Understanding Progress Toward Degree Completion for Student Veterans in the Post 9-11 Era: A Focused Life History Narrative

David T. Vacchi

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UNDERSTANDING PROGRESS TOWARD DEGREE COMPLETION FOR
STUDENT VETERANS IN THE POST 9-11 ERA:
A FOCUSED LIFE HISTORY NARRATIVE

A Dissertation Presented
by
DAVID T. VACCHI

Submitted to the Graduate School of the
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

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UNDERSTANDING PROGRESS TOWARD DEGREE COMPLETION FOR
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DEDICATION

To the courageous student veterans who have served our nation in all capacities and are now educating themselves to continue contributing to our great American society.

Also, to Brian and Ella, that you will have a passion for learning and education that takes you where your path leads and makes you the best person you can be.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my dissertation chair, mentor, and adviser, Dr. Gretchen Rossman for guiding the development of my research method and for sparking a passion in me for qualitative research. Dr. Rossman has been a critical source of support at the most needed times throughout my doctoral process. I would also like to thank my newest committee member, Dr. Shane Hammond, a colleague, co-author, and fellow researcher of the experiences of student veterans. Without Dr. Hammond’s willingness to step forward, my progress to completion would have been stopped. Finally, Dr. Jennifer Lundquist, for joining my committee at the outset and who has shown me the importance of perspectives from across knowledge fields to most-effectively research a population.

I also want to thank my original faculty adviser, dissertation chair, mentor, and co-author, Dr. Joe Berger, for being my champion and showing me how to engage in the academic arena and for opening so many doors for my career and helping me to influence the field regarding supporting the success of student veterans. Joe would have taken me to the finish line, but we both know how life gets complicated and we always continue to move forward. I stand on your shoulders, Sir!

I would like to thank the student veterans, faculty, and staff who participated in this study and who so freely gave of their time and their testimony to help me shine a light on student veteran success. I would also like to thank the countless student veterans I have met over the years, and indeed all my fellow veterans for helping me to understand your experiences, challenges, and successes as students.

Finally, I would like to thank my wife Susan for your support, and your critical perspectives on some of my crazy ideas. You have been my rock and the quality of my work would be less if not for your high expectations and standards. I love you.
ABSTRACT

UNDERSTANDING PROGRESS TOWARD DEGREE COMPLETION FOR STUDENT VETERANS IN THE POST 9-11 ERA: A FOCUSED LIFE HISTORY NARRATIVE

MAY 8, 2018

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Veterans have long-succeeded in higher education, but because available data on contemporary student veteran success has been difficult to uncover, some question the success of this reemerging student population. While data is emerging that suggest student veterans are succeeding in higher education, this study sought to reveal factors that contributed to the success of graduating student veterans in the hopes that these factors can be nurtured in current and future generations of student veterans to help ensure their success as students. Using a new method, the focused life-history narrative, and a conceptual model grounded in nontraditional student theory and Astin’s IEO Model, this study suggests that success influencers emerge during the education of veterans, primarily from faculty and staff, but also from peer veterans, that serve to validate the decision to go to college by veterans and thus propels veterans forward to success. Other findings suggest that timely and accurate processing of education benefits serves to improve focus on the academic experience, rather than worrying about tuition and fee payments, enhancing success. Finally, this study suggests that structure and discipline are important to the successful degree attainment of veterans.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS ............................................................................................................. v
ABSTRACT ............................................................................................................................... vi
LIST OF TABLES ....................................................................................................................... x
LIST OF FIGURES .................................................................................................................... xi

CHAPTER
1. INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY .................................................................................. 1
   Introduction ............................................................................................................................ 1
   What Data Are Tracked ......................................................................................................... 4
   GI Benefits—A Brief History ............................................................................................... 6
   The Problem this Research Addresses ............................................................................... 8
   Purpose of the Study ............................................................................................................ 10
   Research Questions .............................................................................................................. 11
   Potential Significance of the Study ..................................................................................... 12
      Who May Benefit from This Study? ................................................................................. 12
   Dissertation Overview ......................................................................................................... 12

2. REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE ...................................................................................... 15
   Introduction ............................................................................................................................ 15
   Categorizing Student Veterans ............................................................................................. 15
   Defining Student Veteran Success ....................................................................................... 18
      Departure, Retention, Persistence, and Success ............................................................... 20
      What is Veteran-friendly? ................................................................................................. 20
      Using Veteran-Friendly Concepts to Frame Student Veteran Success ............................. 22
   Historical Perspectives on Student Veteran Success ........................................................ 24
   Student Veteran Literature in the Post 9/11 Era ................................................................. 25
   The Impact of Recent Student Veteran Scholarship ......................................................... 29
      Moving Away from Tinto-inspired Theory and Models ................................................... 32
      Recent Applications of Schlossberg’s 4S Model for Understanding Student Veteran Experiences ................................................................. 34
   Situating Student Veterans in the College Impact Literature ........................................... 36
   Using Nontraditional Student Theory Models ................................................................... 38
      Bean & Metzner’s Conceptual Model of Nontraditional Undergraduate Attrition (1985) ................................................................. 39
Weidman’s Conceptual Model of Undergraduate Socialization (1989) ..............................................44

Shortcomings of Linear and Deficit Models..........................................................................................45

Combining Models for Student Veterans .............................................................................................48
A Student Veteran Centered Conceptual Framework ............................................................................50
Conclusion .............................................................................................................................................55

3. DESIGN AND METHODS ......................................................................................................................58

Introduction ...........................................................................................................................................58
Research Questions ...............................................................................................................................58
Research Design ....................................................................................................................................59
Site Selection .........................................................................................................................................62
Participants ............................................................................................................................................64
Data Collection .....................................................................................................................................66

Semi-structured Interviews ....................................................................................................................67

Data Analysis .........................................................................................................................................70
Researcher Positionality ..........................................................................................................................71
Trustworthiness of Method .....................................................................................................................73
Limitations ...............................................................................................................................................74
Conclusion ...............................................................................................................................................76

4. THE VOICES OF VETERANS ......................................................................................................................78

Introduction ...........................................................................................................................................78
People that Influence Student Veteran Success .......................................................................................79

Family Influences on Student Veteran Success ......................................................................................82
Faculty Influences on Student Veteran Success ......................................................................................86
Staff Member Influence on the Success of Student Veterans .................................................................90
Student Veteran Peers as Influencers of Success ..................................................................................97

Spaces that Influence Student Veteran Success ....................................................................................99
Support Services That Influence Student Veteran Success .................................................................100
Structure and Student Veteran Success .................................................................................................102

Pursuing College as a Job .......................................................................................................................106

Woman Student Veterans .......................................................................................................................108
Blending in, but Reaching Back ...............................................................................................................109
Conclusion ...............................................................................................................................................112

5. IMPLICATIONS FOR STUDENT VETERAN SUCCESS ...........................................................................114
Introduction........................................................................................................................................114

Regarding Diversity Considerations Among Veterans.................................................................115
Understanding Student Veteran Success .......................................................................................116

Peer-to-Peer Veteran Support ........................................................................................................117
The Success Influencer ..................................................................................................................118

Familial Support ............................................................................................................................120
Faculty as Success Influencers .....................................................................................................120
Staff as Success Influencers .........................................................................................................126
Veteran Peers as Success Influencers ..........................................................................................130

Implications for Practice ...............................................................................................................132
Recommendations for Future Research .........................................................................................141
Conclusion ....................................................................................................................................147

APPENDICES

A. INTERVIEW THEMES AND GUIDE .........................................................................................150
B. VETERAN IDENTITY SCALE .................................................................................................152

REFERENCES ...............................................................................................................................156
LIST OF TABLES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. GI Bill Program Eras</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Participant List</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Influencer List</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# LIST OF FIGURES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Theory of veteran friendliness</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Vacchi’s conceptual model of student veteran support</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Interview guide</td>
<td>151</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Veteran socialization continuum</td>
<td>153</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

Introduction

Veterans have enrolled in colleges and universities in notable numbers since the early twentieth century (Dickson & Allen, 2004). Supported, in part, by federal legislation to help defray costs, student veterans have a long history within the walls of the academy. As nontraditional students (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Vacchi, 2012), many are older than typical undergraduates and many have families, while all have a short or long list of life experiences very different from that of traditional students (Soeters, Winslow, & Weibull, 2006). Student veteran enrollments have often been interrupted by deployments, active duty training, transition out of the military, or other obligations that preclude a tidy 4 years to degree completion. In addition, some of these students have returned from horrific combat experiences (Hammond, 2015). As such, this population of college-goers is of great interest to those who seek to ensure that college campuses are welcoming and supportive of all students and to those seeking student veteran success.

When I was considering beginning the doctoral process, a faculty mentor suggested I explore student veterans. My immediate response as a veteran who has seen untold numbers of successful veterans over a twenty-year career was, “What’s the problem with student veterans?” The response was what any good mentor would offer, “That’s what you have to find out” (K. Hudson, personal communication, February 11, 2010). So off I went to find out what the challenges and problems with student veterans were, and I found literature that was, in some ways, helpful. I also found literature that was troubling.
There is a dearth of empirical research on the college performance and experiences of student veterans. Although some scholars have undertaken empirical studies of student veterans in recent years (e.g. Bauman, 2009; Diamond, 2012; DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2008; Hammond, 2015; Livingston, Havice, Cawthon, & Fleming, 2011; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010; Young, 2012), these studies have largely focused on the transitions student veterans make into higher education, and do not address college performance or successful degree completion for veterans.

The spirit of the GI Bill programs historically has been to provide veterans with the financial means to attain college and professional degrees (Olson, 1974) and to increase skills of veterans transitioning from the military, perhaps even combat, into American society (US Department of Veterans Affairs, 2015b). Therefore, supporting successful degree attainment for student veterans remains an important goal for higher education professionals, as it is for all student populations.

The purpose of this focused life history narrative was to explore elements that influence the successful bachelor’s degree attainment of student veterans at public and private universities, through the voices of student veterans and the voices of those who helped to enable these students’ success while in college. Further, this study aims to provide an empirical rationale for intentional programming to help institutions assist veterans in attaining college degrees.

This study explored two samples of student veteran experiences from one public and one private university with similar student veteran populations and includes additional data collected from people whom the participants identified as important influencers of their success as students. Findings suggest that the public versus private
university distinction makes no difference on the factors that influence student veteran success. Rather, the cultural competency and willingness of faculty and staff to foster student growth and learning while respecting these students’ differences from traditional students, coupled with self-imposed or learned structure and routine, contributed to veteran success. This study had a prominent finding, which is common in the literature (e.g. Rumann & Hamrick, 2010), that timely and accurate processing of education benefits is important to helping veterans focus on the academic process of being a student rather than worrying about delinquent tuition bills the government is supposed to pay. The most surprising finding was the emergence of the success influencer for each participant who helped to validate participants’ decisions to attend and ultimately succeed in college.

This study is guided by Astin’s theory of involvement (1970, 1984), specifically his Inputs, Environment, Outputs (IEO) Model. Astin theorizes that students come to college with various background characteristics, skills, and talents (inputs), and engage within the higher education context (environment); this interaction results in the outputs of either successful or unsuccessful degree attainment by students.

Nontraditional students are over age 24, often have family and work responsibilities, live off campus, and have full or part-time jobs or other life circumstances that can interfere with successful completion of educational objectives (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018). Student veterans meet the definition of nontraditional students offered by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) as well as Bean and Metzner (1985), and my study connects with their seminal work rather than the traditional student theory from which Bean and Metzner’s work was adapted:
Tinto’s theory (1975; 1993). Weidman’s model of undergraduate socialization (1989) was also important to the development of my conceptual model, as several of Weidman’s variables theoretically inform my model. Further, Weidman’s model opens a further discussion about where appropriate social support may come from for nontraditional students such as veterans.

**What Data are Tracked**

Historically, student veterans have performed as well as non-veteran students in higher education (Olson, 1974). However, some data since the Vietnam era makes it unclear whether contemporary student veterans attain degrees at rates comparable to their non-veteran peers (Holder, 2011, 2007). While some may assume that the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) tracks student veteran performance, this is not the case: The VA only tracks education benefit use and has outsourced measures of veteran degree attainment to the Census Bureau (Holder, 2011) and Student Veterans of America (e.g. Cate, 2104).

Despite an agreement between the VA and Student Veterans of America (SVA) to begin tracking and analyzing extant VA data (SVA, 2013), it may be some time before such analyses will be available to inform higher education professionals about the performance of student veterans in college. In an early document from this agreement, Cate (2014) produced the Million Records Review and found that roughly 52% of veterans earned their degree within 6 years of beginning a college program. Complicating these results, however, is that the subjects of this study were almost exclusively student veterans from the Montgomery GI Bill Era, a benefit program now in its twilight with the advent of the Post 9/11 and Forever GI Bill programs. (See Table 1
for a listing of the various GI Bill programs and their effective dates.) The Montgomery
GI Bill is not as comprehensive in providing financial stability for veterans as its
immediate successor, the Post 9/11 GI Bill. Further, the Million Records Review is
limited in that it could not account for frequent stop outs of active duty, for deployment
while attending college, and for veterans moving from college to college or taking breaks
to earn a living.

As this dissertation is being completed, Student Veterans of America has
partnered with the National Student Clearinghouse to focus solely on the student
performance of Post 9/11 GI Bill students, and the initial findings are encouraging (Cate,
Lyon, Schmeling & Bogue, 2017). While it is too early in the lifecycle of the available
Post 9/11 GI Bill to collect definitive completion data, Cate et al. (2017) developed a
combined completion and persistence data point they called *success rate*, which indicates
that over 71% of Post 9/11 GI Bill students have been successful since 2009, when
funding for the Post 9/11 GI Bill became available.

Until a long-term study can adequately assess the performance of veterans in
higher education, particularly through degree completion, various aspects of student
veteran performance should be studied at smaller scales and in more localized ways. In
the short term, the gap in knowledge about the experiences of veterans in higher
education suggests an opportunity for scholars to address this lack of understanding about
what contributes to student veteran success. This study aims to fill that gap and is a
logical step to filling a student veteran knowledge void. It is of particular importance
since earning a college degree is the goal of using GI Bill benefits and is a key marker of
socioeconomic advancement in US society.
GI Benefits—A Brief History

Our nation has taken care of its veterans since the Colonial era with programs such as veteran pensions, disability payments, financial support for spouses of war veterans, and veterans’ hospitals and asylums for recovery after the trauma of war (Altschuler & Blumin, 2009). Perhaps the darkest period for veterans was during the years following World War I when the broken promises of compensation bonuses allocated for veterans inspired 45,000 veterans to occupy Washington, D.C. in 1932 to demand their payments from President Hoover (Dickson & Allen, 2004). This incident culminated with General Douglas MacArthur using force to disperse what was called the Bonus March but also resulted in disbursements of long overdue war payment benefits to veterans (Altschuler & Blumin, 2009; Dickson & Allen, 2004; Olson, 1974).

In his detailed history of the evolution of the GI Bill programs, Olson (1974) recounts the Roosevelt administration’s desire to avoid another Bonus March at the end of World War II. In an interesting twist of fate, when President Roosevelt realized he could not get the votes to pass sweeping entitlement programs for all Americans (Altschuler & Blumin, 2009; Olson, 1974), returning veterans became the cause championed by the thirty-second US President.

The result of successful lobbying by the American Legion and other advocacy groups during the decades between the two world wars, the Serviceman’s Readjustment Act of 1944 (United States, 1944), passed with little resistance. This act ushered in one of the most sweeping veterans benefit programs in our nation’s history (Thelin, 2004). While the Post 9/11 GI Bill is the most generous education package in this history (Vacchi & Berger, 2014), the WWII GI Bill included an array of benefits and programs
that went well beyond formal education to include gradually integrating veterans rejoining American society after the war (Altschuler & Blumin, 2009; Olson, 1974). The primary goal of the 1944 GI Bill program was to stave off another Bonus March situation with a larger group of war veterans that numbered nearly 16 million (Olson, 1974; Thelin, 2004).

The effects of the WWII GI Bill are legendary and became the symbolic cornerstone of the WWII generation, popularized when Tom Brokaw coined the phrase “The Greatest Generation” (1998). After nearly 8 million WWII veterans used GI Bill education benefits, almost four times more than Congress predicted (Olson, 1974), the financial benefits of subsequent GI Bill programs gradually diminished until the early Vietnam Era when the program’s benefits were so minimal that many veterans chose not to go to college (US Department of Veterans Affairs, 2015c).

Despite the relatively poor treatment of Vietnam Era veterans by American society, including higher education, the US Congress revised the Vietnam Era GI Bill in time to encourage the greatest percentage of veterans to use GI Bill benefits of any era at roughly 70% (US Department of Veterans’ Affairs, 2013; Vacchi & Berger, 2014) during the 1970s. Then, during a generation of relative peace between the Vietnam War and the Global War on Terror, the Montgomery GI Bill, initiated in 1985, became the first GI Bill program to require contributions from military members in exchange for future benefits (US Department of Veterans Affairs, 2015c). Simultaneously, the Veterans’ Educational Assistance Program (VEAP) and Montgomery GI Bill were the first GI Bill programs used as recruiting incentives in the aftermath of the US military’s conversion from a
largely conscript force to a standing all-volunteer force (US Department of Veterans Affairs, 2015c).

With the onset of the Global War on Terrorism, primarily fought in Iraq and Afghanistan, the 35-year-old Montgomery GI Bill program would see its end as the Post-9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Act of 2008, popularly known as the Post 9/11 GI Bill, began. Since the program started in August 2009, over 1.4 million veterans or family members have used these generous educational benefits (Worley, 2015), with an additional 1.2 million more eligible veterans able to use these benefits in the near future (Molina & Morse, 2015).

Table 1. GI Bill Program Eras

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<tr>
<th>GI Bill Program</th>
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<tr>
<td>Serviceman’s Readjustment Act of 1944 (original GI Bill)</td>
<td>1944-1956</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vietnam Era GI Bill</td>
<td>1955-1989</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Veterans Educational Assistance Program</td>
<td>1977-2015</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Montgomery GI Bill</td>
<td>1984-2011</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post 9/11 GI Bill (Forever GI Bill)</td>
<td>2009-present</td>
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The Problem This Research Addresses

The GI Bill programs are designed, in part, to reduce or eliminate financial obstacles for veterans to attend college and earn degrees or develop skills to make them more marketable to the civilian workplace after military service. Heller (2011) identifies a significant lever for socio-economic advancement to be the bachelor’s degree, the degree which most veterans appear to seek when using their education benefits (Cate et al., 2017). As such, the need to act on college campuses to facilitate the successful
degree completion of student veterans is important, but little research offers any convincing specifics for advocates to undertake towards this goal.

Despite the generous benefits offered by the Post 9/11 GI Bill program, we still do not know how well veterans perform in college. No study tracks grade point averages or time to degree for veterans. Simply put, with legislation in place to reduce the financial burdens of veterans so they can attend college to earn a credential that will help them contribute better in the civilian workplace, why is there such a paucity of research to understand how student veterans succeed in earning their college degrees?

Holder (2011, 2007) conducted two studies, one while at the US Census Bureau and subsequently a second while at the Department of Veterans Affairs that profile the educational attainment of veterans based on US Census data. Briefly, Holder (2011) reported that women veterans tend to earn baccalaureate degrees at rates higher than male veterans, but the largely male veteran population overall earns bachelor’s degrees at a rate significantly lower than the general population. Interestingly, as of 2009, veterans earned advanced degrees at rates higher than the general population (Holder, 2011), which seems to suggest there may be a problem with veteran undergraduate degree attainment.

