b. What type of institution was it (two-year, four-year, vocational, etc)?

   c. How many credits were you able to transfer?

      i. How did this impact you (e.g. larger/smaller course load, enrollment in summer classes, later graduation date than anticipated, etc)?

4. How many credits are you currently taking (did you take per semester, on average)?

5. What types of classes are (were) you enrolled in (evening, weekend, online, etc)?

   a. Is (was) this your preferred schedule? If not, what would have you preferred?

6. What is (was) your major area of study or what do you think your major will be?

7. Did you experience a time when it was necessary to leave school at this university or a previous institution?

   a. If you left college because you were deployed, how did the university support you during your deployment?

      i. Were you given the opportunity to finish the semester remotely?

      ii. Was any portion of your tuition reimbursed?

      iii. How long were you deployed at that time?

      iv. Did you have to reapply for enrollment upon your return?

      v. What challenges did your deployment present (i.e. academic, personal, social, etc)?

      vi. What supports could the university offer to make student deployments as easy as possible?

8. Are (were) you registered with Disability Support Services (DSS)?

   a. Why or why not?

   b. The Veterans Administration (VA) uses a rating scale for identifying disabilities. The VA scale is measured in percentages. If you are familiar with this disability rating, could you share what the percentage that are you are rated for? How did you know about DSS?

   c. How would you describe your experience working with DSS?

   d. What supports and accommodations does (did) DSS provide you?

   e. Do you have any recommendations to improve DSS?

   f. How would you say that your disability affects your experience at this university? (or affected your academic experience when you were in college)

  g. What accommodations or supports would be most beneficial to you?

9. Are (were) you a part of the student veterans group on campus?

  a. Why or why not?

  b. How did you get involved?

  c. What experiences have you had working with the student veterans group?

  d. What benefits has the student veterans group provided?

  e. What recommendations do you have to improve the student veterans group at this university?

10. What does the term "veteran friendly" university mean to you?

  a. Would you describe this institution as being "veteran friendly?"

  b. Why or why not?

II. University experience. These questions will help me understand your transition to college and what your academic and social experiences are (were) like.

11. Please describe your experience **transitioning** to this university.

  a. How much time went by from the time you left the military and started attending a postsecondary institution?

  b. What transition supports did the university provide (i.e. orientation, referral to student vets organization, etc)?

  c. What other supports did you use?

  d. What were your three greatest challenges?

  e. What recommendations do you have for the university and for future veterans enrolled as students?

12. Please describe your **academic** experiences at this university.

  a. How prepared did you feel for your coursework? If yes, can you explain why?

i. Did you find it helpful to enroll in preparatory courses to get ready for college level coursework?

    ii. Do you know if you were required to enroll in developmental education courses (i.e. taking an English course prior to enrolling in freshman composition class)? What if any, were your concerns about this?

b. What challenges do (did) you face academically (i.e. study skills, organizing information, writing, background knowledge, math skills, reading skills, etc)?

    i. What strategies did you use to adapt to the college environment?

    ii. What strategies did you use to balance coursework with other commitments?

c. What are the top three academic supports or accommodations you found to be the most helpful? (some examples of academic support are extra test-taking time, taking a test in a separate rom, etc.)

    i. What additional services and/or accommodations could the university offer to support you academically?

d. Overall, how would you describe your relationships with faculty members?

    i. Can you give me an example of a good relationship you have had with a faculty member?

        1. What made it a good relationship?

    ii. Have you encountered any issues or problems with faculty members?

        1. Can you describe this further? All information will be kept confidential (e.g. no faculty names or courses will be identified) and the circumstances would only be shared in the context of the whole sample.

    iii. In what ways do you think faculty members have supported you as a veteran?

    iv. In what ways do you think that faculty members could be more supportive?

13. Please describe your **social** experiences.

  a. What university activities are you involved in?

  b. What is (was) your social life on campus like?

  c. To what extent do (did) you interact with students on campus who are not veterans?

    i. How do (did) you view your peers who are not veterans?

  d. To what extent do (did) you interact with students on campus who ARE veterans?

    i. How do (did) you view your peers who are veterans?

  e. How is (was) your family incorporated into social activities through the university (bringing close friends, spouse or children to campus social activities, etc)?

  f. Do (did) you like to be identified as a veteran to your peers, faculty, etc? If so, how?

  g. What additional things could the university do to support you socially (events, etc)?

III. Graduation (Current Student). In this section I'm going to ask questions to help me understand your graduation plans.

14. When do you expect to graduate (semester, year)?

15. What are your plans after graduation at this time?

16. What supports are you receiving to help you transition to employment or graduate school?

17. What supports could the university offer to help you transition to employment or graduate school?

Graduation (Former Student). In this section I'm going to ask questions to help me understand what you did after you graduated from college.