A second potential explanation for Holder’s findings, one of great relevance for this study, could be that something happens with veterans during their college experience that causes them to stop out or drop out of college. While the field does not have an adequate study of Post 9/11 Era degree attainment by veterans, a study of largely Montgomery GI Bill Era student veteran degree attainment suggests that about 59.4% attain their degrees in 6 years (Cate, 2014); this is roughly comparable to the broader US
population. When this same study extends the time to degree to 8 years to allow for stop outs, the student veteran degree completion rate jumps to 74.2\% (Cate, 2014).

While we may be years away from knowing definitively how successful veterans are as students, one thing remains clear: The academy should understand how veterans succeed and should create structures, programs, and supports that facilitate veteran success in college, as the academy should for all students. This study takes an important first step in understanding how veterans succeed in pursuit of baccalaureate degrees.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to explore the influences that are most salient for student veteran success in attaining baccalaureate degrees, as reported by the student veterans themselves. While veteran bachelor’s degree attainment tended to increase between 2000 and 2009 (Holder, 2011), veteran performance in higher education is not yet clear in the Post 9/11 era, despite higher enrollment rates in higher education than the general population (Holder, 2011).

One explanation for these uncertain degree attainment statistics is that Holder’s population included all active military members ages 18 and older, many of whom were not, or could not, pursue college degrees due to service commitments or ineligibility for benefits such as the GI Bill program. Given that a primary motivating factor for enlisting in the military since 1985 is education benefits (Burland & Hickes-Lundquist, 2011; Eighmey, 2006; Woodruff, Kelty, & Segal 2006) and, given that currently serving military members can use programs such as Tuition Assistance, operational deployments may prolong college attendance beyond the six-year degree attainment benchmark used to measure successful degree attainment by organizations such as the NECS.
Extending the time to degree measure for veterans as Cate (2014) did is logical, considering the interruptions that many veterans and military members face when pursuing college degrees, such as combat deployments, training deployments, and transitions from the military to civilian society. Given this, we need to shift our assumptions when thinking about success in college for veterans and for all nontraditional students. If factors that influence successful degree attainment contribute to a practical theory or framework for student veteran success, then the application of those factors – for programs and structures – may improve veteran graduation rates at the undergraduate level, or at least speed graduation rates. The purpose of this study was to identify some of the factors that influence the success of student veterans with the hopes of providing a practical framework for colleges and universities to support veteran success.

**Research Questions**

The guiding research question for this study was: What contributes to student veteran successful degree attainment in college? Three sub-questions guide this study.

- First, from the student veterans’ perspectives, what people, policies, programs, environments, supports, or other factors contribute to their successful baccalaureate degree attainment?
- Second, what do people who influence the success of student veterans perceive as the factors that contribute to a veteran’s ability to earn a bachelor’s degree?
- Third, why are the specific factors identified by student veterans effective at enhancing their success?
Potential Significance of the Study

This study is of significance for several groups: student veterans themselves; colleges and universities that provide supports for all students; policy makers concerned about the success of student veterans; and the field of scholars and practitioners. To date, no study examines the causes of student veteran success, and this study offers a significant step to revealing this elusive knowledge.

Who May Benefit from this Study?

The primary beneficiaries of this study are student veterans who may benefit from new approaches to supporting their success as students. This study will also benefit practitioners who serve student veterans on a day-to-day basis with a framework and rationale for developing programming and services on campus for their student veterans. Additionally, faculty and other members of the campus community who interact with veterans on regular or intermittent bases will benefit by learning how interactions with veterans can enhance student veteran success in college. Finally, scholars endeavoring to conduct studies in the future may benefit from these findings, the conceptual model, and the theoretical underpinnings explored during this study.

Dissertation Overview

Chapter 2 reviews the literature relevant to this study, starting with connections to generative college impact theory and moving through nontraditional student theory and recent student veteran literature explicating the various components that highlight knowledge gaps and inform my conceptual model. This chapter also includes a discussion of the strengths and weaknesses of the small body of extant student veteran research and scholarly literature. The chapter concludes with my conceptual framework.
Chapter 3 introduces my methodological choices and the details of my approach to the study and how that changed over time. As a focused, or modified, life history narrative, I intended to explore the history of student veterans while in college and drew from them the factors, or influences, on their success as students. This chapter also describes the background of the hybrid methods I used for this study, including life history inquiry (e.g., Denzin, 1989; McAdams, Josselson, & Lieblich, 2001; McMahan & Rogers, 1994; Thompson, 2000) and narrative inquiry (Chase, 2005).

The study’s design included one public and one private university, approximating a control for institution type. I chose these institutions based on convenience, accessibility, and similar veteran population sizes. I hoped to interview between five and ten students at each campus but ended up with eleven total student veterans as the emergence of influencers of student veteran success was unexpected. As a result, I endeavored to interview at least one influencer for each student veteran participant and succeeded in ten of the eleven cases, with two veterans sharing the same influencer. Therefore, I was able to triangulate my findings more comprehensively than I originally intended with an influencer for all but one of the participants. I then followed up with both groups of veterans to reflect on and revisit these perspectives as focus group discussions, thereby creating opportunities to triangulate and validate the findings. Although not a grounded theory study, I used the data analysis technique of Charmaz (2006) and generated an initial theory for student veteran success.

Chapter 4 presents the data and findings from the study’s participants and Chapter 5 presents a discussion of the findings, implications, recommendations for future research, and the conclusion of the study. As with many qualitative studies, I could not
follow all the leads in the data to their conclusion but relied upon the data analysis to limit the findings to the most salient in the data. Findings include an explication of how structure and support can facilitate a severely disabled veteran through to success in college, by retraining the veteran to focus on routine, physical fitness, and focused time for studies and social life. The findings also suggest similar implications for all veterans, primarily concerning the importance of social support for student veterans, from where that support comes, and how routine and focused time for academic and social activities creates structure. Finally, the findings suggest how faculty and staff can be facilitators of the success of student veterans by being culturally competent and adapting to the student’s way of learning, rather than working from a traditional student paradigm, and how effective advocacy can nurture self-efficacy in veterans. The findings do not fit neatly into any model, including my own, but Astin’s Theory (1984) and my conceptual model (Vacchi, 2011; Vacchi, Hammond & Diamond, 2017) appear to align with the findings well. Finally, this study offers direction to explore numerous areas more thoroughly, but perhaps an equally valuable outcome of this study is that I now have more questions than when I began, and those questions inform my recommendations for future research.
CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Introduction

This chapter begins with a discussion of the lens through which I view certain aspects of veteran success which will serve to shape how and why I used certain literature to develop my conceptual model. After defining success and clarifying terms used in the college retention literature, I discuss the concept of veteran friendliness and how it interacts with student veteran success. Next, I offer an historical review of student veteran success in college and then discuss the contemporary research that offers conflicting perceptions about the success of veterans in college. Then, I offer a critique of the use and applicability of Tinto’s (1975, 1993) and Schlosberg’s (1981) theories and models. I also offer what I believe to be an appropriate application of Schlossberg’s theory from recent scholarship. I then situate this study within the larger college impact literature, in which I make the argument that student veteran inquiry connects more appropriately with nontraditional student theory and models (e.g., Bean & Metzner, 1985) and Astin’s IEO Model (1970; 1984), rather than traditional student theory and models such as Tinto’s (1975, 1993). The chapter concludes with the literature that informs the conceptual model used in this study.

Categorizing Student Veterans

While the definition of a veteran varies depending upon military service specifics, benefit entitlements, or which element of a state or federal government is under consideration, defining veteran for the purposes of higher education need not be complicated. The common characteristic of all current and former military members is
experiencing the strong socialization brought about by initial entry training, known in some military services as basic training, and further reinforced by socialization to military organizations (Soeters et al., 2006; Vacchi, 2012). Therefore, a veteran is any current or former member of the active military, Reserves, or National Guard (Vacchi & Berger, 2014).

Thus, an inclusive definition for student veteran is “any student who is a current or former member of the active duty military, the National Guard, or Reserves regardless of deployment status, combat experience or legal status as a veteran” (Vacchi, 2012, p. 17). The most important aspect of this definition for higher education professionals is that these students come from a culture quite different from that of higher education, and they may require different models and accommodations to succeed in higher education (Berger, 2000).

Student veterans are a unique student population due to their experiences within military organizations and, for many veterans, due to their combat experiences (Cook & Kim, 2009; Radford, 2011; Steele, Salcedo & Coley, 2010). Further, student veterans meet the criteria Bean and Metzner (1985) use to distinguish nontraditional students from traditional students, in this case students who are already independent from their parents. Supporting student success in ways that account for the unique background of students (Rendón, Jalomo, & Nora, 2000), such as student veterans, may be more effective than traditional approaches to student success (Bean & Metzner, 1985) which require socialization to campus contexts (e.g., Tinto, 1975, 1993). Models for retention of traditional students presume students conform to these models to stay in college (e.g., Tinto, 1975, 1993) making these deficit models (Freire, 1970) for nontraditional students
who drop out of college because they do not conform to traditional paradigms. Requiring ethnically diverse or nontraditional students, such as student veterans, to adapt to higher education settings may obstruct student success (Rendón et al., 2000); instead, the institution may need to adapt to the unique nature of specific student populations (Berger, 2000) by implementing accommodating programs and services.

The proliferation of special programs and services for veterans on campus, summarized well in the Cook and Kim (2009) and McBain, Kim, Cook, and Snead (2012) reports by the American Council on Education, can preclude argument that these special accommodations for veterans in higher education are appropriate to support veteran success, despite these being based on best practices and anecdotal observations. Still, the most frequently cited student veteran literature offers little understanding of the keys to degree attainment for student veterans and instead presumes student veterans should conform to traditional student models and prescriptive programs to remain in higher education (e.g., DiRamio et al., 2008; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010).

Despite being nontraditional students, student veterans seek college degrees for the same reasons many students seek degrees: earning a credential that offers an improved prospect at getting a job and improving socioeconomic status (Burland & Hickes-Lundquist, 2011; Steele et al., 2010). A common lever for socioeconomic status improvement since the expansion of higher education in the post-WWII era is attaining a baccalaureate degree (Heller, 2011). Specifically, while earning a degree from a two-year institution can result in a nominal increase in expected salary compared with those only earning a high school diploma, a bachelor’s degree results in approximately $20,000 more annual income than for those simply earning a high school diploma (Heller, 2011).
With approximately 57% of all student veterans attending bachelor’s degree-awarding institutions (Radford, 2011) the economic importance of earning a bachelor’s degree suggests this is an important context in which to explore student veteran success.

And while roughly 22% of community college enrollees who aspire to continue to four-year institutions to complete a bachelor’s degree (McDonough & Fann, 2007), one of the few populations that succeeds in this goal are military veterans with over 35% of those completing a two-year degree earning a bachelor’s degree (Cate, 2014); civilians do not appear to reach that goal with great success (McDonough & Fann, 2007). Further, while the Veterans Administration does not track degree completion statistics (Cate, 2014; McBain, 2010), veterans may use community colleges as affordable alternatives to lower division coursework for bachelor’s degrees while planning to transfer to baccalaureate institutions (Rumann, Rivera & Hernandez, 2011). In fact, some student veterans preserve GI Bill benefits by paying out of pocket for community college fees and aspire to use GI Bill benefits to complete bachelor’s degrees and graduate degrees at higher cost institutions (Rumann et al., 2011). As we continue to learn more about the pathways to the four-year degree attainment of student veterans, the baccalaureate degree appears to be an aspirational goal of the majority of student veterans (Cate, 2014; Radford, 2011).

**Defining Student Veteran Success**

To assist veterans in earning college degrees, it is important to learn more about this understudied population, and we must study those people, policies, environments, and supports that appear to contribute to veteran success in higher education. Measures of success can take many forms, such as semester on semester retention or persistence
rates, grade point averages (GPA), general retention or persistence rates, and degree attainment rates (Pascarella, 1985). Another overlooked aspect of success can be those veterans that take some college and join a field for immediate employment without earning a degree. Various high tech and high demand fields, such as biotech, may hire employees after some nominal level of college and may not require a degree.

Since a goal of earning a college degree is typically connected to securing employment, it stands to reason that any veteran who can gain employment without a college degree has also been successful. Conversely, earning a baccalaureate degree, particularly in certain fields, neither guarantees employment nor assures well-paid employment. For this study, however, success equals persistence to degree attainment for student veterans, regardless of retention at a specific institution; therefore, the institution-centric measure of retention is not of immediate interest for this study. The rationale for this is higher education models suggest that degree attainment is one of many measures of success.

The NCES (National Center for Education Statistics) does not consider a student who takes longer than 6 years to earn a bachelor’s degree to be successful, and students who start and stop many times over a period longer than 6 years may even be counted as students that start multiple times, and yet never finish (Kuh, 2012), thus confounding the entire six-year degree attainment statistic as measured by NCES. Therefore, I assert that earning a degree is the goal for almost all student veterans because a primary goal of attending college is to improve socioeconomic status by securing a job after college and is therefore equated to success for this study. Unfortunately, extant literature neither offers sufficient information on student veterans as a population due to a general
oversight of this population since the Vietnam Era (Vacchi & Berger, 2014), nor does student veteran literature inform our knowledge about what contributes to student veteran success.

**Departure, Retention, Persistence, and Success.**

The early college impact and student development literature (e.g. Astin, 1984; Chickering; 1969; Pascarella, 1980; Tinto, 1975) developed an array of terms, used differently in various contexts. To prevent confusion, I define some terms used in this study derived from the recent work by Berger, Blanco, and Lyons (2012) to clarify and define these terms. **Departure** refers to students leaving college voluntarily or involuntarily. **Voluntary departure**, or withdrawal, is the choice of a student to stop attending college for non-academic reasons, not to be confused with the involuntary nature of **dismissal** from college for academic or disciplinary reasons. **Retention** is a college-centric term, which emphasizes the success of an institution at maintaining a student’s enrollment through graduation, or semester over semester. **Persistence** is a student-centric term, which implies that a student stayed in the higher education system to complete a degree, but not necessarily at the same institution. **Success** is a term that can mean anything from remaining in school for one semester to attaining a certain grade point average, to graduating from college. For this study, I defined success as graduating from college with a baccalaureate degree.

**What is Veteran-friendly?**

A concept recently linked to student veteran success is veteran-friendliness. A problem with the concept of veteran-friendliness is that there is no universally accepted definition for an institution to be considered veteran-friendly (Ackerman et al., 2009).
An enhanced version of the definition offered by Lokken, Pfeffer, McAuley, and Strong (2009) that guides my theoretical perspective on veteran-friendliness is:

A veteran-friendly campus identifies and removes barriers to the educational goals of veterans, creates a smooth transition from military life to college life, provides information to veterans about available benefits and services, creates campus awareness of the student veteran population, and creates proactive support programs for student veterans based on their needs. (Vacchi & Berger, 2014, p. 124)

Supporting the success of student veterans in higher education is the essence of campus veteran-friendly efforts, and a campus is veteran-friendly when the campus chooses to accommodate student veterans. With a highly diverse Post 9/11 Era student veteran population (Radford, 2011), the most urgent need for expanding our knowledge about student veterans may be gaining an understanding about what facilitates student veteran degree attainment. To this point, many scholars, educational professionals, and members of the media, such as GI Jobs.com and Military Times Edge.com have presumed that there are certain aspects that contribute to student veteran success under the moniker of veteran-friendly criteria for colleges to pursue in order to recruit and retain student veterans. However, none of the criteria used in the various veteran-friendly websites, or scholarly publications, offers empirical evidence for use of these as criteria to make a campus more accommodating or that they enhance student veteran success.
Using Veteran-Friendly Concepts to Frame Student Veteran Success

Seeking to learn ways to support the success of veterans in higher education, as many of these scholars have attempted, is laudable, and points to a broader attempt to create veteran-friendly campuses in which veterans can be comfortable enough to succeed in achieving their educational goals. In a pilot study undertaken during a qualitative research methods course, I explored the question *What is veteran-friendliness?* from the perspective of student veterans (Vacchi, 2013). During a qualitative data analysis course in a subsequent semester, I undertook a grounded theory analysis of the data from the methods course and developed a theory of veteran friendliness depicted in Figure 1. Simply put, as veterans transition their identities, accommodating spaces and services, along with supportive personal relationships enhance campus veteran-friendliness and by extension student veteran success.

![Diagram of Theory of Veteran Friendliness](image)

Figure 1. Theory of veteran friendliness. (Vacchi, 2013)
The strongest finding in Vacchi’s (2013) study was the singular importance of the timeliness and accuracy of education benefits processing. While other studies have anecdotally observed this as a source of frustration for student veterans, there is also a logical rationale for this sentiment as offered by Vacchi and Berger (2014). Simply put, education benefits are an entitlement earned by student veterans in order pay for college to reduce, or eliminate, the financial obstacle that can exist in higher education. When staff members responsible for processing education benefits do not do so in a timely or accurate manner, this becomes a distraction to student veterans causing them to focus more on benefits than their academic work.

Regarding spaces, this was the weakest area of the findings in Vacchi’s (2013) study of veteran-friendliness but was clearly present in the data in two prominent ways. First, the existence of a veterans’ center, or lounge, was regarded as a veteran-friendly measure taken by the institution. Second, spaces that were politically neutral and were conducive to academic productivity were also regarded as veteran-friendly. Spaces that were openly hostile to veterans, or their core beliefs, were avoided by participants of the study and actually overshadowed the benefits of other veteran-friendly spaces, perhaps suggesting that seeking veteran neutral spaced may be the real goal of academic institutions.

Relationships were regarded as important, but again had positive and negative exemplars in the opinions of the participants of Vacchi’s (2013) study. First, veterans were regarded as critical allies and support agents on campus and to the success of students. This finding does not suggest that all veterans like each other, support each other, or should, but that veterans find the common bond with other veterans to be
reassuring and even validating. And yet, some participants only had veteran allies off campus, agreeing with the non-traditional student tendencies posited by Bean and Metzner (1985). The second major theme among the participants’ data was the negative relationships with some faculty and most traditional-aged students. Veterans do appear to struggle with the immaturity, lack of respect for faculty, and lack of focus in academic work apparent to these participants among their traditional student peers (Vacchi, 2013).

While the Vacchi (2013) veteran-friendly study is a pilot, it aligns well with both student veteran scholarship, the college impact literature, and anecdotal observations familiar to most veterans and many who work in support of veterans on college campuses. Unfortunately, there is little in the older literature that explores the notion of veteran-friendliness from an empirical perspective.

**Historical Perspectives on Student Veteran Success**

What little we know historically about student veterans comes from largely anecdotal observations and historical articles, mainly on WWII era student veterans (e.g., Clark, 1998; Turner & Bound, 2003), and some statistical analysis on student veteran performance (e.g., Fredricksen & Schrader, 1950; Stewart & Davis, 1946). These statistical analyses suggesting that student veterans perform as well as, or better than, non-veteran students in college (e.g., Fredricksen & Schrader, 1950; Garmezy and Crose, 1948; Joanning, 1975; Olson, 1974; Stewart & Davis, 1946).

In what was the largest statistical analysis of veteran performance in higher education, Fredricksen and Schrader (1950) reviewed the college performance records of over 10,000 veteran and non-veteran participants from a national sample. Their findings suggest student veteran academic performance is equal to or better than non-veteran
performance on a wide array of variables: not a single variable in the study indicated student veteran performance was inferior to non-veteran performance. 2 years earlier, in a smaller study at the State University of Iowa, Garmezy and Crose (1948) compared the academic performance of 245 veterans with 564 non-veterans and found “a small but consistent superiority of the student veteran over his non-veteran counterpart” (p. 550) with the veterans maintaining and average GPA of 0.1 higher than the non-veterans. In a study of perhaps the oldest available data on veteran performance in college, Stewart and Davis (1946) found veterans to be “neither appreciably better nor poorer than the average” (p. 57) WWI Era college students at the University of Colorado. A study conducted by Joanning (1975) on Vietnam era student veterans offers interesting findings that, in the aggregate, veterans achieved higher grades that non-veterans, but that the real difference resulted from the performance of veterans who had attended college before their deployment to war. With performance of veterans with no prior college experience being similar to non-veteran performance, it may be that the impact of combat deployments, or service-related stop outs, may have a positive effect on the academic performance of student veterans when they return to college. Finally, Olson (1974) offers a comprehensive summary of both the genesis and evolution of the early GI Bill programs and student veterans performance in college during the WWII era.

**Student Veteran Literature in the Post 9/11 Era**

While veterans through the Vietnam era appear to be largely as successful as non-veteran students, Holder (2011) concludes that Montgomery Era GI Bill student veterans may not be earning bachelor’s degrees at rates comparable to those of non-veteran students. This is an interesting conclusion, particularly given that a higher percentage of
the veteran population enrolled in college through 2009 than did from the non-veteran population (Holder, 2011). Holder does not define the inclusive population of student veterans in her studies in detail, but her definition must include active duty members because her population includes 18- to 22-year-olds who typically are still serving, rather than being veterans separated from military service.

A possible explanation of Holder’s findings is that many active duty service members enroll in college, but on an intermittent part-time basis, making their path to degree attainment longer than that of traditional students. Another explanation is that some active duty service members use tuition assistance funds to develop skills, such as computer-related skills, in order to perform better in their military positions, with no short-term intention of competing a college degree. In a conversation with Kelly Ann Holder in 2011, she confirmed that the available data she had did not disaggregate active duty members and there was no way to do so with her data set. A closer look at Holder’s data suggests that male veterans lag behind their non-veteran peers accounting for veterans overall trailing behind non-veterans in degree completion metrics. Holder’s findings also support Pirnot’s (1987) findings in a longitudinal study of women’s persistence in higher education that older returning women persist at greater rates than women of traditional age do. With over 70% of student veterans being male (Radford, 2011), Holder’s findings warrant consideration.

While Holder’s conclusion that veterans are not earning degrees at rates commensurate with their non-veteran peers raises important questions that require scholarly investigation, there may be a rationale for reconsidering Holder’s conclusion. It is unclear if Holder’s inclusion of active duty personnel results in a reasonable measure
of success for all student veterans, of whom 85% are no longer in the military (Radford, 2011). Further, Holder’s data from her 2007 and 2011 reports may overcount those veterans and active duty members who stop and start programs many times. With no national system to track active duty members who start and stop college classes repeatedly, and the frequency of active military members switching colleges due to changing duty stations, deploying to combat, or deploying for training, Holder’s conclusions may be confounded. In other words, the traditional six-year degree completion metric used to measure degree attainment may be inappropriate for student veterans, as it is for other nontraditional student populations (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

Despite the traditional six-year measure being the standard by which successful degree attainment is measured across higher education, there has been much discussion about how this measure is inefficacious at capturing degree attainment rates of nontraditional student populations such as veterans (Cate, Schmeling, & Bogue, 2017; Cate, 2014; Kuh, 2012). In fact, in his study entitled The Million Records Review, Cate (2014) notes that veterans earn degrees at rates similar or better than non-veterans using the traditional six-year metric commonly used as a success benchmark for baccalaureate degree attainment, at roughly 59%. However, the presumption of the six-year metric is that degree attainment is elusive for most students beyond that mark, yet veterans appear to be earning bachelor’s degrees at a success rate of roughly 74% within 8 years (Cate, 2014).

The veteran population studied by Cate (2014) was largely a Montgomery GI Bill era population that had few incentives for veterans to persist; this differs from the Post
9/11 GI Bill era veteran whose successful performance in college is incentivized by GI Bill benefit rules. Post 9/11 Era beneficiaries must repay the government for negligent attendance that results in failure, may lose some benefits if they take less than a full-time course load, or lose the benefit entirely beyond the 15-year time limit to use benefits upon separation from the military. As such, with more and more veterans using the Post 9/11 GI Bill (Cate, 2014) and the concurrent incentives for successful performance, it may be that we should expect degree attainment statistics to continue to improve for veterans in higher education. In fact, in a report in which Student Veterans of America partnered with the National Student Clearinghouse (Cate, et al., 2017), student veteran success rates were measured at 71.6%. For this SVA study success was defined as “the sum of the Completion Rate and the Continued Enrollment Rate” for five annual cohorts from 2009 to 2013, with data matches occurring through September 2015, which is the verification of enrollment deadline for VA education benefits for the fall semester 2015 and statistically includes retention through December 2015. In this 2017 study, Cate, et al. found that over 53% of student veterans graduated within 4 years, and while the study did not include data on where veterans were in their matriculation when they became full-time students, this is not statistical evidence of a population that is struggling to succeed when compared with non-veterans.

In agreement with Cate’s findings and in contrast to Holder’s findings, studies by Operation College Promise (Lang & Powers, 2011; Lang, Harriett & Cadet, 2013) suggest that student veterans perform better in the classroom than their non-veteran peers when attending colleges with programs and services espoused as veteran-friendly. Further, these studies demonstrate, with a cross-sectional measure, that veteran
persistence within these kinds of supportive institutions was 94%, while the national average for non-veterans was 65.7%. While the definition for veteran-friendly varies, these studies demonstrate that institutions choosing to support student veterans positively affect student veteran persistence. The studies of Operation College Promise and Holder (2011, 2007) are not definitive, but the findings of these studies agree with the conclusions of Berger (2000) and Rendón et al. (2000), which suggest that institutions may need to adapt in order to support the success of unique student populations on campus. Much of the student veteran literature (e.g., DiRamio et al., 2008; Livingston, et al., 2011; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010) suggests that student veterans should adapt to the institution in order to avoid departure, which is a perspective contradicted by available nontraditional student theory (e.g., Bean & Metzner, 1985).

In short, we do not know with certainty that student veterans succeed at rates comparable to non-veterans. The findings of the Million Records Review (Cate, 2014) were inconclusive and had some methodological and sampling shortcomings, not the least of which was choosing to study a Montgomery GI Bill population, which arguably does not represent the contemporary student veteran. Still, the encouraging findings of its follow-on report (Cate et al., 2017) may be reinforced and validated by ongoing collaborations between the VA, SVA, and the National Student Clearinghouse, if this collaboration results in a more definitive set of findings (US Department of Veterans Affairs, 2015d).

The Impact of Recent Student Veteran Scholarship

The most important impact of recent student veteran scholarship is that this body of work has brought attention to the cause of student veterans as a burgeoning student
population. These qualitative studies on recent veterans (e.g., Bauman, 2009; DiRamio et al., 2008; Livingston et al., 2011; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010) begin to paint a picture of the student veteran experience. These studies generally found that veterans are nontraditional students, tend to feel out of place with younger traditional students as classroom peers, and find little in the way of social connection on campus, and, as a result, tend to struggle with transitions into higher education. A critical review of this body of literature reveals shortcomings in using empirically valid concepts, or empirically justified implications for practice in higher education. A less critical review allows these primarily qualitative studies to earn the respect of subsequent scholars for reigniting the academic conversation in higher education about student veterans. As Hammond (2015) observes, the student veteran literature that has emerged since 2008 is the beginning of a scaffold upon which we should seek to build a more comprehensive body of literature in order to better conceptualize the collegiate experiences of veterans.

Perhaps the most cited study is a qualitative study by DiRamio, et al. (2008) in which the authors assert Tinto’s theory (1975, 1993) is an appropriate way to connect student veteran scholarship to the broader college impact literature. Despite Tinto’s (1975) assertion that students must integrate academically and socially with a campus and align with the goals of a campus in order to persist in college, studies repeatedly fail to corroborate these levels of integration in order to persist (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Berger & Braxton, 1998; Braxton, 2000; Metz, 2004; Tierney, 1992). A criticism and a complement of Tinto’s theory came from Smart (2005) when he offered, “There are no psychometrically valid measures of any constructs included in Tinto’s theoretical model” (p. 469) while complimenting the intuitive nature of Tinto’s theory in the next paragraph.
Tinto’s theoretical model is also a prime example of flawed linkages between theory and measurement in higher education (Smart, 2005). Perhaps the most poignant criticism of Tinto’s theory is offered by Tierney (1992) in which Tinto’s theory is noted as ignoring the specific clash of cultures when ethnic minorities enter college. DiRamio et al. (2008) offer a description of similar challenges some student veterans can face when transitioning from combat rapidly into a college environment, particularly that there is tension between veteran and non-veteran students and many times tension between veterans and their faculty members. This study also offers an intriguing recommendation for a transition coach, a veteran experienced on the campus to help new student veteran navigate the campus. While this is an interesting concept and is even in practice at some colleges and universities, this study offered no empirical evidence that this is either something that his participants sought or that there is any evidence that a program such as this would be successful.

Despite student veterans being nontraditional students (Bean & Metzner, 1985; DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011; Radford, 2009; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010; Steele, et al., 2010; Vacchi, 2012), many student veteran scholars continued to rely on Tinto’s theory of student departure (1975) to consider the collegiate experiences of student veterans. Although Tinto updated his theory in 1993, attempting to address the needs of some underserved populations and the influence of institutions on student retention, Tinto falls short of effectively improving his 1975 theory (Metz, 2004) because the theory still places blame for student departure squarely on students rather than suggesting institutions bear some responsibility for student success. While Tinto’s theory has suffered much criticism from researchers in higher education (Berger & Braxton, 1998; Metz, 2004;
Smart, 2005), we must acknowledge the paradigmatic nature of Tinto’s theory, and how scholars could begin there, while overlooking that student veterans are nontraditional students (Vacchi, 2013).

**Moving Away from Tinto-inspired Theory and Models**

Several other student veteran scholars (e.g. Bauman, 2009; Diamond, 2012; Hammond, 2015; Livingston, et al., 2011; Minnis, 2014; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010; Young, 2012) logically chose to sidestep the problematic Tinto paradigm for student veterans but joined DiRamio et al. (2008) in the use of Schlossberg’s theory or 4S Model (1981) to inform their studies. Schlossberg’s 4S Model (1981) posits four factors—situation, self, support, and strategies—to help counsel mid-career adults in transition and it enjoys great support from the psychological counseling field. Many counseling departments in higher education also endorse the efficacy of Schlossberg’s 4S Model for counseling individual students as they move along their path to becoming independent adults in college. However, other than its efficacy as an approach to counseling individuals, the 4S Model offers little in the way of framing the broader student veteran experience in college. A common result of studies that use Schlossberg’s theory or 4S Model (1981) is that the theory is either inappropriately applied, or the 4S Model restricts the exploration of the student veteran experience to a model that arguably is of limited utility to shape student veteran research or to understand the student veteran experience beyond supporting transitions.

What DiRamio et al. (2008) explored is the first semester of being on the college campus after a combat deployment as being part of the overall transition out of the military (Moving Out). DiRamio et al. (2008) could have interpreted their findings as
demonstrating how transitions out of the military can overlap with a separate transition into higher education and developed a model to represent this interesting dynamic. As it is, this study only partly addresses the *Moving In* component (Schlossberg, 1981) of veteran transitions to higher education and sheds little light on effective methods to support the success of student veteran degree attainment, let alone the transition into higher education. Qualitative research is almost exclusively an inductive process that allows the voices of participants to direct the findings of a study (Creswell, 1998). What DiRamio et al. (2008) offer is a deductive test of Schlossberg’s model as a framework for understanding the experiences of student veterans and ultimately falls short of demonstrating the utility of Schlossberg’s model for framing a smaller subset of the holistic experience of veterans: transition experiences of student veterans.

Van Dusen (2012) found little empirical support for utilizing Schlossberg’s model for student veterans when he attempted to validate Livingston et al.’s (2011) qualitative operationalization of Schlossberg’s 4S model (1981) using statistical methods. While any transition fits neatly into Schlossberg’s theory, the attempts of numerous scholars to adapt Schlossberg’s 4S model to frame the veteran experience in college have left the field wanting for a more salient model. Perhaps scholars should seek a non-linear model adaptable to the individual characteristics and needs of student veterans and should not attempt to use Schlossberg simply because other scholars have attempted to do so.

Schlossberg’s theory of adult transitions (1981) is used effectively by some student veteran scholars (e.g. Diamond, 2012; Hammond, 2015; Minnis, 2014; Van Dusen, 2012; Young 2012). Schlossberg’s theory asserts that when negotiating a transition, adults move in, move through, and move out of a specific transition scenario,
which is quite logical, and hence its wide popularity as a theory for understanding transitions. The 4S model is also appropriate for guiding individual counseling approaches to supporting the transition of veterans as they transition through college (Diamond, 2014; Minnis, 2014; Young, 2012).

**Recent Applications of Schlossberg’s 4S Model for Understanding Student Veteran Experiences**

Some studies struggle to employ Schlossberg’s theory and 4S model (1981) to explain the transition student veterans make when leaving a combat deployment and coming to a college campus (e.g. Bauman, 2009; DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011; Livingston et al., 2011; Rumann & Hamrick 2010) because they model the approach used by DiRamio, et al. (2008). What this literature primarily achieves is a description of the transition difficulties student veterans face when moving from being in combat to being out of combat, which is not the purview of higher education professionals whose focus naturally should be on the academic enterprise. More appropriately, military leadership and their healthcare system, or the VA, should address challenges facing combat veterans as they transition out of combat and back to roles in the peacetime military, or less frequently, into civilian society.

Many scholars who have used Schlossberg’s theory or 4S model have little insider perspective, which is highly valued in qualitative inquiry for appropriately understanding a participant population (Rossman & Rallis, 2016). More specifically, none of the recent scholars researching student veterans is a recent combat veteran, which limits their ability to tacitly understand or explain the phenomena associated with the Post 9/11 Era’s student veteran transitions out of combat. While it is reasonable for non-veterans to
research student veterans, these early efforts to understand and explain the experiences of student veterans offers only an outsider’s perspective (Rossman & Rallis, 2016).

The studies conducted by DiRamio et al. (2008) and Rumann & Hamrick (2010), among others, do have value: They present the individual stories of veterans within the literature for scholars and practitioners alike to learn from and appreciate. Simply having these first-hand accounts of veterans in the higher education literature is valuable and serves as a legitimate foundation upon which future scholars can develop more sound theory and models from which the field may be able to learn more about veterans as students in higher education.

Several themes emerged from these qualitative interviews that are now recognized as commonplace in higher education, and that have even shaped best practices on campuses across the nation. For this accomplishment, DiRamio et al. (2008), Rumann and Hamrick (2010), Bauman (2009), and Livingston et al. (2011) captured the voice of the Post 9/11 Era veteran as soon as it began to emerge on our campuses. Perhaps the most frequent and popular theme is the disparity in cultures between the military and civilian societies. Even some of my own pre-dissertation research reflected these themes of a clash of cultures, as it is quite evident that when current or former military members join the academic community, there is an adjustment that veterans should make to communicate effectively, integrate with the academic traditions and processes of the local campus, and establish patience with a sometimes undisciplined and immature body of traditional students.

Perhaps the most important understanding developed from these recent studies (e.g. Rumann & Hamrick, 2010) is that late or inaccurate processing of GI Bill benefits
can be a significant distractor to the educational process of student veterans. The bureaucracy of the VA in developing processes and procedures, including the training, turnover, and retraining of VA Certifying Officials on campus, has also had the effect of interrupting the academic flow for veterans, particularly during the fall semester (Vacchi, 2013). This is primarily because the fall semester brings the largest influx of veterans to campus each year, and the federal government can get tangled up in small or large political issues around the beginning of the federal fiscal year, which is October 1. If the budget is not set, or the government is shut down, GI Bill payments can be delayed, which can be a significant distraction to student veterans.

Something that can be interpreted from this combined literature is the identity transitions that veterans undergo as they become students on campus. Although this is clear in the DiRamio et al. (2008), Rumann & Hamrick (2010), and Livingston et al. (2011) studies, it is surprising that identity transitions were not stated as a finding of these studies. Rather, these studies tried to offer recommendations for practitioners that appear to be of little value, or hard to implement on campuses. This may represent the greatest weakness of these studies: They struggled to provide useful recommendations or logical implications for practice.

**Situating Student Veterans in the College Impact Literature**

To frame the discussion about student veterans in higher education, it is important to situate student veterans appropriately within the college impact literature. While some recent scholars used the traditional student theory of Tinto (1975, 1993) as a line of inquiry to connect their studies to the college impact literature, scholars now agree (Falkey, 2016; Norman, Rosen, Himmerich, Myers, Davis, Browne, & Piland, 2015; Vacchi & Berger, 2014) that student veterans are nontraditional students, suggesting that
Bean and Metzner (1985) is a more appropriate connection into the literature. Perhaps another appropriate connection to the college impact literature is Astin’s IEO model (1984). The utility of Astin’s model is that it serves to organize the development of specific models for various student populations due to its logic. Ironically, Astin’s I-E-O model is in many ways similar to Schlossberg’s *Moving In, Moving Through, and Moving Out* theory, with three logical phases, but Astin designed his theory with students’ holistic college experiences in mind (1984), whereas Schlossberg developed her theory based on strategy development for mid-career adults in employment transitions (1981).

Using Astin’s IEO model (1984) as a guiding theoretical framework, Figure 2 offers an adaptation to his original work for student veterans, suggesting the inputs are student veteran background characteristics and academic skills, the environment contexts are interactions on and off campus and general veteran friendliness, and the output is the graduation, or departure, of a student veteran. Despite the lack of reliable measures for Astin’s broad theory (Smart, 2005), it nonetheless is one of the most commonly used guiding theories in higher education research (Smart, 2005).

Approaching the student veteran population using Astin’s model clearly differentiates veterans from non-veterans by highlighting the most obvious difference between these two groups regarding inputs: socialization to and experience in the military culture (Soeters et al., 2006). Given this, a logical way to situate veteran-friendly efforts, or the impact of accommodations for student veterans, is within Astin’s environment category. Finally, we can expect favorable outcomes, or successful degree attainment, for student veterans if the inputs and environment mesh effectively.
Using Nontraditional Student Theory Models

Because student veterans underwent a strong socialization to the military (Vacchi, 2012), experience situations that mature them beyond their years (Cook & Kim, 2009; Radford, 2009; Steele et al., 2010), and have separated from their parents, student veterans differ from traditional students. This suggests that scholars could fruitfully use nontraditional student models to explore student veterans; one such is Bean and Metzner’s conceptual model of nontraditional undergraduate student attrition (1985). Weidman’s conceptual model of undergraduate socialization (1989) also accounts for some of the non-college influences on undergraduate socialization to a college campus, in a similar manner to Bean and Metzner’s (1985) study, which accounts for nontraditional background variables. These two models are adaptations of Tinto’s model and could serve as conceptual bridges to Tinto’s theory (1975), but more appropriately serve to connect current student veteran theory to Astin’s Theory (1984). However, the recent student veteran literature falls short in connecting student veteran theory to Tinto’s theory, and simply adopts it with little theoretical or logical justification.
Bean and Metzner’s Conceptual Model of Nontraditional Undergraduate Student Attrition (1985)

In a study meant to depart from the models of Spady (1970), Tinto (1975), and Pascarella (1980), Bean and Metzner aimed to help fill the gap in knowledge regarding nontraditional student attrition in 1985. An important finding and assertion of Bean and Metzner (1985) is that social adaptation to the college is not important for nontraditional student success. They offer numerous possible criteria for identifying a nontraditional student, such as being older than 24, not living on campus, being a part-time student, being married, being a parent, being primarily concerned with the institution’s academic courses, and not being greatly influenced by the social environment of the institution.