18. When did you graduate?

19. Did you begin work immediately after graduation?

    a. If so, what type of work?

20. What supports did you use to help you transition to employment (or graduate school, etc) after graduation?

21. What supports could the university have offered to better help your transition after graduation?

IV. General background: These questions will help me gain a general understanding of the demographic data that best describes you.

22. What do you consider to be your gender?
23. How old are you (age rounded to the nearest 6 months)?

24. What do you consider to be your ethnicity?

25. What is your current marital status?

26. Do you have any children?

    a. If so, how many, and what are their ages?

27. What is your current living situation (on/off campus, spouse/roommates/children, etc)?

    a. How long have you been in this arrangement?

28. Are you currently employed in the labor market outside of home and school?

    a. What field of work are you in?

        i. Can you describe your position and what you do?

    b. Do you consider this your profession?

    c. How many hours per week do you work?

I'd like to ask you a few questions regarding your military service to help me better understand your background and current situation.

29. What branch of the military did you serve in?

    a. What years did you serve?

    b. Where did you serve (i.e. locations)?

        i. When were you there?

    c. What is your current status (active/active reserves/inactive reserves)/retired/medically retired/separated)?

V. Conclusion

30. Is there anything else you would like to share about your experience?

31. Is there something I did not ask you and you would like to share?

32. Do you have any questions for me?

Appendix B: Letter to Participants
Research Study Information Sheet

The Experiences of Veterans with Disabilities during their Enrollment at a Four-Year University

Candice Cloos   Dr. Lynda West

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(703) 850-6155   (202) 994-1533

You are invited to participate in a research study under the direction of the researcher's advisor, Dr. Lynda West of the Department of Special Education and Disability Studies in the Graduate School of Education and Human Development at The George Washington University (GWU). Taking part in this research is entirely voluntary. Your academic standing or the status of your employment will not, in any way, be affected should you choose not to participate or if you decide to withdraw from the study at any time.

The purpose of this study is to examine the experiences of veterans with disabilities in postsecondary education to improve supports and services to ensure their academic success. The major research question directing this study is, "what are the experiences of veterans with disabilities during their enrollment at a four-year university?"

If you choose to take part in this study, you will schedule an interview time with the researcher. The interview, the formal research activity, will be conducted a private room in the library or in a professor's office. The total amount of time you will spend in connection with this study is approximately one hour for the interview. You will also have an opportunity to review the transcript. You may refuse to answer any of the questions and you may stop your participation in this study at any time. You will receive a $25 Visa gift card as a show of gratitude for your time.

Your well-being is of utmost concern. Possible risks or discomforts you could experience during this study include: loss of confidentiality or psychological stress. I will try to minimize these risks to the best of my ability. If you experience any distress during the interview, I will stop and provide an appropriate referral to a counselor who has agreed to serve in an on-call role during the study period.

Every effort will be made to keep your information confidential, however, this cannot be guaranteed. The researcher will exercise extreme caution in handling the data and it will

be stored in password-protected digital folders. All data will be deleted upon completion of the study. Participant information will remain confidential through utilizing pseudonyms and deleting any identifiable information provided during the interview. If results of this research study are reported in journals or at scientific meetings, the people who participated in this study will not be named or identified in any way. Your records from the study may be reviewed by departments of The George Washington University responsible for overseeing research safety and compliance.

You may not benefit directly from your participation in the study. The benefits to universities and colleges, social science, and humankind that might result from this study are: recommendations for institutions to improve postsecondary supports and services for veterans, and a contribution to the research literature. You may benefit from being able to share your experiences through a research project dedicated to understanding and improving veterans' experiences in postsecondary education.

Staff at the Office of Human Research of The George Washington University, at telephone number (202) 994-2715, can provide further information about your rights as a research participant. Further information regarding this study may be obtained by contacting the researcher, Candice Cloos, at (703) 850-6155.

To ensure anonymity your signature is not required, unless you prefer to sign it. Your willingness to participate in this research study is implied if you proceed.

*A copy of this document will be provided to you in in case you want to refer to it in the future. Please do not hesitate to share any concerns or questions you have. Thank you for your consideration.

STUDENTS NEEDED

FOR A STUDY ON UNIVERSITY EXPEREINCES OF VETERANS WITH DISABILITIES

WHY PARTICIPATE?

- Help universities understand how they can better support veterans

PARTICIPANTS WILL:

- Have the study described and questions answered by the researcher before deciding to participate

- Remain anonymous

- Participate in an interview with the researcher that will last approximately 1 hour

- Receive a $25 Visa gift card as a token of appreciation

WHO IS ELIGIBLE?

Any veteran who:

- Is at least 18 years of age

- Identifies as having any type disability

- Is currently enrolled as a student at GWU

CONTACT:

- Candice at ccloos@gwu.edu