It is important to note that any of the first three descriptors in this list, and not exclusively all of these, can make a student nontraditional (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015). By this definition, student veterans are nontraditional students. Adding in the unique prior socialization of student veterans, this clearly differentiates student veterans from traditional student populations. Parsons and Platt (1973) noted that nontraditional students are less likely to move from a less mature to a more mature state due to attending college. The implication of this conclusion is that, in order to study student veterans, we may not be able to use traditional student models; we should, perhaps fruitfully, focus on student development and college impact models developed or adapted for nontraditional students.

Bean and Metzner (1985) note that the primary difference between nontraditional and traditional students is that external environments affect decisions to drop out of college more heavily for nontraditional students. This agrees with the work of Rendón et
al., (2000) in that family and non-college peers influence minority students more than do social actors on campus. Weidman (1989) also highlights the influence that non-campus actors can have on the persistence of nontraditional students, a discussion of which is in the next section. Among the environmental factors affecting nontraditional students are personal finances, external employment, outside encouragement, family responsibilities, and opportunities to transfer (Bean & Metzner, 1985). The recent literature on student veterans highlights the first four of these factors as prominent among persistence concerns for student veterans in higher education (McBain et al., 2012; Radford, 2011). Thus, the unique nature of veterans’ prior experiences requires adaptation to account for non-campus influences and to diminish an unproductive focus on social integration, or involvement, for minorities such as veterans.

Another relevant observation by Bean and Metzner (1985) is that older and more mature students are less disposed to socialization pressures than traditional aged-students. In their study, Bean and Metzner (1985) assert that nontraditional students have shorter and less intense interactions with faculty and peers at the institutions they attend. A critical finding of the Bean and Metzner (1985) study is “the lack of social integration into the institution” (p. 489), suggesting the need for a different theory for nontraditional students. If socialization to the institution is not a critical component of decisions to remain in college for nontraditional students, then models that suggest student veterans need to adapt or integrate socially to a college context are theoretically and conceptually suspect and may have difficulty framing and explaining the student veteran experience in college.
Bean and Metzner (1985) account for academic outcomes in addition to academic entry characteristics, specifically grade point average (GPA), which they use as a major indicator of dropout decisions. In focusing on GPA in addition to psychological outcomes, Bean and Metzner (1985) complicate their model by demonstrating numerous intersecting direct, compensatory, and possible effects making the model somewhat too complex for the reader. To streamline Bean and Metzner’s (1985) model, Chartrand (1992) eliminated GPA as a variable and focused on psychological outcomes such as institutional commitment, academic adjustment, and psychological distress.

While part of Chartrand’s main goal was to validate Bean and Metzner’s (1985) model, she concluded that adding in the GPA component is a logical extension of her adapted model (Chartrand, 1992), which would closely align the two models except for a few individual variables. Chartrand’s (1992) study agrees with Bean and Metzner’s (1985) conclusion that social and academic integration are not as important for predicting nontraditional student retention as they are for traditional students. For nontraditional students, career-related academic variables, perceived study skills, support from family and friends, institutional commitment, and the absence of psychological distress were important predictors of intentions to continue in college (Chartrand, 1992), all of which comprise a solid start for areas on which to focus to create a veteran-friendly campus.

The logic of including GPA as a precursor to student persistence is clear, particularly if the GPA is low, which may result in a student’s involuntary departure from an institution. In this regard, it is reasonable to expect a similar response by student veterans as for other nontraditional students as acceptable grades are the single most important criterion for earning a college degree. It is interesting that Chartrand’s (1992)
adaptation attempted to omit GPA, which she later decided was inappropriate. When adapting earlier models for new populations, or attempting to improve conceptual models, preserving valid components of those models enhances the potential validity of the new model. In the case of adapting Bean and Metzner’s model for student veterans, the critical components to use or preserve are the environmental variables, academic variables, GPA, and psychological outcomes. Chartrand (1992) found questionable relevance for background characteristics, which may suggest that these are less relevant the older a student is while pursuing a degree and may also suggest only certain college entrance characteristics are relevant when framing veterans using Astin’s IEO theory (1984).

The implications for this are significant for student veterans and other nontraditional students. The structures of higher education represent a deficit model since they focus on the matriculation of traditional-aged students (Rendón et al., 2000). If certain background characteristics such as high school GPA and college entrance scores are not predictors of intent to stay in college and eventual success for nontraditional students, this represents potential for policy changes to improve college access for nontraditional students such as veterans. Further, the implication for developing a model for student veterans suggests focusing on those elements of the university that can affect academic variables and psychological outcomes. In other words, for student veterans it is important to focus on the quality of academic experiences with faculty and students, overall life stress, satisfaction levels, and how various agents on campus affect stress and satisfaction.
Another adaptation by Cabrera, Nora, and Castañeda (1996) combines Bean and Metzner’s (1985) model with Tinto’s (1975) model. Ironically, Cabrera, et al. (1996) exhibit surprise at the similarities between the two models, despite Bean and Metzner discussing how their model is an adaptation of Tinto’s model. Still, with the Bean and Metzner model focused on external environmental factors absent in Tinto’s model, and Tinto’s model focusing on social and academic integration which are marginal variables in Bean and Metzner’s model, combining the two models is interesting. The Cabrera et al. (1996) study attempts to adapt the combined model for a traditional-aged student population and succeeds in demonstrating the shortcomings of Tinto’s (1993) model in excluding external environmental factors and observing how institutional commitment may indicate intent to persist only for traditional-aged students (Cabrera et al., 1996).

There is a clear connection between the conceptualization by Cabrera et al. (1996) and the model developed by Weideman (1989) in that consideration of influences external to the campus is important, particularly for nontraditional students.

A main difference between the Cabrera, et al. (1996) and Chartrand (1992) studies is in the sample population used: For Cabrera, et al. (1996) the population is traditional-aged freshmen and the Chartrand (1992) study explores older students. I find the Cabrera et al. (1996) study to be an exploration that demonstrates the applicability of Bean and Metzner’s model (1985) to more than just nontraditional students and highlights that Tinto’s model (1993) may only apply to traditional-aged students. The important lesson for adapting models for student veterans is to understand and consider student veterans as a population and to use an appropriate body of theory to develop a conceptual model for studying or framing the student veteran experience in college. There is a lack of
understanding of student veterans in recent literature suggesting a need to develop new theory and models for student veteran success.

**Weidman’s Conceptual Model of Undergraduate Socialization (1989)**

The work of Bean and Metzner (1985) clearly connects with Weidman’s conceptual model of undergraduate socialization (1989) in accounting for external influences on student experiences in higher education, which Weidman terms “non-college reference groups” and “parental socialization” (p. 299). Drawing on the work of Astin (1977, 1984), Chickering (1969), and Tinto (1975, 1987), Weidman offers a model that specifies some of the environmental aspects suggested in Astin’s IEO theory. Weidman’s model (1989) also shores up one of the main weaknesses of Tinto’s model, which is an acknowledgment that influences from outside the campus affect college students’ experiences, as evidenced by the Cabrera, et al. (1996) study. Most importantly, Weidman designed his model to accommodate adaptation. Perhaps the most useful aspect of Weidman’s model (1989) for student veterans is to account for specific non-college reference groups, such as the active military, the National Guard, or veterans’ groups reinforcing that campuses are not isolated from the external world (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Vacchi & Berger, 2014). The main weakness of Weidman’s model is that it reverts to Tinto’s assertion that students must integrate academically and socially to a campus in order to avoid departure. The implication of this fact is that Weidman’s model offers some aspects to adapt for student veteran models, but is inappropriate for stand-alone use for student veterans, among other nontraditional student populations.

Carter (1999) adapted Weidman’s model in a study of the impact of institutional choice and environments on first and second year undergraduates by considering the
effect socioeconomic status and ethnicity have on undergraduate aspirations. Carter’s (1999) study demonstrates the differences in traditional undergraduate students based on family, if not ethnic, background when she disaggregates White and Black students in her sample. The differences Carter’s (1999) findings suggest are that student background, experiences, and influences are different for different student subpopulations, which suggests that student veterans might have different college experiences not only because they are older, but because of their military background. Carter’s (1999) findings also demonstrate the efficacy of Weidman’s model for researching various student groups, something that Tinto’s model historically struggles to do (Metz, 2005).

Hackett, Croissant, and Schneider (1992) assert that Weidman’s model provides a great variety of potential variables to consider when constructing a study for student populations. In a study of the organizational effects on the socialization of undergraduate engineers, Hackett et al. (1992) adapted Weidman’s (1989) model for specific external influences, in this case, a cooperative education program and an undergraduate research program. Hackett et al. (1992) not only found that these external experiences to the traditional academic experience helped shape intrinsic values of participating students, but that extrinsic values and academic skills showed little change. The importance of Hackett et al.’s (1992) use of Weidman’s model is clear: Non-college reference groups hold an influential role on the development of undergraduate students.

**Shortcomings of Linear and Deficit Models**

A limitation of recent student veteran models is that they are linear deficit models and seek to explain student veteran failure, without accounting for temporal changes that may occur during the entire time a student is on a given campus, such as changing faculty
member, student peers, financial situations, and transitioning into civilian society. One implication is that scholars should seek to understand student veteran success, rather than explain their failure, and export lessons for campuses to enhance policies and programs for student veterans. Further, empirical snapshots of student veterans, particularly those in their first or second semester on campus when transitions are not yet complete, may paint an inaccurate picture of the holistic college experience of veterans and may suggest that veterans struggle with transitions into college and college overall more than they actually do.

Linear models suggest that students follow the logical phases of the model in order to move through these models successfully. While of some theoretical utility, unique populations of students may benefit more from models that can account for some of their broader characteristics and accommodate nontraditional pathways to success (Rendón et al., 2000). Appropriate student veteran models might consider socialization to the military (Vacchi, 2012), comfort in highly structured environments (DiRamio et al., 2008; Radford, 2009; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010), the discipline and commitment to degree attainment historically prevalent in veterans (Olson, 1974), and that roughly 30% of veterans have combat-related injuries (Tanielian & Jaycox, 2008). Vacchi and Berger (2014) offered an empirical look at the holistic experience of student veterans over time. One implication of their ecological model for veterans is that it demonstrates the difficulty other models have with isolating certain challenges and singling those out as causes for departure.

A significant criticism of many student development models is that they are deficit models (Friere, 1970), including that of Tinto (1975, 1993) who sought to explain
departure. Deficit models assign responsibility for failure to individuals that organizations purport to help or serve. In the case of Tinto’s model, when students depart it is not because the institution failed in any way; it is because the student failed to adapt to the institution. Specifically, departed students failed to integrate academically and/or socially to the campus context. This problematic line of thinking has increased relevance for studying marginalized populations such as minorities and nontraditional students, such as student veterans, as dominant campus cultures presume that nontraditional groups are predisposed to poor academic performance (Rendón et al., 2000).

Institutions of higher learning that fail to account for differences in student background, and therefore do not help those students, are falling short of their responsibility to adapt to the needs of traditionally underserved or underrepresented populations (Berger, 2000; Rendón et al., 2000). The need to design models that consider varied populations more appropriately resulted in the development of Bean and Metzner’s model (1985) and others, that began to disaggregate student populations in the 1980s. While the media has created a negative stereotype of the returning veteran and some scholars have fueled this stereotype by deficit modeling of student veterans in their studies, it is ironic that I have observed some emerging scholars and student affairs professionals embrace these stereotypes as true rather than taking a critical view of these stereotypes and viewing veterans through a strengths lens.

The term PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder) evolved in the aftermath of the Vietnam War, has been in the psychological lexicon for over 40 years, and has become a deficit model in which many people stigmatize those with PTSD as damaged and unable to function in society. A counternarrative to this veteran as victim narrative is the theory
of post-traumatic growth (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2014), which has been in the psychological literature since the mid-1980s. In short, this theory explains how severely traumatized individuals, including veterans, can and do adapt and rise above their trauma, and reintegrate with society quite well. These ideas hold promise for new understandings of student veterans.

**Combining Models for Student Veterans**

Weidman’s (1989) model focuses on traditional undergraduate students, but its malleability accommodates numerous variables that Bean and Metzner (1985) assert are important for nontraditional student populations. It is, thus, a powerful starting point for developing a model for student veterans. Because both models are linear and encompass a longitudinal college experience, these two models combine well. Both models begin with background variables to allow for control of college entry characteristics in a quantitative study. These also combine with Bean and Metzner’s (1985) academic variables as inputs to the student experience and align well with Astin’s IEO Theory (1970, 1984). Because the socialization of traditional undergraduate students in college is likely weaker than socialization to the military, student veteran models should not focus on socialization aspects, as does Weidman’s model (1989). Instead, a combined model should focus on individual student veteran success, or degree attainment, thus avoiding the deficit model perspective.

Keeping in mind Bean and Metzner’s (1985) finding that social integration contributes minimally to retention of nontraditional students, a combined model might nominally measure social integration variables, but should focus on academic integration (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Weidman, 1989; Tinto, 1993) and the influence of non-college
reference groups (Weidman, 1989). A critical aspect of Bean and Metzner’s model (1985) to include in a model for student veterans is also psychological outcomes, for example, satisfaction and stress from internal and external influences such as GI Bill processing, treatment as a student veteran, and family and work pressures.

Finally, considering the temporal nature of personal circumstances from semester to semester and how these can differ, particularly when students take different courses with different faculty each semester, arranging a model in a linear manner may also be a conceptual flaw. Tinto (1988), for example, appears to agree with this, highlighting the shortcomings of his own theory, when he notes that the higher education literature has “virtually no discussion of the possible variation in [the dynamics of student departure] over the course of the student college career” (p. 438).

An adaptation of Bronfenbrenner’s ecological theory (1993) offered by Vacchi and Berger (2014) argues for the need to focus on the temporal nature of the collegiate experience for students and suggests that myriad influences have changing effects on the experience of veterans throughout an entire degree program. The human experience is not a linear process, and student experiences may be challenging to describe accurately over several semesters as students develop. Therefore, creating a model that puts student veterans at the center and focuses on the influences and obstacles to their development and success may allow for greater accuracy in analyzing the student experience and, thereby influencing success with policies and programs. This kind of model may help to reduce the effects of intentional and unintentional obstacles to student veteran development and success as students.
A Student Veteran Centered Conceptual Framework

To organize this study, I drew on a conceptual model developed by Vacchi (2011) and published by Vacchi and Berger (2014) called the model for student veteran support. This model evolved from nontraditional student theory (Bean & Metzner, 1985), Weidman’s model of undergraduate socialization (1989), and what was available in the student veteran literature, which largely focused on transitioning to higher education (Bauman, 2009; DiRamio, et al., 2008; Livingston, et al., 2011; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010) and on services (McBain et al., 2012; Radford, 2011; Steele et al., 2010). The model focuses on the individual veteran and suggests that conditions for student veteran success are neither consistent between veterans, nor static, as traditional student departure models are and that these conditions are dynamic in nature (Vacchi et al., 2017; Vacchi & Berger, 2014).

Vacchi and Berger’s (2014) adaptation of Bronfenbrenner’s ecological theory (1993) suggests a more holistic view of veteran experiences may inform our understanding of veteran experiences in college better than exploring single characteristics. Focusing on the entire veteran experience is a veteran-friendly approach to researching veterans and veteran-friendliness affects the entire collegiate experience of student veterans with the overall goal of supporting veterans in their college pursuits. My conceptual model for student veteran support, informed by veteran-friendly perspectives in the literature (Ackerman et al., 2009), centers on the individual student veteran and offers four cornerstones for supporting successful degree completion. This model connects with other student veteran literature by suggesting that the transition support and services offered for student veterans contributes to semester on semester retention of student
veterans. However, this model offers an argument that short-term retention or persistence is only an intermediate goal, and that degree attainment is the ultimate goal for both veterans and higher education institutions. To expand on the recent student veteran literature, I connected the literature on nontraditional students to student veteran experiences using Bean and Metzner’s (1985) work. Their findings suggest that social adaptation to a college context for success may well be overstated for nontraditional students and that the academic interactions veterans experience on campus are far more important than traditional student models of social integration with the campus context suggest. This development, drawing from appropriate scholarship, serves to refocus attention on areas that may contribute to veteran degree completion, including appropriate sources of personal support for veterans, which may come more from off-campus sources than on-campus ones. I connected Weidman’s (1989) work with the student veteran literature to help articulate the importance of non-college reference groups, faculty, and peer relationships influence on veteran success in college.

The most common experience of all students is classroom learning, despite that experience varying depending on course subject matter, faculty conduct, and peer student conduct. Bean and Metzner (1985) found that for nontraditional students the academic experience is significantly related to retention, while social interactions appear to be of no import for nontraditional student retention; the findings of Cabrera et al. (1993) and Chartrand, et al. (1992) validate these findings. DiRamio et al. (2008) suggest that student veteran peer relationships are important to student veteran success, but do not demonstrate this relationship empirically, either through the voice of veterans who may desire such contact or by demonstrating that peer connections on campus influence
successful college outcomes for veterans. It may be that some veterans need these relationships, but these needs for connection to other veterans may represent one aspect of the transition from the military to the civilian context of campus. Further, peer veteran support, or overall support, may come from actors who are external to the campus environment, something I explored in this study.

Numerous models (e.g., Bean & Metzner, 1985; Tinto, 1993; Weidman, 1989) demonstrate that faculty members play a key role in the success of students; after all, these are the institutional representatives with whom students interact most frequently. Weidman’s model (1989) has a particularly flexible set of variables that I found to be of great use in adapting to my conceptual model and appear to support pursuit of both qualitative and quantitative data from participants. When I talk about these variables, I summarize Weidman’s contribution to my conceptual model by talking about four sets of interactions: faculty interactions and student peer interactions, both in and out of the classroom. Weidman (1989) asserts that the extent to which students perceive positive interactions with faculty and student peers in and out of the classroom is related to positive student outcomes. Tinto (1993) recognized his omission of nontraditional students and faculty interactions in the revision of his theory, acknowledging that the experiences of nontraditional students are likely different than that of traditional students and that faculty play a key role in the quality of academic experiences of students.

The conceptual model used in this study is a framework grounded in theory and models that may offer a useful lens through which to explore student veteran experiences. This framework views student veterans as the focus of programmatic consideration rather than as generic students moving through a linear institutional cycle. Adapted from
Weidman’s conceptual model of undergraduate socialization (1989) and Bean & Metzner’s conceptual model of nontraditional undergraduate student attrition (1985), my framework emphasizes four areas on which to focus for student veteran success. The four major categories include (1) services and (2) transitions, where we have spent the last several years focused within the student veteran literature, and (3) academic interactions and (4) support relationships, aspects mostly ignored in the extant student veteran literature. Many models and theories (e.g., Astin, 1984; Tinto, 1993; Bean & Metzner, 1985; Weidman, 1989), agree that faculty interactions and academic experiences play some role, typically an important role, in student outcomes in college. Thus, exploring the academic interactions between student veterans, faculty, and other students may help fill the gap in knowledge regarding the classroom experiences of student veterans. Finally, support for nontraditional students comes from different sources than does support for traditional students. Bean and Metzner (1985) highlight the significance of the “non-collegiate, external environment” (p. 490), while Weidman (1989) highlights “non-college reference groups” (p. 299), while many traditional students appear to rely on social supports from on-campus actors and peers (Tinto, 1975, 1993).

A second important component of academic interactions is the quality of interactions between student veterans and other students. The recent literature is replete with observations of tensions between traditional undergraduate students and those with a military background (e.g. Ackerman et al., 2009; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010; Livingston et al., 2011) even if most veterans and staff have little idea how to navigate this problematic dynamic. While this study did not focus on the specifics of faculty and
student dynamics, I offer some recommendations for practice in chapter five of this
dissertation.

An aspect of the support relationships component of my model is the value of
academic advising for supporting student veteran success. Various reports on student
veterans (e.g., Cook & Kim, 2009; Lang & Powers, 2011; McBain, Kim, Cook, & Snead,
2012; Radford, 2009) emphasize the extent to which college credit for military
experience and transfer credits create complexity for student veteran transitions. One of
the main ways students can navigate the college credit process is through the help of
academic advisors, so I included academic advisors in a category broadly labeled support
along with peer advisors.

The final aspect of support relationships is peer support. During the original
development of the conceptual model (Vacchi, 2011), I termed this aspect of the model
peer support in an attempt to connect with existing student veteran literature (e.g.,
DiRamio et al., 2008; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010). However, the insufficiency of limiting
support to peers, be they non-veterans or veterans, became evident as I explored the
nontraditional student literature and found the value of non-college reference groups in
Weidman’s model (1989). My conceptual model (Figure 3) logically fell into place when
I expanded on the literature’s limited perspective on support coming from student veteran
peers and included anyone who supports the veteran during college, particularly those
people who are not part of the campus community, such as spouses, military units, and
veterans who are not students on campus.
Conclusion

This review of the literature focused on a definition of success that guided this study, followed by a conceptualization of the term *veteran-friendly*. After a review of historical literature that suggests veterans have generally succeeded well in higher education, I offered critical perspectives on the use and applicability of Tinto’s theory (1975, 1993) and Schlossberg’s 4S model for framing the experiences of veterans in higher education. Balancing this critique is a discussion of appropriate applications of Schlossberg’s theory in recent scholarship and how this may point scholars more appropriately toward the use of Astin’s IEO theory (1984) as an appropriate connection to the broader higher education literature. With this study properly situated within the
nontraditional student literature (e.g., Bean & Metzner, 1985) and theoretically aligned with Astin’s IEO theory (1984), describing the conceptual model of this study naturally followed.

Student veterans in higher education represent a cyclical population with regard to prominence in the minds of higher education professionals, meaning their notoriety as a student population typically surges right after a period of war and recedes during periods of prolonged peace. With the lack of popularity of veterans in the post-Vietnam Era and the emergence of new models for specific sub-populations of students in the 1980s, scholars overlooked veterans in higher education until the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq increased the number of separating veterans joining our campuses. Before the number of student veterans again diminishes on our campuses, scholars should develop models grounded in the higher education literature, and other literature, in order to develop a body of knowledge to help guide theory and practice in serving student veterans on the Twenty-first Century campus.

Student veterans volunteer to serve our nation in times of peace and war, and most Americans show appreciation and respect for this service. The intention of the GI Bill programs historically was to support the reintegration of service members to our society and economy, while giving veterans the opportunity to develop skills and earn credentials to make a better living after military service (Olson, 1974). While the GI Bill provides the funding for this grand goal, colleges and universities shape the environment on their campuses and can create a supportive environment conducive to student veteran success.
Units of the federal government, such as the Department of Veterans Affairs, along with interested advocacy groups such as Student Veterans of America, intend to collect data to describe the success of student veteran populations (SVA, 2013). While long-term studies can take 7 to 10 years to develop reliable data about the success of specific student populations (e.g., Smart & Pascarella, 1987), professionals in higher education, along with student veterans, would benefit from an understanding of what contributes to student veteran success now. As colleges and universities continue to struggle to identify and implement supportive policies and programs for student veterans (Cook & Kim, 2009; McBain et al., 2012; Molina & Morse, 2015), waiting for a long-term study may disadvantage many veterans in college today. In fact, the lack of research assessing the success of student veterans forces campuses into trial and error programs and policies to serve the increasing numbers of student veterans who continue to join our campuses every year (US Department of Veterans Affairs, 2015a).

Cross-sectional research based on the experiences of veterans graduating from college and those influencers who support student veteran success, such as the snapshot taken in this study, are important for the field to inform programming because no long-term studies exist. Indeed, as early as 1991, Terenzini and Pascarella highlighted the need for gaining a more nuanced understanding of specific nontraditional student population experiences using qualitative methods to inform and complement the body of quantitative research extant within the literature. Given that we have no recent quantitative studies examining the experiences of student veterans, qualitative inquiry along the lines of this study may serve to help guide future studies relying on a variety of methodologies from an informed and nuanced perspective.
CHAPTER 3

DESIGN AND METHODS

Introduction

This study fills a gap in knowledge regarding the factors comprising, or the influences on, successful degree attainment by student veterans. Beginning with a conceptual framework designed specifically for student veterans and informed by generative research, this chapter delineates a hybrid method, informed by the research questions, that was drawn on to gather and analyze the data. As detailed in Chapter 2, the conceptual model focuses on four areas: Services veterans use that are provided to all students; Transition Support largely unique to the student veteran experience; Academic Interactions between veterans and their faculty and non-veteran peers in and out of the classroom; and Support sources. This chapter includes a review of the research question and sub-questions for this study, a review of the research design, site selection and rationale, participant selection procedures, data collection methods, analysis procedures, limitations and delimitations, and ethical issues.

Research Questions

As described in Chapter 1, the guiding research question for this study is: What contributes to student veteran successful college degree attainment? More specifically, three sub-questions served as supporting questions.

- First, from the student veterans’ perspectives, what people, policies, programs, environments, supports, or other factors contribute to successful baccalaureate degree attainment?
• Second, what do people who influence the success of student veterans perceive as the factors that contribute to a veteran’s ability to earn a bachelor’s degree?

• Third, why are the specific factors identified by student veterans effective at enhancing their success?

**Research Design**

Narrative inquiry (Chase, 2005), specifically life history inquiry (e.g., Denzin, 1989; McAdams, Josselson, & Lieblich, 2001; McMahan & Rogers, 1994; Thompson, 2000), served as the overall genre that guided my approach to this study. The design was a hybrid between life history inquiry and narrative inquiry. In their text, *Designing Qualitative Research*, Marshall and Rossman (2015) acknowledge the essential nature of “hybrid forms of qualitative inquiry” (forward material) to bridge gaps and forge new pathways for multidisciplinary research. This modified or focused life history study sought participants’ narratives of experiences in college that contributed to their successful degree attainment, rather than their entire life story (Atkinson, 2002). Unlike chronological approaches to narrative inquiry (e.g., Bruner, 1986; Gubrium & Holstein, 1997; Polkinghorne, 1995), this study may challenge the status quo (Chase, 2005) perception that student veterans struggle to succeed in college (Cate, 2014; DiRamio et al., 2008; Holder, 2011). During this study, I conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews (Rossman & Rallis, 2016) with a diverse group of graduating student veteran seniors or recent graduates from one public and one private university. My intention in using these two institutions was to approximate a control for institution size, while comparing the perspectives of student veterans at two different institutional types.
Chase (2005) eloquently describes the role of participants as narrators of their stories but offers that some interviewees may not be ready to “take up the part of narrator unless they are specifically and carefully invited to do so” (p. 661). Developing a flexible interview guide to elicit the rich stories of the experiences of student veterans was important to the success of this study (See Appendix A). An ethical concern in this study was to avoid leading participants to certain themes, so I took care as I probed and explored their experiences and those of other participants. Gaining the perspective of participants and creating opportunities in which participants can tell their stories using their own voices requires seeking an emic, or insider’s perspective (Rossman & Rallis, 2016) and was critical to my success in revealing several influences on the success of student veterans in college.

Triangulation is an important cornerstone for trustworthiness in a qualitative study (Yin, 2008), and as such interviews alone are a limited means for collecting data and developing findings. In exploring how graduating student veterans completed their academic programs, I needed supplemental data about the experiences of the veterans and I accomplished this in two ways. First, I gathered veterans from each campus for focus group interviews to clarify and confirm initial findings from each campus’ veterans. Second, as veterans began to identify their success influencers, I modified my study to interview at least one influencer per veteran participant to provide supplementary data on the success of the veterans. These additional perspectives came from faculty, support staff, family members, and other student veterans. Using these two additional data sources helped shed new light on aspects of student veteran experiences and success and helped to achieve greater trustworthiness (Marshall & Rossman, 2015) through
triangulation (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Patton, 1990).

However, it was important to the credibility of this study that the participants themselves identified these other agents. As influencing factors or individuals that veterans believe contributed to their success in college were identified in their initial interviews, I selectively explored a few of these people that the veterans indicated were most influential on their success as students. For example, some veterans identified specific faculty members who influenced their success as students, and I sought out three of those faculty members for interviews. I thereby enhanced my understanding of the student veteran’s success by gaining other perspectives, rather than simply relying on the veteran’s perspective alone.

In conducting this focused life history narrative, I interviewed 11 undergraduate or recently graduated student veterans using the interview guide approach (Rossman & Rallis, 2016). I considered an array of success topics partially informed by the literature and partially informed by my own experience as a veteran but allowed the participants to direct the flow of the interview. I initially sought five to 10 student veterans at each of two sites and I intended to select a diverse group of student veterans seeking at least two women, various ethnic backgrounds, and the various military services including some active and reserve component military members. However, as with many student veteran populations, particularly in the northeast US, it was difficult to find willing participants who were other than White males. For a complete list of participants and success influencers and some relevant demographic information see Tables 1 and 2 in the Participants sub-section of this chapter.
During the interviews, I expected participants to identify specific influences on their success as students, and I sought out the human influencers they identified to gain a more emic (Rossman & Rallis, 2016) perspective. What I did not anticipate was a dominant pattern that each participant easily identified one or two people who had a significant degree of influence in their eventual success. Therefore, after initially interviewing three of the BCU student veterans, the course of this research changed and compelled me to gather more data from the success influencers, to the extent reasonable, to better understand the success of the student veterans from a more holistic perspective. Adding this aspect became critical to the eventual findings and refinement of implications, recommendations, and theoretical development about the success of veterans in college. In addition to the 11 veterans participating in this study, I interviewed eight success influencers.

Throughout the data collection process, I kept a journal of possible leads and interesting concepts to pursue during triangulation. I also wrote memos after each interview to reflect on intriguing findings, which is how the success influencer data trail emerged. After reflecting on the initial themes from these first two rounds of data collection, I gathered three of the student veterans for a focus group interview at Big City University (BCU) and three from Big State University (BSU) to reflect key themes back to them to enhance and refine some of the initial findings from the interviews. The other participants were not available to participate in the focus group interviews.

**Site Selection**

As we learn more about the pathways that veterans take in higher education, it is important to consider the types of institutions in which they enroll. This is particularly
salient given the variation in institutional effects on degree attainment and student success (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Veterans enroll at public institutions at roughly twice the rate as at private institutions, however, at the baccalaureate-awarding institution level, enrollment trends are similar with 21% of veterans enrolling in public four-year colleges and 25% enrolling in private non-profits or for-profit institutions (Radford, 2011). Given this parity between enrollment trends in four-year colleges, understanding the experiences of successful student veterans could offer insight into helpful programming and areas in which to focus support for the greater student veteran population in order to increase degree attainment rates.

While a single institution of each type likely does not allow for transferability of findings, the literature offers virtually no insights into factors influencing veteran degree attainment, so this study may offer an exploratory first step toward an improved understanding of student veteran success. Longitudinal studies, typically quantitative in design, offer a valuable understanding of a selected population over time (Pascarella, & Terenzini, 2005); however, qualitative studies can offer an insightful cross-sectional view into the experiences of a chosen population (Yin, 2009).

To focus on the university and to approximate a control for institutional type, I selected Big State University and Big City University as similarly sized research universities in the northeast United States. Each institution enrolled between 400 and 500 student veterans, and each had a similar history of recent student veteran support and student veteran club activity. Still, the kinds of degrees chosen by most students at these campuses differ in some ways, as does the urban setting of Big City U and the rural nature of Big State U. Since earning a baccalaureate degree is one of the key indicators
of moving up the American society’s socioeconomic ladder (Heller, 2011; US Census Bureau, 2008), choosing these two institutions seemed appropriate given the knowledge gap in the literature on veteran success in higher education.

**Participants**

I used both convenience and snowball sampling (Patton, 2002), and I built my sample through references from staff members at the veterans’ services offices, posting a call for participants in the form of a flier posted in the veteran’s lounges, and e-mail contact to graduating senior student veterans. Some participants also joined the study from the reference of initial participants. Since this was a purposeful sample, it would be inappropriate to assume that these participants are representative of the entire student veteran population at either institution. Polkinghorne (1989) recommends interviewing five to 25 participants when exploring a phenomenon. Initially, I sought up to 10 veteran participants per site, but capped the number of participants once the *success influencer* emerged as an important aspect of triangulation requiring interviews with these people. With the possibility of a single influencer for each participant, this risked becoming over 30 interviews with the addition of two focus groups. However, I feel as though interviewing five to six student veterans per campus gave me a reasonable volume of data, and with the addition of eight influencers and two focus groups, my data set to develop an initial understanding of the success of student veterans seemed sufficient.

When interviewing success influencers and briefly establishing rapport, I had one broad question, *Talk to me about your experiences with your student veteran.* From there, I allowed the conversation to flow in a direction determined by the influencer. For individual veterans who noted specific experiences with these influencers, I asked the
influencers about their perspective on the same experience. My exploration into the importance of the success influencer would not have happened without these important influencer interviews and a critical perspective on understanding the experiences of the students would have been missed.

The focus groups came together quickly out of necessity due to my travel limitations, but with reduced participation. With three participants in each group, five of the student veterans did not participate. One influencer, Aram at BCU, who is a student veteran peer, was also in the room for the BCU focus group but did not participate. As a veteran, I find it easy to establish rapport with student veterans, and because I had already interviewed these focus group participants I reestablished rapport with ease. As with the influencers, I allowed the conversation to move on its own at times, but also revisited the key common themes that I saw emerging from individual interviews.

Table 2. Participant List

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Site</th>
<th>Military Service</th>
<th>Military Component</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Marital Status</th>
<th>GI Bill Use</th>
<th>Influencer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Astor</td>
<td>BSU</td>
<td>Army</td>
<td>National Guard</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>MGIB</td>
<td>Nancy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dino</td>
<td>BSU</td>
<td>Army</td>
<td>Active</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Vocational</td>
<td>Jimmy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jerry</td>
<td>BSU</td>
<td>Army</td>
<td>Reserves</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>MGIB/USAR-TA</td>
<td>Jane</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sammy</td>
<td>BSU</td>
<td>Army</td>
<td>Reserves</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>Post 9/11</td>
<td>Dino</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tanner</td>
<td>BSU</td>
<td>Air Force</td>
<td>Active</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>Post 9/11</td>
<td>Faculty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jimmy</td>
<td>BSU</td>
<td>Army</td>
<td>National Guard</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Post 9/11/Ch1606</td>
<td>Dino</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drew</td>
<td>BCU</td>
<td>Marine Corps</td>
<td>Active</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>Post 9/11</td>
<td>Faculty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Darren</td>
<td>BCU</td>
<td>Army</td>
<td>Active</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>Post 9/11</td>
<td>Aram</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kerry</td>
<td>BCU</td>
<td>Army</td>
<td>Active</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>Post 9/11</td>
<td>Karla</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Myron</td>
<td>BCU</td>
<td>Air Force</td>
<td>Active</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>Post 9/11</td>
<td>Amos</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mica</td>
<td>BCU</td>
<td>Navy</td>
<td>Active</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Post 9/11</td>
<td>Natasha, Amos</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Rossman and Rallis (2016) highlight the value of a grand tour question for making interviewees more comfortable; they note that this typically encourages longer responses to subsequent questions. I found this to be the case in a previous study and it was also true for this study. I also found in a previous study that many veterans tend to be succinct with responses, which may require frequent probing and supplemental questions. To foster more in-depth responses, I designed the grand tour question, “Take me from your time in high school to the time you entered college.” This open-ended question allowed for various components of participants’ life stories to emerge at the beginning of each interview while making the veterans feel more at ease in telling their stories. I used a similar version of a grand tour question when interviewing the success influencer: “Please briefly tell me your background that brought you to your position today.” Most of those interviewed, discussed how they earned advanced degrees and
gained employment at the university; for two influencers who were student veteran peers, this resulted in background stories similar to the veteran participants.

Having undergone many of the same experiences and transitions myself that student veterans experience before and during college gave me an insider’s connection with my participants (Rossman & Rallis, 2016). This insider’s, or *emic* perspective, which Rossman and Rallis (2016) suggest can be an advantage for researchers, allowed me to reflect back the meaning of the participants’ words during the interviews; this immediate member checking was important (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Still, I was wary of falling into the trap of believing that I automatically understood what participants meant and forced myself to explain some concepts in their own words that I believed I already understood. This was a type of validity check during my data collection efforts.

For further member checking, I provided willing participants a copy of their transcript which they reviewed for accuracy. I also provided a copy of what I believed to be the main points of each participant’s interview that participants also checked for accuracy. In addition, I used peer debriefing from select colleagues to help me consider the developing findings and implications. Finally, I concluded each interview with a request for a possible follow-up interview to allow for clarifications in the event I took insufficient notes or could not understand portions of audio recordings. This was critically important when the digital audio portion of a BCU student veteran’s interview did not save correctly and was lost.

**Semi-structured Interviews**

I used a semi-structured interview guide technique (Rossman & Rallis, 2016) to encourage in-depth responses as participants told their stories. My aim was to create an
atmosphere in which student veterans would feel open to sharing their experiences (Heshusius, 1994), honoring their experiences and opening up the possibility for revealing influences on their success in college. I anticipated the possibility that military experiences themselves may have had some effect on the success of the participants, but I wanted to be sure they identified other influences than their military service, so I had a menu of general prompts if veterans relied too heavily on their military service for their success. This was not needed but was guided by the theory of veteran friendliness (Vacchi, 2013) and would have prompted participants to consider places, services, or people that influenced their success. I also used a memo process as I proceeded with interviews and data analysis to reflect on my ongoing observations, points of confusion, and directions for the study (Charmaz, 2006). I reserved the option to add more participants to the study if I felt there were no clear themes identified in the data, but the dominant theme of another person influencing the success of student veterans prompted me to interview a total of eight influencers rather than adding more student veterans to the participant list.

After the grand tour question, “Take me from your time in high school until today,” I asked a series of open-ended questions directly seeking people, places, or spaces that influenced participants’ success as undergraduates as three main sources of veteran-friendliness derived from my earlier study (Vacchi, 2013). The conceptual framework would guide probes of each participant interview in the event they did not immediately offer an array of influencers to their success; however, this was not needed, as all participants were immediately able to identify a person who influenced their success.
Additionally, in reviewing the transcripts as part of data analysis, I noted the salience of some influencers who were mentioned without prompting.

After initial interviews with veterans, I interviewed the various people identified by participants as key influencers of their success. Those identified were parents, faculty, staff, and fellow veterans in and out of college; according to participants, they all appeared to have a marked effect on their validation as students. Interviewing these success influencers served as one means of triangulation, helping me to gain a deeper understanding of the dyadic relationship between the influencer and the veteran and how the influencer helped to facilitate the success of the veteran.

Finally, I invited the participants at each site to a focus group interview (Marshall & Rossman, 2015) to member check (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and to follow up on key themes, so that I could seek clarification on initial interview responses to enhance and refine my initial findings. This component of triangulation offered a nuanced perspective on the success of student veterans that solidified the body of data collected during individual interviews. Some participants were not able to attend the focus groups and I ended up with three participants at each site and one influencer at the BCU site, who was also a student veteran peer. The BCU focus group took place in the veterans’ lounge on the BCU campus and the BSU focus group happened after the participants attended an invited barbeque near campus. I asked each focus group similarly worded questions to gain further insight into themes that emerged across the participants during individual interviews.

A final aspect of triangulation during data collection was to utilize peer debriefs for checking the credibility of my findings. I was somewhat surprised at the saliency of
the findings as perceived by several peers, because, while I was confident in the
development of the conceptual model, theoretical connections, and the trustworthiness of
the procedures and findings, this is my first comprehensive study. Even more surprising
was the feedback from a peer who is studying an entirely different underrepresented and
understudied population: Her perception was that my conceptual model would apply well
to the empirical exploration of her population as well.

**Data Analysis**

The goal of this research was to develop a model that suggests elements
supporting the success of student veterans in pursuit of baccalaureate degrees. Charmaz’s
(2006) approach to grounded theory data analysis guided an inductive analysis process. I
compared initial themes and findings from open coding to inform my decision to seek
interviews from influencers as a way to understand the success dynamic of student
veterans more comprehensively.

I began data analysis with initial coding, sometimes called open coding or manual
coding (Saldaña, 2009), and I was open to any possible direction the data took my
analysis (Charmaz, 2006). I coded the data phrase by phrase to draw connections
between the themes generated by each participant. The second phase of coding was
focused coding (Charmaz, 2006) during which I took the most frequent codes, sifted
through the rest of the data, and made decisions about which initial codes made the most
sense for categorizing the corpus of data (Charmaz, 2006). Here, the perspectives of
influencers, focus group sentiments, and the intensity of the perceived influence on each
participant helped to inform which codes I used to categorize all of the data. Finally, I
used theoretical coding (Glaser, 1978) to shape the focused codes into a theory or model that describes the phenomenon of student veteran success.

**Researcher Positionality**

I needed to set aside my experiences as much as possible to be open to the perceptions of the participants about their success. For this study, the experiences of student veterans were clearly different from anything I have experienced, because I was not a veteran when I earned my bachelor’s degree: I was a traditional undergraduate. Moustakas (1994) asserts that perfectly bracketing one’s prior experiences is seldom possible, but Creswell (2007) offers that attempting to bracket is desirable. While many of my own experiences and anecdotal observations inform the overall direction of my scholarly activity, I used these perspectives to focus on areas I felt would express the unique experiences of veterans in college and to shape my conceptual model. While I have had negative interactions based on my status as a student veteran, few experiences in higher education have been as extreme as the recurring challenges I faced while serving in the military. As such, I connect personally with Baxter-Magolda’s assertion that veterans likely have a greater capacity to manage dissonance than their non-veteran peers, due to military experiences (DiRamo & Jarvis, 2011).

I am a student veteran, albeit different from the typical undergraduate veteran who is, by definition, a prior enlisted member of the military. I am a retired senior officer and had scores of enlisted soldiers working for me during my active duty career. In my previous research, I considered the possibility of power dynamics during the interviews as unsettling for undergraduate student veterans, and I intended to manage this potential ethical challenge in several ways. First, I did not intentionally share my active duty rank
or experiences and introduced myself as a student veteran working on my doctoral research and added that I have deployed in the recent wars. In the past, this appeared to break down many potential barriers and positioned our shared veteran status as a prominent common bond. Over the last several years, I have found that the common bond of serving during the same era, particularly during Operations Enduring and Iraqi Freedom, develop a rapid rapport with the emerging generation of veterans. Second, I informally greeted each participant and established first name parity with them: a peer-relationship that many veterans tend to value and seek as they transition into civilian life. Third, I monitored each participant for comfort during the interviews and employed the natural familiarity most veterans have around each other by sharing common veteran language and experiences as appropriate during interviews and focus groups.

I had no dominant preconceptions about where and how student veterans receive support for their success as undergraduates. I hypothesized that veteran peers would be a frequent response but had no idea that faculty would play an apparently more important role than veteran peers in supporting the success of veterans. Two guiding theories (e.g., Bean & Metzner, 1985; Weidman, 1989) suggested that participants would offer an array of influencing factors, including the student veteran lounge, veteran peers, advisers, faculty members, and family members. However, the most interesting findings appear to relate to the ways human influencers affected the success of these veterans. The ability to acknowledge positionality yet include alternative views and be open to unexpected outcomes, is a hallmark of qualitative inquiry (Creswell, 2007; Marshall & Rossman, 2015). Perhaps the best evidence that I succeeded in mitigating personal bias can be seen in the surprise of the central findings that were completely unanticipated.
Trustworthiness of Method

My role as a researcher is to facilitate data interpretation for the benefit of others. I support Van Manen’s (1990) perspective that a researcher’s interpretation of the meaning of lived experiences facilitates understanding a phenomenon; however, a single interview runs the risk of opening the data to unnecessary interpretation on my part. As Chase (2005) asserts, participants may not be ready to be the narrators of their life stories and as such may need a researcher’s assistance to do so. The interpretive approach (Van Manen, 1990) has advantages over the approach Moustakas (1994) espouses, which is that phenomenology is less researcher interpretation and more description of participants’ experiences.

This study focused on the lived experiences of the participants and, critical to the trustworthiness of the methods, encouraged the rich descriptions of factors affecting undergraduate student veteran success among the participants. While the impromptu reactions to the initial interview was a valuable starting point, particularly in deciding to interview influencers, following up on themes and trends with participants allowed for the veterans to think about factors of their success over time to reinforce, strengthen, or add new perspectives to their experiences during the focus group interviews. The clarifying perspective of a person identified as a key influencer was important to understand the dynamic existing between the two actors in the dyadic relationship contributing to a student veteran’s success. Further, an important finding was learning that the effect staff and faculty members had on the success of the veterans was the same with their relationships with any impassioned students regardless of veteran status. I expected that the value of my role as the researcher would be critical in connecting the
threads of continuity between the stories of participants as they described their success as students.

Another technique I used frequently during this study was peer debriefing (Marshall & Rossman, 2015) which allowed me to discuss emergent findings with colleagues to ensure my analyses were grounded in the data (p. 40). Ideally, I would have had military veteran scholars to triangulate results with during this study, but I did not have ready access to those kinds of peers. Still, there are some data available in the modest literature that provided some corroboration for my findings, in addition to peers in my academic program who are familiar enough with my research to provide important perspectives. During the interviews, I confirmed some concepts by asking questions from various perspectives to ensure I captured the essence of an experience. After transcription, I clarified specific elements of data with the participants thus ensuring I accurately reflected their stories of success, which can also serve as member checking (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Limitations

There are several limitations of this study, including the small size of the sample, which does not allow for the generalizability of this study to a larger population. While Polkinghorne (1989) offered that as few as five participants can help to explain a phenomenon, skeptics may view more as better for a sample in research studies, which raises the stakes for comprehensive interviews and thoughtful data analysis. While seeking a diverse sample, I was limited in potential participants due to available graduating seniors and the diversity of an institution’s student veteran population. With a relative scarcity of women student veterans in general, and the scarcity of Black,
Hispanic, Latino, and Asian students at the two study sites, I intentionally sought women and veterans of color, with little success.

Ideally, this study would have considered numerous institution types, sizes, and missions, but I had to be realistic during this dissertation process. Restricting this study to two universities still allowed for an initial look into the factors that may contribute to student veteran success in the context of what may be the most important degree for student veterans seeking to improve socioeconomic status: the baccalaureate degree. For this reason, I chose one public and one private university at which to collect data. Another aspect that I had to limit was the number of participants and interviewees. Attempting to interview graduating seniors with busy schedules in April was ambitious, but I was able to meet with at least five veterans from each campus that were either about to graduate or had graduated the December prior to my data collection. I reduced the number of veteran participants from a goal of 20, because of the significant emergence of the influencers in this study and the clear need to interview these success influencers as a form of triangulation to understand more fully the interactions within these dyadic relationships. A final delimitation was the focus of the participants being solely on undergraduates. With graduate and undergraduate experiences being quite different, and approximately 84% of student veterans being undergraduates, this was an intentional choice on what the field needs in the way of knowledge generation.

I would like to note here that shortly after interviewing Darren, an alumnus of BCU, I lost the digital recordings of our interview and as a result only had my hand-written notes to include in the data analysis. While this is a terrible loss of in vivo data, his experiences were consistent with the other participants of BCU and BSU, and there
were little in the way of unique experiences that were not also part of the stories of other participants.

Conclusion

With an emerging small body of theory and research to inform policies, programs, and practices for student veterans, and an urgent need for knowledge to inform future studies, inductive studies are a productive way to inform not only practice, but also to inform future deductive studies. Some recent studies have addressed the transition out of the military and into higher education (e.g., Diamond, 2012; DiRamio et al., 2008; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010; Young 2012) while others have explored experiences beyond the transition (e.g., Hammond, 2015; Minnis, 2014). These studies, among others, have taken important steps to improving our knowledge about the experience of student veterans: work that must continue.

Exploring the experiences of veterans as students, in fact all students in higher education, has but one broad goal: to seek a better understanding of the student experience to identify ways to enhance the success of students in their higher education aspirations. Seeking to explain failure or departure, rather than success, has fallen short of effectively serving the needs of students for generations and has developed a culture of deficit modeling and failure avoidance, rather than seeking and nurturing success. Until we have definitive deductive studies that can demonstrate successful strategies for student veteran success that are reasonable to apply to the veteran culture, we should employ inductive inquiry and be open to the universe of possibilities explaining veteran success. We must allow for being surprised that what we discover may be new and
unexplained by extant knowledge, which is largely based on the experiences of traditional students in college to date.

To explore veteran success in higher education at this early juncture in the development of knowledge and theory may require observing and querying veterans about their success and seeking to capture their lived experiences in their own voices; this is a generative way to achieve this research goal. The conceptual framework for this study and theory of veteran-friendliness drove the shaping of my interview guide to consider services, transitions, and personal and academic relationships to identify what spaces, services, and support relationships influenced student veteran success.

This chapter included a review of the research question and sub-questions for this study, a review of the research design, site selection and rationale, participant selection procedures, data collection methods, analysis procedures and ethical issues.
CHAPTER 4
THE VOICES OF VETERANS

Introduction

In this chapter, I present the data and findings from the collected interview and focus group data. As can occur during inductive studies, I was so surprised by the dominance of a major theme early in the study, that of the success influencer for student veterans, that I modified the original scope and direction of the study to explore the dyadic relationship between these human influencers and the veterans themselves. While the number of veteran participants for this study adjusted toward the low end of my original goal, five at BCU, and six at BSU, I also added eight success influencers; these people were identified by nine of the veteran participants as a primary influence on their success in college. As an important aspect of triangulation, I invited all participants to join focus group discussions to reflect on my initial observations and emerging themes, resulting in three veterans per site participating in these focus groups. I continued to explore the rest of the data and theoretical themes regarding other influences on the success of the participants’ college process and several other themes emerged, which are discussed further in this chapter.

Three broad themes emerged during data analysis with notable consistency throughout the responses of the student veterans; some interesting, but less pervasive in the data, themes emerged as well. The most surprising finding was that all participants, except one (who has a caveat I noted during post-interview memos), readily identified a person, or multiple people, they thought was very important to their success as undergraduate students. In addition, a prominent theme was the routine and structure
helpful to student veterans. This theme was identified primarily because it was highlighted by a veteran who had undergone the transition to college while negotiating severe PTSD and TBI (traumatic brain injury) residual from a combat deployment to Kuwait and Iraq. A traumatic brain injury (TBI) is defined as an alteration in brain function, or other evidence of brain pathology, caused by an external force (Brain Injury Association of America, 2017). It was through the discussion of how this veteran succeeded that, with the dedicated help of his younger sister who was also a student at Big State University, this theme of structure emerged and then resonated within the rest of the data provided by other participants. Without the overt nature of the special relationship between Jerry and Jane, I would have missed this important theme. Finally, certain services, specifically the processing of education benefits, emerged as an important finding, as it has in many other studies, and an interesting notion that the participants seem to want to be able to simultaneously be seen as any other student is seen, but also to be able to emerge as needed as a veteran who is different from most students.

**People That Influence Student Veteran Success**

The higher education literature that highlights the influences of faculty and non-campus influencers (e.g., Bean & Metzner, 1985; Vacchi & Berger, 2014; Weidman, 1989) is quite relevant for this study. In fact, it would appear that the consistent appearance of a *success influencer* in the data for this study suggests these people serve as important triggers for successful academic interactions, much like a critical moment of validation for self-authorship (Baxter-Magolda, 2007), and subsequently success in college.
The first time I noted that there was something important going on with other actors influencing the success of veterans during data collection was during my first interview with Mica, a US Navy veteran of four years’ service. What is most surprising about Mica mentioning as many as four specific people as critical to his success as a student is that he was one of the most successful students in his entire graduating class at Big City University with academic and extracurricular achievements rarely accomplished by most college students. Speaking of professor Natasha, Mica said, “She’s been very...she’s been good. She challenges my thought process, to make me think very critically about everything that’s going on.” Early in my interview with Mica, he spoke of his wife’s influence in supporting him and keeping him grounded.

My wife has been pretty instrumental. Just because she’s offered support. She kind of might think that some of the projects that I get involved with are silly. She’s always been good at keeping me grounded. I have had some considerable success over the past year. Which she has always been keeping me down to earth. Not allowing me to get to full of myself. (Mica, 2013)

Many people attribute the kind of success Mica has in college to innate intelligence and capabilities, but he clearly credited others with his success, a theme consistent among all but one of the participants. Particularly given that Mica had a 2.2 high school GPA and, despite being quite intelligent, he only had a 3.2 GPA in college, something Mica notes can be attributed to him “butting heads” with faculty members in an attempt to engage in a higher level of classroom learning.

What is most interesting about the common dynamic of the success influencer among the participants is that successful academic performance is assumed and the self-
effacing humility instilled by military training seemed to cause participants to discount that and explain their own success by highlighting the influences of others on their success as students. Only one participant, Tanner, an Air Force veteran at Big State University, attributed his academic success to his personal abilities and did not highlight a success influencer. I will discuss Tanner’s case in other sections of this chapter because there may be unique situations surrounding his life and experiences that make him different from the typical student veteran and might even make him more similar to a nontraditional student without military experience than many student veterans.

Mica identified his wife, who was about to have their first child, his campus certifying official and student veteran organization adviser, a peer student veteran, and a faculty member as being key influencers on his success as a student. Although this was a surprise to me, I understood this dynamic as I have observed the humility of many veterans anecdotally over the years, which seems to be a residual effect of the voluntary servant dynamic that exists when joining the all-volunteer military.

To see what was going on with this dynamic for Mica, and to explore new areas for veterans, I chose not to interview his supporting wife, particularly since she was in a late stage of pregnancy. The college impact literature (e.g. Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005) suggests the importance of a spouse regarding motivational support for college attendance and financial support, as Mica’s wife clearly provided because she is a corporate professional. Rather, I explored the other influences on Mica’s experiences in college and encouraged him to speak expansively about who his influencers may have been. As I poured through the data, numerous other influencers emerged for Mica, such as Amos the lead veterans advocate on campus working in the bursar’s office about
whom Mica said, “Amos was a pretty good reason for not only the success of the Student Veteran’s Organization, but the success for me as a student veteran. He’s really done wonders.” Mica also readily mentioned Aram, a fellow student veteran leader and an influencer for several BCU student veterans.

[Aram] was another person to keep me in check. Sometimes I can get some lofty ideas about how things will go. By him and I discussing things, talking things out, and talking things through as to what we should do. I think that that was the best way to keep my high-minded ideas tethered to the veteran’s community. (Mica, 2013)

Most of the other participants joined Mica in mentioning two to four success influencers all within recurring positions related to veterans suggesting four different categories of influencing people: family, faculty, staff, and veteran peers.

**Family Influences on Student Veteran Success**

Many of the participants identified family members as particularly important to their success as college students. As mentioned, Mica identified his wife as an important factor in his success, “Just because she’s offered support.” Mica was the key student leader in the creation, funding, and construction of the campus’ veteran memorial, among a myriad of other non-veteran related accomplishments over his four years as a student at BCU. “She’s always been good at keeping me grounded… Not allowing me to get to full of myself.” (Mica, 2013).

Dino, an older retired student veteran noted how his wife and his daughter helped him in various ways. “My wife will read my papers for edit. You know, she’s really... I got a good support system around the house.” What was important for Dino was that his
wife already had a college degree when they met and she “remarked that getting a college education is probably the smartest thing [Dino had] ever done.” Dino respects the fact that his wife is clearly intelligent and that her degree is a marker of that intelligence. Dino also understood the positive effect his education had on his marital relationship.

If we have a conflict, you know, with my experience in sociology, I am more open on conversing with her, stuff like that. We had a major issue here recently where it can look like yeah, time to go to a marriage counselor. Well, you know, maturity and looking at things rationally and logically from an educated viewpoint, I started to open and then she opened. We pretty much worked the issue out to where we actually are back on our norm again, you know. (Dino, 2013)

It was clear during Dino’s interview that this kind of conflict resolution would have been difficult while he was in the Army.

With older student veterans, the possibility of connecting with school-age children around academics becomes a possibility. “My daughter and I, we sit down and do our homework at the kitchen counter together,” Dino said. While this may seem like a simple notion, not all children feel comfortable enough with their parents to do something like this. This positive relationship could have been primarily related to Dino being a good parent, but he was rarely living in the same location as his wife and daughter when his daughter was very young because Dino’s wife did not like the military. So, while he was assigned to various duty stations around the country, Dino’s wife lived in Florida and developed her career and raised their daughter. An interesting window into the
relationship Dino had developed with his daughter, he spoke about the two of them taking tap dance classes together.

We actually signed up and took tap dancing. She took tap dancing lessons from the local dance studio in [local town]. I signed her up for dance 1.0 or something for an entire semester. Her and I would be in my room right above where my wife sits and we lay out these wooden boards I got and we’d be up there sitting there, shuffling and doing the paddles and working on these tap moves that we learned in classes. And my wife would be yelling from downstairs to move it. So yeah, I had a lot of support from the family.

Jerry did not hesitate when asked who was important to his success, “I’d say first and foremost, it’s got to be my younger sister.” Jerry was managing PTSD, a TBI, and was recovering from a stroke when he was pursuing a business degree from Big State University. Jerry was in and out of several civilian, military, and Veterans Health Administration hospitals over the two years he was entering college after his injuries in Iraq. What became clear as I interviewed Jerry’s sister, Jane, as a key influencer of his success, was that she created structure for Jerry that he either was not aware of as necessary for his success as a student, or structure he rarely needed at any point in his life to that point.

She lived in the dorm across from me, and she was consistently checking in to see how I was doing, making sure that I was where I needed to be, that I can find what I needed to, kind of keep in the stress level and the anger level lower and tolerable.
During my interview with Jane, it became clear that Jerry downplayed the significance of her contribution to his success. Because his own situation was clearly so dire, it seems Jerry presents another example of how veterans tend to downplay the severity of any issue that might be severe as veterans are not supposed to be the weak links in life or work settings. Jane said, “We took classes together. Once I realized that—after the first semester, I did really well, and he had not done as well, I wanted to figure out what was going on.” The dyadic relationship between Jerry and Jane is definitely a case study that I will reexamine in detail for a future research project as I think it perfectly captures all of the essential areas in which a student veteran might plan for and structure success in a college program.

Kerry, an Army veteran at BCU, offered another example of different kinds of familial support she received from her parents while a criminal justice major in college. “[My dad’s] always been really supportive and I feel like I want to make him proud. I’m a criminal justice major. My dad was a cop.” Kerry was clearly well connected and influenced by her family and expressed that her family always supported her decisions, particularly of going into the military and of going to college. Speaking specifically of her dad’s support of her college pursuits Kerry said, “He’s so important and when I have a question with law enforcement, I ask him. I get a really cool perspective from him. It’s just nice to have that support especially from my dad.”

While the technical support from her father around law enforcement issues was clearly important to Kerry, she intimated a different kind of support from her mother. “My mom was also really supportive. She’s more of the emotional support type of person,” which Kerry contrasted with academic support and high academic expectations
that came from her father. Interestingly, Kerry’s mother was a high school graduate, while her father had earned a master’s degree. Perhaps this is a source of his encouragement for academic achievement, while Kerry’s mother was a source of moral and emotional support for Kerry.

**Faculty Influences on Student Veteran Success**

Mica rapidly highlighted the influence that Professor Natasha had on his success when queried about factors that influenced his success in attaining his bachelor’s degree. Mica explained a feeling of dissonance he has with higher education, “A lot of education is regurgitation, and I’m not a fan. I would rather take the information, interpret, and give back a better product.” Clearly, Mica, a 3.2 GPA college student, prefers the adult learning style as a 29-year-old veteran, rather than the elementary pedagogical style frequently used in undergraduate education. When Mica spoke of Natasha, he said, “She challenges my thought process, to make me think very critically about everything that’s going on… She knows when and how to ask the why question, if that makes sense.”

Mica responded to her style and sought to take additional courses from Natasha, who Mica said “[has] been kind of a mentor over the past year… If any professor were to be a mentor, I think she would be it.” This relationship continued outside the classroom as he explained how Professor Natasha worked with him on an invitational essay competition through the German Embassy, along with thirty other students from around the country.

When I saw the spark of passion in Mica’s eye about the academic process as it unfolded with Natasha, I knew I had to explore her perception of this dyadic academic relationship. Interestingly, Professor Natasha was open about the extent to which she is critical of US military global intervention in her political science classes, yet she
accommodates veterans by allowing them space to explore and critically think about their experiences in class discussions, which serves to validate veterans. She also does this with non-veterans, but rarely sees it unfold with non-veterans as they are largely traditional students and have little life experience outside of college. Regarding her relationship with Mica, she really does not show him favoritism in any way. Professor Natasha says, “If you have a student who is willing to put in — no matter what kind of student — that extra work, then there is just this sort of openness.” She also emphasized, “I like to cultivate my relationships with my students… I’m more around and more accessible [than some other faculty]”. She also views Mica’s success as being attributed to his own skills and talents, and not simply because he is a veteran or anything in particular that she does as a professor.

All but one participant, Tanner, intimated what Professor Natasha agreed was an accommodate and validate style of being an educator, which contributed to their success as students. Dino, a 50-year-old retired Army first sergeant, talked about the accessibility of community college faculty as being superior, in general, to that of Big State University. “They’ll sit down one on one with you quite frequently,” he said, knowing full well that BSU faculty will also sit down with students, but the accessibility of the community college faculty was greater in his view. Dino also talked about how folks such as family, disability services staff, and VA work-study students helped create a welcoming and supportive environment, and after a difficult first semester, he felt validated from all of the support and then started accumulating A’s for grades at BSU.

Drew, a USMC veteran, identified his math professor as an influencer. He mentioned that few students used office hours to get help, but Drew spent considerable
time in office hours and the professor respected that in his support of Drew. “I was in there plugging away every day. I’m pretty sure I bombed that final. I think just he knew I worked very hard at it, so he bumped it up a little bit. I finished with an A minus.”

Although most veterans appear not to seek favoritism, it is rarely refused when seen as a justifiable reward for dedicated academic effort.

Another way faculty support the success of veterans is in the advising role, which happened with regularity among the veterans as well. Astor, an Army National Guard member and music major, highlighted the distinct influence that his adviser, and associate dean, Nancy, had on his success as a student. “That woman built my schedule from scratch every semester [and incorporated my interests as well],” said Astor of his advising interactions with Nancy. He followed quickly by saying, “if I had any problems, I would just go to her and she would take care of the problem.”

Nancy knew Astor before he went to basic training and observed, “I think he’s someone who has noticeably evolved since he got in [to the military].” As a child and partner of veterans herself, Nancy was quick to observe that Astor was not as immature as traditional students after he returned from basic training, making a gesture of a spectrum and talking about how far Astor was along the maturity path compared with traditional students and where he was before his initial military training. “Really, quite an impressive maturity level, starting from — and I don’t mean that he was immature when he came in, but just having real perspective about things and realizing the fundamental importance about things.” Nancy attributed his development to a combination of time spent at BSU, personal growth, and development through military training. “I think it’s a sense of self and a sense of prioritization and a sense that you can
depend on yourself but you also have to depend on other people, which is what I think you learn in the armed forces [laughter].”

One participant, Tanner, placed emphasis on his success being directly attributable to his talents and efforts as opposed to very many other people, which made him a bit of an outlier in this study, and in my view, makes him an anomaly among most veterans in my anecdotal observation over the years. It generally seems as though veterans take a self-effacing view of things and typically ascribe credit for successes to other team members or others that may have influenced a given situation. During the focus group interviews, the veterans who could attend agreed with this sentiment. Myron, a veteran at BCU, said during their focus group interview, “I just tend to look externally for the factors that make me who I am.” And Dino at BSU agreed during their focus group, “There’s just the people that I tend to trust and I felt like they gave me great help, they were doing it because they were really good members of the higher education community.” Still, there may have been some sort of life experience, or identity shift, taking place that I was not privy to, or aware of, during Tanner’s interview. He seemed very open during the interview but felt as though his educational experience was beneath him at BSU, despite a modest 3.1 GPA, because he did not have to try hard to get by on his academic work.

After a bit of interview maneuvering, I was able to ask Tanner if he felt any of the other kinds of folks who had influenced the success of other student veterans were of any significance to his degree attainment. His responses were interesting: no student veteran peers, no academic advisers, no family, not even the veterans’ services coordinator, whom he worked for as a Veterans Affairs (VA) Work Study student, seemed important
to his success in his view. “Janice is not a source I would ever use, even if I felt I needed to,” Tanner said about the BSU veterans’ services coordinator. Finally, as Tanner thought about faculty, he did land on one professor in his geology program as influential, but I believed he was conflicted about admitting that someone besides him might have had anything to do with his success.

There was one in particular. I do research with her. I wouldn’t necessarily give her too much credit. She was definitely influential. I don’t think I would have the knowledge I have now if it wasn’t for her. Yeah, she helped me succeed. Just doing research with her, I did my best to take classes with her whenever available, and obviously, that took me towards the end goal.

I noted a distinct struggle, on Tanner’s part, to admit that anyone had a positive influence on his academic career because he paused and thought before each of his quoted statements above. This case alone is fascinating, and I would love to explore the apparent tension within Tanner’s psyche and his reluctance to ascribe contribution to his success to very many people other than himself.

**Staff Member Influence on the Success of Student Veterans**

Mica, Myron, and Dino also had great experiences with staff members who served to support their success as students. In Dino’s case, he worked a class capstone project into an internship as the supervisor of peer tutoring at Big State University, and as might be expected, given his background as a senior non-commissioned officer in the Army, he proposed numerous revisions to the processes, training, and evaluation of peer tutors. His staff supervisor encouraged him not only to revise all of these aspects of the program but also to conduct a pretest/posttest study of the effects of these changes. The
results were not a surprise to me in that he was extremely successful in reinvigorating the program. The interesting aspect of this undertaking was the practical application of the project, rather than the more prevalent classroom style of abstract application. Said Dino about the project, “In my veteran brain, I’m creating a real world too, not a practicing [sic] to be turned in and graded, but something that is supposed to be implemented.” Dino spoke about how this was affecting him at the time of the study: “creativity in higher ed is starting to come in.” As with many veterans, the more practical the work is in benefitting others, the more Dino embraced the work.

Myron received great support from Amos, the Big City University certifying official, due to the competence with which he pursued his job as the chief university official to ensure GI Bill payments were accurate and on time. “Amos was great. I’m sure you’ll hear that a lot. Very cool, laid back, understood what we were going through, to some degree at least.” Amos became the campus’ primary advocate for the organizing efforts of the student veterans to become a registered student organization, to establish a veterans’ lounge on campus, and to undertake the design, funding, and construction of a veterans’ memorial on campus. Myron was suspended for two semesters during an incredibly difficult time in his life, a topic that I intentionally did not pursue beyond what was offered by Myron. What was impressive to me was the perspective Myron had, the ownership of his prior actions, and the success he had after he returned to campus. There’s a maturity with Myron that goes beyond acculturation and maturation in the military. Amos agreed:

You know, you hit the nail on the head. It is impressive because especially coming onto a campus, being an older student, not really feeling like you have
that peer-to-peer relationship with a lot of other students on campus. And then having something bad happen, I think would be enough for a lot of people to just call it quits. But he was determined to finish, and so even when he came to me to tell me what had happened, he was determined to come back, so that was never a question. But he also felt really bad about what he had done, and he wanted to share that with the group so that they knew that if there were things going on in their own lives, they could look out for any red flags that might help anybody else. He wanted to be an example. And I think that’s a really good example of leadership is to use what happens to you for the betterment of others.

Mica had great support from Amos in encouraging him to create the student veteran organization and undertake campus-wide initiatives for veterans. Amos, a university official who volunteered to work with student veterans\(^1\), welcomed the responsibility of helping get the student organization started as a staff mentor. For his part, Amos does not claim much credit but credited the work of Myron and Mica in getting it started. However, the students were quick to point out that if Amos had not provided them encouragement and direction, they might not have succeeded in their veteran initiatives. They also talked about the assurance that having their finances in order played in being able to focus on the job of their education.

Another student at BCU, Darren, a USMC veteran, highlighted Amos and one student affairs professional as being people who provided much guidance to him and helped him secure two study abroad opportunities. When Darren began taking part in academic experiences everyone else seemed to be participating in and when he was given

\(^1\) I cannot be more specific about the role of this individual because it would unduly expose them, thereby violating their anonymity.
initial guidance at the beginning of his academic time at BCU, things fell into place rapidly.

Finally, both Sammy and Tanner were clearly helped by staff members at BSU. Tanner, the Air Force veteran who believed he was solely responsible for his own success, appeared at odds with his own identity as a person and as a veteran. “I don’t really have any interaction with anyone towards school-based activities,” Tanner said of the influence of people in his academic process, “I don’t like asking anyone for help, so I don’t seek it.” Interestingly, his lack of help-seeking conflicts with his ability to self-assess, because he switched degree programs three times and was maintaining a 3.1 GPA while simultaneously holding the perspective that, “Typically, things come relatively easy to me.” So, it may be that Tanner was either bored or challenged more than he expected in college and his lack of help-seeking may have deterred greater success as a student.

While exploration of veteran identity is another study entirely, and combat veteran identity has been conceptualized in a study by Hammond (2015), Tanner was a non-combat veteran who did not seem to fit into the military. “Six years in the Air Force: couldn’t stand it,” Tanner said as he described near immediate frustration with his military service. He went on, “Too many ignorant people stayed in. Too many competent people got out… so I got out.” However, Tanner’s challenges in focusing on his college degree might suggest he had internal challenges and conflicts of which I did not specifically uncover during his interview. During his time as an undergraduate student, most of the people Tanner interacted with in the veterans’ lounge were combat
veterans of the Army or Marine Corps; he did not really fit in there either, despite being a
VA work-study student in the office.

They’re pigs over there. Just about every other word is derogatory about some
minority group other than the Caucasian male. And I just don’t want to associate
with that. There’s that, and then just ignorant comments. And so, I’ll say
negative things to them just to kind of put them in their place. There’s that
conflict. (Tanner, 2013)

On a positive note, Tanner was clearly affected in supportive ways by an assistant
dean of students and sought refuge in the dean of student’s office to such an extent that
he was reassigned from being a VA work-study student to a work-study student in the
dean of students’ office.

I’m actually leaving that job because I don’t like putting up with them anymore,
just listening to that in the background while I’m trying to work on stuff. It’s
some of the most ignorant comments you ever heard in your life. (Tanner, 2013)

The influence of this assistant dean of students served to reduce Tanner’s day-to-
day stress in being around the pervasive machismo of veterans that frequented the
veterans lounge, which allowed him to find a more comfortable niche in his student
experience at BSU. And yet Tanner expressed frustration ahead of this reassignment of
job duties as well saying about traditional students, “But still, I don’t really want to be in
the dean of students’ office either, because the students working there, the 18-, 20-year-
olds.” When pressed for why, Tanner intimated a great deal about the way he interacts
with others, and his disconnection to traditional-aged students.
They’re not mature. They don’t get it. I don’t know what there is to get. I spent my life in it. It’s just…They don’t know life yet. So, it’s hard for me, really, to just connect with them. Some of them, you can have a reasonable conversation with about, I don’t know, whatever, just something that doesn’t involve drinking or getting high and going home and hanging out with mommy and daddy over the breaks, stuff like that. It’s just, I don’t know, most of them were born in the ‘90s. Even cultural things, talking to them about some cartoon or something I watched when I was a little kid, what are you talking about? I’ve never heard of this. What is it? It’s just an age thing. It’s just that generation gap. I’m really shy anyway. I’m weird. I don’t know. Some people don’t know me as shy, because when they first meet me, I’m really outgoing. But that’s usually [sic], because I’m so uncomfortable, I’m overcompensating. But most of the time, if it’s just me, I’ll sit in the corner by myself and just watch everybody else and just listen to what’s going on. (Tanner, 2013)

Sammy, like several of his fellow veterans, was positively influenced by a VA work-study staff member, Dino, who turned out to be both an influencer and a student participant in this study as well. When asked what Dino did for him, Sammy replied, “Just kind of motivational. A couple of times, I’d been to him with this and that. A swift kick in the ass here and there if I needed it.” Sammy agreed that Dino was an important person to listen to and to motivate him to perform in school. Dino was very matter-of-fact about his influence on Sammy and felt as though the kind of mentorship he provided to Sammy was similar to much of the mentorship he provided to his soldiers in the US Army. Dino was instrumental as both a student veteran peer and a mentor. From his
Army background, Dino took a developmental approach to problem-solving with veterans: He helped them solve their own problems and would hand off veterans to the right staff office to show them where to go to take control of their own situations in the future. Another staff member on campus, in mental health services, also helped Sammy when he was having trouble focusing and sleeping because he was doing school work all the time. Once the staff member advised him to delineate work hours for school and restful hours for his own self-care, Sammy was able to sleep and focus on his schoolwork and his success came easily.

Jerry identified his academic adviser as very helpful after he had a stroke in his freshman year.

I think she was unbelievably helpful, because I decided to, after the stroke I had, to just break down and tell her what was going on and why it was going on. And she was unbelievably supportive and said, “Well, sounds like you’re going to be taking some time off campus, and I want to make sure that we can get you to your work however we need to.” She worked through my sister to get work to me while I was in the hospital at West Point and then at Walter Reed.

This support was an indication to Jerry that institutional representatives cared about his success as a student at BSU.

**A staff member who was not identified as important to student veteran success**

While Amos was identified as being influential to the success of several student veterans at BCU, it was a surprise that no veteran at BSU identified Janice, a similar kind of staff member that worked with student veterans\(^2\), as being important to their success as

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\(^2\) I cannot be more specific in the staff member’s role because it would unduly expose them, thereby violating their anonymity.
students. While it is beyond the scope of this study, it is indicative of the kinds of personalities, skill sets, and temperaments that may be ideally suited for veterans’ services professionals, or leaders, which were largely absent from Janice’s background as a university staff member. Janice had over 30 years of experience at the university in various roles and excelled at programming, but this appeared to be of little consequence to many student veterans, all of whom intimated some negative aspect of her personality or skill set. Despite being a social worker by professional degree, she was not a good counselor because she could not handle some of the intense encounters or reactions that some veterans have during their student experience. Tanner offered, “Janice is not a source I would ever use, even if I felt I needed to,” while Sammy mentioned Janice’s lack of qualifications, “I think the person who works there has to be a lot more flexible as far as dealing with people.” In the same statement, Sammy suggested that Dino had all the qualifications a college should seek when hiring a veterans’ services officer. While my study did not explore skills and proclivities for veterans’ services professionals, these characteristics might suggest skills deficiencies and tendencies to avoid when hiring a veteran’s services staff member.

**Student Veteran Peers as Influencers of Success**

Dino represents very helpful peer veterans even though his role as a peer blurred between his role as a VA work-study student and as a military retiree, but this kind of mentorship was not limited to veterans with previous senior military positions. At Big City University, Myron, an Air Force veteran, and Mica, a Navy veteran, both identified Aram, a Marine Corps veteran, as being central to their success as students, particularly in finding camaraderie and a purpose on campus outside the classroom. Myron referred
to Aram’s influence as mutually beneficial, particularly when starting the veterans’ organization on campus: “We all had the same mentality that we had to help each other and get each other’s backs. That was, definitely, very helpful.” Mica agreed that Aram offered a grounded perspective when the veterans aspired to create the veterans’ organization: “Sometimes I can get some lofty ideas about how things will go. By him and I [sic] discussing things, talking things out, and talking things through as to what we should do… I think that that was the best way to keep my high-minded ideas tethered to the veteran’s community.”

Highlighting Aram, an infantryman, in a completely positive light was not universal, as Kerry mentioned, “Even though men like Aram are a little hesitant about letting females in, they’re still really accepting and we really have this really good dynamic.” Despite Aram’s hesitancy, as one of the few women, Kerry felt at ease around the predominantly male group of active veterans at BCU: “They don’t hold back with me. I fit in perfectly and they’re so accepting. That’s just an extension of my entire experience with the military.”

While many participants at Big State University identified Dino as an influencer, Dino himself identified Jimmy, another Army veteran, as influencing his own success early in his time at BSU. When Dino had problems getting his education benefits accurately processed during his first semester at BSU, he approached Jimmy, a VA work-study student, for a potential solution. “I went in there to tell him what the problem was and I said, Listen, find someone to fix it. And he picks up the phone and he fixed it. I was like, Damn, fellow student, fellow vet, all right!” The literature is replete with examples of the positive benefits of peer-to-peer relationships at the collegiate level (e.g.
Pascarella 1980; Pascarella, et al., 1986; Tinto, 1993; Weidman, 1989) what remains unclear is whether this is a critical component of the college success of student veterans. What we can see from the data is that student veterans can, and do, pay it forward, and help other veterans avoid, or navigate, the obstacles they faced when first entering the campus. What is clearly a gap in knowledge is whether, or to what extent, successful veterans who do not participate in regular activities with the student veteran group benefit from veteran, or other, peer-to-peer connections on campus, or if these are critical to success, or not.

**Spaces that Influence Student Veteran Success**

While it was clear from the participants that the veteran lounge was helpful in making connections socially with other veterans and like-minded students, the data did not suggest that spaces were particularly influential on the success of student veterans, according to the veteran participants. In my personal observation, at the BSU campus, the dynamic in the cramped veterans’ space, which was combined with veteran services support staff offices, was toxic due to personality clashes between veterans and staff. This began to drive students away and left only a few in the space on a regular basis. Still, I observed a steady stream of veterans dropping into the lounge to get coffee and then depart for classes suggesting the availability of free coffee served as a desirable incentive for veterans to swing by the space from time to time.

At BCU, the dynamic was different because the space was purely for veterans and served as a hub for student club activities and social connections. But like BSU, the lounge space was not specified by any participants as critical to their success, yet it seemed to facilitate other aspects of success such as connecting with peer veterans in
important ways. Perhaps since many of the participants were either integral to gaining the new space, such as at BCU, or the space already existed and was taken for granted, such as at BSU, the space itself was not identified, the veterans’ lounges were clearly appreciated by participants that used the space. I will discuss this further, as it connects with the broader literature, in Chapter Five.

**Support Services that Influence Student Veteran Success**

Specific programs on campus are known to help the full gamut of students, and veterans are no exception. Two prominent aspects of support that agree with and partially challenge the literature emerged from the data. It is clear from the literature that timely and accurate processing of education benefits is of critical importance to veterans in higher education (DiRamio et al., 2008; Rumann & Hamrick). Mica had great support from Amos, the Big City University certifying official, in setting him at ease about college finances. Many are aware that the GI Bill is not processed instantaneously and can result in delayed payments for students, which can be further complicated during a federal government shut down. Mica declared, “If I had to worry about that I don’t think I’d be able to focus on the Student Veteran’s Organization, my other projects, or school. I think that by Amos giving me a peace of mind was really helpful.” This sentiment was shared almost universally by all participants in being able to focus on the job that is going to college.

Jimmy, a study participant and a VA work-study student, found ways to do everything on his own when he arrived on campus in the fall of 2008. As a result, he became very self-sufficient and a veteran expert, making him a logical choice as a VA work-study student. “I actually help veterans now that I work there. And I’ve learned
the system through reading it online and trial and error and being part of the system, having to navigate myself through it with no guidance as well.” Anecdotally, this seems to be a common experience for veterans before a veterans’ office is established.

With some studies focusing on disabled veterans and services necessary to support the success of disabled veterans (e.g. DiRamio & Spires, 2008; Madaus & Miller, 2009), I heard surprisingly little about the Disabilities Services Offices, or the VA Medical Centers, as being central to the success of student veterans. Jimmy did not use disability services, “I haven’t used like disability services or any of that, just the veteran office when I first came here.” Perhaps many of the participants did not have disabilities that affected their ability to be a student or had no disabilities. Still, Jerry, an Army combat veteran who has PTSD and TBI, used services at the VA, West Point, and a private program for veterans returning from combat who do not believe their problems will be resolved by the VA. Eventually, this private program was the solution for Jerry because they addressed his needs as identified by him, whereas the VA and military healthcare system used a standard protocol to try to address his needs. Jerry was very matter-of-fact about the whole experience but spoke more substantively about the impact of his sister Jane than he did about the physical and psychological treatment he received from the VA and other medical organizations. Finally, Dino mentioned using disability services at the beginning of his education process and how his counselor served as a sounding board for his initial frustrations with college, but that he only used this resource because he initially couldn’t find any veterans. Once Dino found the veterans’ office on campus, he no longer used disability services.
Structure and Student Veteran Success

Interviewing a student veteran, Jerry, and his sister Jane, as Jerry’s influencer of success, spotlighted a thematic finding that I might not have noticed had it not been so evident in the interviews of these two siblings. These findings resonated with other participants during the focus group discussions, but the most powerful data came from the dyadic relationship between Jane and Jerry, and I only use these data to illustrate this finding. Jerry was greatly affected by post-traumatic stress and traumatic brain injury when he returned from his deployment to Iraq. He had not been a stellar student in high school, while his younger sister, Jane, was the academic star of the family. With his initial entry training, mobilization, deployment for Operation Iraqi Freedom, and subsequent medical treatment, Jerry’s start to college was delayed by two years creating a situation in which he began his college career at BSU at the same time as his sister, two years his junior. He also happened to have an older sister who was a senior during his freshman year, which helped convince him to choose BSU over another regional option. This openness to the potential for support from family members was prescient as it would turn out that Jerry really needed that support as his freshman year unfolded. Before he was diagnosed with PTSD and TBI, Jerry was unable to sleep and had severe headaches, and reality set in when he had a stroke while working out one day at school. After his diagnosis and a semester in which Jerry essentially completed his work while a patient in various hospitals, he returned to campus.

Jane, recalling the same situation, thought that it was odd that Jerry performed as poorly in his general education courses that first semester in school. “Jerry has always been a really bright kid…. He didn’t previously commit himself to academia prior to
serving in the military…. I think his confidence was low.” While the two siblings took mostly the same courses, they were not in the same sections that first semester, and Jerry did fairly poorly. “Once I realized that—after the first semester, I did really well, and he had not done as well, and I wanted to figure out what was going on.” After identifying that Jerry needed help with the course registration software and process, Jane decided to take control of the situation.

So, I decided that you know what? We both have enough general education credits that we need, we’re going to enroll in the exact same courses. So, we took I think four or five classes together that semester, but still gave him I think one to do on his own and to manage.

Jerry’s mind would wander in class, and sometimes he would get distracting headaches, but Jane was vigilant in her personal and academic support for Jerry.

We would sit next to each other throughout the class. You know, we’ll be taking notes and he’d be watching me. And if he missed something, he could look at my notepad, and if I notice that he had stopped writing, which usually meant either a headache or he was somewhere else, that I could generally sort of be like, “You know, I think this is something you want to listen to right now, this is probably going to be on the exams,” bring him back into it in a much easier way.

In addition, Jane relocated her dormitory room to across the hall from her brother and took control of Jerry’s routine and structure for the next semester. She helped Jerry develop a more independent routine and schedule as a student. They synchronized schedules, ate meals together, attended classes together, went to the gym to work out after classes, and dedicated evening study time after dinner. Jane went on to posit about
the benefits of structure and routine for Jerry and establishing a foundation for his confidence, something seen across all participants in varying ways.

But it was just that it was the same structure every single day, and he knew exactly where he was supposed to be and what he was supposed to be doing. I think that made his life a little bit easier. And from there, we took another one or two courses together, but I think that was the foundation that he needed, and it built up his confidence because his grades after that semester were much better.

Clearly this is an ideal level of care and support at the personal level and may be impractical for most student veterans, but much of this assistance can be replicated through student development and programming on college campuses. However, Jane had to overcome being Jerry’s little sister, and not being a combat veteran in being an advocate for Jerry and other veterans on campus. Jane joined the student veteran organization, primarily to be an advocate for Jerry, but also to advocate for other veterans. Still, in her support of Jerry with military medical facilities and with the university, she experienced resistance, “just in trying to get on the same playing field or having people consider my thoughts, opinions, or include me in certain meetings or groups because I wasn’t one of them.”

While this kind of treatment may make some veteran allies abandon their desire to help, Jane would not quit because this was her brother. Ironically, it was the members of the student veteran organization who validated her advocacy when she intimated these veterans told her, “You know, you have served. You know, you didn’t serve in a combat capacity, but as a family member, you’ve been through this. You understand this, and
you understand us.” Once this happened, Jane was validated as an ally and there was no stopping her in supporting not only her brother, but in advocating for all student veterans.

This dynamic carried further into a very interesting development: non-veteran allies as translators. When I was deployed to Iraq, I would not have been able to accomplish what I did with the Iraqi people without local translators. These Iraqi citizen translators spent a great deal of time with the US coalition and learned about us as people, not just occupiers of the post-Saddam Iraq. The most effective translators I used operated under the guidance that once they understood the message I was trying to convey, they had to convey this message in language and terms that were culturally sensitive to the Iraqi people. In the same way, allies of the veteran community can effectively serve to bridge the military-civilian divide by being advocates and conveying the message of veterans in terms understood by non-veterans. For example, Jerry had more than his sister as non-veteran allies, he had an older sister as well, and the civilian networks of both of his sisters, in addition to childhood friends who were now in the local ROTC program as allies creating a network of support and sources of structure that were important to Jerry’s success as a student.

And I think getting to the point of realizing that it can’t just be veterans and service members that changed the situation, whether it be on campus or in the corporate world or wherever it is that you’re trying to make change for those who have served, can’t just be left to them. It has to be civilians that also jump in. And I think, for me, it’s been a very comfortable setting where I feel like I can speak for them—not that I understand what they’ve gone through, but that I appreciate their service and it’s something that’s very personal to me because
somebody I love has given that and has gone through these things, so I’ve been able to witness what he’s gone through and then relay it maybe in a different way that he can’t, especially to civilians that are in a very civilianized language, and sort of translate a little bit from my learning from those who have served in the military lingo and whatnot. (Jane, 2013)

**Pursuing College as a Job**

Myron identified Amos as influential to his success, “Very cool, laid back, understood what we were going through, to some degree at least.” Primarily, it was Amos’s support in creating the student veteran organization and in securing a space for the veteran lounge that impacted Myron so positively. But Myron also added the criticality of accurate benefits processing. “Obviously, we want to get paid. We just want to pay the bills.” Myron went on to connect receiving GI Bill benefits with being able to focus on school work as a job, “We just want to keep doing the job. That’s what most of us are here for. We’re not here to scam the system. Do the schoolwork. Get the degree.”

Pursing college as a job was a frequent theme, although not universal. All the participants, as is common with most student veterans (Vacchi & Berger, 2014), chose not to attend college straight out of high school because they were either disinterested or felt unable to perform academically at the collegiate level. Vacchi and Berger (2014) posit that veterans make intentional decisions to go to college, unlike many 18-year-olds who feel as though college is what they are supposed to do after high school. This intentionality was evident in the participants and suggests a degree of focus and commitment to the educational process that might be less evident among traditional
students. Despite being nontraditional students, some student veterans are also parents, adding to the complexity of college attendance. Dino explained the work ethic of pursuing a college degree as a parent,

But, you know, I always looked at coming to campus as a job. In other words, I wouldn’t come off from my 10 o’clock class then go somewhere and then come back for a 3 o’clock. I would like, make a point to come to campus early in the morning, stay until I’m done, and then go home. (Dino, 2013, p 11).

Drew talked about how his military service trained him to be more focused and competitive about everything, particularly his pursuit of a college degree at BCU:

I think the Marine Corps puts a little fire under your ass. Makes you want to compete with people. I saw school as a competition and a chance to rise above your peers like you would want to do in your unit. A push for excellence. (Drew, 2013)

Drew also talked about working a part-time job while being a student and how it can detract from student success and how not having a job helps students to focus on studies. “Because that’s a big stressor for students, the whole working 20 hours a week while doing your undergraduate [degree]. It definitely deters a lot of people from finishing.”

Mica also has an interesting take on his success as a student with a modest 3.2 GPA, “What’s more important, getting a 3.9? Or getting more connections in the field that you want, and more knowledge in the field that you want, and more thinking critically in the field that you want?” Mica was insistent that the student veteran organization was only of marginal utility in transitioning from the military to college life and that involvement in other areas and with other organizations on campus are critical to earning a good job
after college as a veteran. He asked himself, “What did successful people in my field do in school? On top of getting fairly decent grades, they were involved with whatever organization that led them to have some sort of connection with whatever.” While Mica may have been oversubscribed as a student, he did not transfer this level of expectation to all student veterans. “My opinion, for whatever it’s worth, is I think that all vets should join an organization. Or a club, or whatever it is, that matches their field.”

**Women Student Veterans**

A single woman student veteran offers little empirical evidence for transferability of findings regarding women, however, the experiences of Kerry at BCU offer a counter-narrative to what is widely seen in the field as a normal experience for women student veterans. Specifically, it appears that women participate less in student veteran programming and use veteran lounges less than their male counterparts, despite utilizing their GI Bill benefits at rates greater than their male peers. If this is true, I speculate that women may not want to experience the hyper-masculinity in the veteran lounge that they experienced while in the military. Kerry mentioned that being accepted on campus with veterans was an extension of her military experience—she had a good military experience in which she had strong friendships and respect for numerous men and women in the Army.

I guess transitioning, it was really nice to have the guys here. They’ve been a really big part of my academic career. I’m used to hanging out with guys. Like I said, typically I’m the only girl. Even when I wasn’t, I had a couple really good girlfriends; I was usually out-doing them, so I was always in the same group as the guys. Having them around and being back in that, my element. I’m with the
guys. And I can be treated like one of the guys. They don’t hold back. When it’s just us in here they’ll just say whatever. They don’t hold back with me. I fit in perfectly and they’re so accepting. That’s just an extension of my entire experience with the military. The males, even though men like Adam are a little hesitant about letting females in, they’re still really accepting and we really have this really good dynamic. This kind of give and take relationship where I can tell you ‘Hey, I think you’re being dumb’ and he can be like ‘Hey, I think you’re being dumb, too.’ And nobody really gets offended. We can kind of have those debates and stuff. Having them around and then coming in here just to vent. I’ve sat in here with Mica. Like a few nights and I’d be like ‘Mica, I’m just going to complain to you about a million things right now.’ From personal life to school stuff, Mica’s been really good. He’s definitely sat with me a few times. Him and I will just go back and forth, and be like ‘Hey, how was your day? Let me tell you about this kid in my class.’ That’s really nice.

Clearly, Kerry’s positive experience overall in the military suggests that the experiences of women in the military may influence the extent to which women student veterans participate in veteran’s initiatives on campus or may influence their eventual academic experiences.

**Blending in, but Reaching Back**

Most of the veterans expressed varying degrees of identity negotiation as they moved from being in the military through their college years and then toward their post-college lives. Hammond (2015) discusses the prominence of combat veteran identity among student veterans in community colleges, and that this identity overlaps with other
aspects of identity for student veterans such as ethnicity, sexual identity, gender, the component of the military, etc. Participants in this study mostly agreed with Myron’s characterization of what it is like being a student veteran in a largely traditional student environment. “I think there’s two things going on in a lot of our heads. One is I want to blend in, right? Cover and concealment. I want to blend into the student population and have that college experience that we missed.” Cover and concealment is a military term, largely used by the Army and Marine Corps, for a military member blending in with surroundings in a tactical environment, but it is so pervasive across the military that Myron, an Air Force veteran, used this language as well. “We want to blend in, but we also want to reach back. Like you were saying, we want to reach back into those good times in the military, and that honor, and that bond.”

I followed up with the BCU focus group on this issue. Two reactions emerged: First, the group agreed with this tension between wanting to be identified as a veteran and wanting to be viewed and treated like everyone else. Mica said, “I do it. I’ve got my school activities going on, and the veterans’ activities going on, but then I also have some anecdote or some life lesson that I always throw down about my experience in the military.” Kerry offered a similar sentiment, “I don’t really talk with students about it. Unless, like in class someone really irritates me, I’ll be like, Look, I was in the Army. That is not the reality of it.” The second sentiment of the group was that it may be less effective to identify oneself to others in the classroom as a student veteran at the beginning of the semester, unless it is totally relevant to the course in question. Myron talked about the uncomfortable dynamics he experienced early in his college career when trying to introduce himself as a veteran at the beginning of the semester, then how his
tactics changed, “It has an impact on the way the professor sees you, the way the students see you. I’d rather just keep my ideas to myself. Until it becomes comfortable enough that I have some actual input that it relates to.”

In contrast, Tanner blended in for different reasons: by distancing himself from his military experience. Again, he was wrestling with a life purpose and identity at this point in his life, in my view. Mentioning that earning his associates degree motivated him to want to earn a bachelor’s degree, Tanner said, “just because I’m not going back in the military. There really isn’t anything else. It’s just that motivation of I don’t know what I’m going to do, so I need to do something.” Again, Tanner differed from the other participants.

BSU veterans expressed similar sentiments: they were proud of their military status but sought to be treated like everyone else. During their focus group, some reveled in their academic performance and knowledge level as any passionate student might. Reflecting on his prior level of intelligence and an epiphany after his first year in college, Dino said, “I think the thing that kept me in school was that I’d realized that -- I was surprised at how I made it all that way in life as dumb as I was.” Dino continued, remarking about a notion when walking between classes one day, “I’m making connections between the two different subjects. And then I started making all these connections, so it was kind of curious. It was kind of interesting.” Most of the conversation in this group was about undertaking a normal college experience and observations about other veterans who wanted nothing to do with the veteran’s office and other veterans. “A lot of guys—like I said, they leave; they don’t want to be around that lifestyle anymore,” Dino said to the agreement of the group.
Conclusion

The participants in this study offer a complex set of findings: ideas, themes, and insights about their experiences as student veterans. Distilling these ideas down into empirical themes was difficult and I experienced the full weight of the “messiness” that is qualitative research during this data analysis (Rossman and Rallis, 2016). Trying to distill the experiences of student veterans into a singular stereotypical model would be folly in my view. However, several important themes emerged from the data that were widely held, and others that were present among many of the participants, and these I chose to focus on during this presentation of the data. It would be my hope to revisit these data through other lenses to answer other research questions for future studies.

In sum, people appear to be important to the success of student veterans, specifically peer mentors, staff, and particularly faculty. The emergence of the success influencer who validates the college pursuits of student veterans was a surprise in my findings that caused me to change the scope of the study and to explore this dyadic relationship for as many participants as I could. Family were noted as important for support but were not highlighted as critical to success. There was a prominent exception to this in that Jane, Jerry’s sister, created structure for Jerry when he initially experienced failure upon returning to college after combat. Related to this finding was that many participants expressed the need to pursue college as they would a job, which also implies structure and discipline. While the theory of veteran-friendliness suggests that places are important for a veteran-friendly environment, not even the veteran lounges were credited with a contribution to the success of these participants, something that should be explored further and is a recommendation for future research in Chapter 5. Finally, with the array
of programming the field attempts to undertake on behalf of student veterans, participants in this study only highlighted a desire for timely and accurate processing of education benefits: not even the disabilities services office was highlighted as having a contribution to the overall success of participants.

While the stories of these veterans are fascinating and many salient points emerged that can help us better understand the experiences of student veterans and how to support their success, these can be distilled to several major findings and lessons the field may be able to use to create or improve programming and approaches to supporting the success of student veterans on their campuses the implications of which I discuss in Chapter 5.
CHAPTER 5
IMPLICATIONS FOR STUDENT VETERAN SUCCESS

Introduction

For nearly 100 years, veterans have been returning from combat, or service in the military, to pursue education as a vehicle to prepare for a productive post-military career. For many veterans, education is a means to climb the socioeconomic ladder toward a more comfortable life than these veterans might have had before entering the military. The literature is limited, particularly in the WWI and Korean War eras, but the evidence suggests that veterans are at least as successful as non-veterans in college and, in most cases, are more successful (Vacchi & Berger, 2014). Why then was I motivated to pursue an explanation for the success of student veterans in higher education? I pursued this study because recent scholars and practitioners have questioned the success of the most recent generation of veterans in higher education (e.g., DiRamio et al, 2008; DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011; Molina & Morse, 2015; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010). With such a gap in knowledge about the experiences of student veterans, and little contemporary research I could find on the success of student veterans, it became my passion to explore the issue of student veteran success in higher education to give an empirical explanation for what statistics are just now beginning to reveal: student veterans appear to be, in fact, succeeding in higher education at rates equal to, or better than, non-veterans (Cate et al., 2017).

The theoretical underpinnings of the conceptual model used in this study were closely examined during this study and add strength to the argument that higher education should view student veterans as nontraditional students. Further, the utility of
elements of Bean and Metzner’s (1985) and Weidman’s (1989) models were examined during this study. I believe my model held up well and framed an appropriate focus on salient aspects of the student veteran experience in this study. The potential implications for future research on student veterans of what I believe to be a successful test of my conceptual model may be significant for the field if readers agree this model is properly grounded in theory and lines of inquiry.

This chapter discusses findings and the associated implications and connects these back to the recent student veteran literature and the college impact literature. The chapter begins with a discussion of diversity considerations for student veterans in which I argue that traditional markers of diversity may be of limited use in considering diversity for student veterans. Next this chapter offers a discussion of student veteran success as reinforced by the findings of this study. Implications for practice follow and the chapter concludes with recommendations for future research.

**Regarding Diversity Considerations Among Veterans**

An interesting observation throughout this study and over the course of my time studying veterans is that the true diversity of a veteran population may reside in the military component and service in which participants served. For example, are the experiences of National Guard members different from those of separated veterans? Are the experiences of combat veterans different from those of non-combat veterans? Are the experiences of Navy veterans the same as those of Army veterans? While these are questions of identity and perspective for other studies, my research and anecdotal experience to date (Vacchi, 2013) suggest that service and component of the military, along with combat experience, create noticeable differences in veterans, something I call
the veteran identity scale. Appendix B discusses the veteran identify scale in detail, which essentially describes the extent to which an individual identifies with being a veteran, with a range from no identity through a strong identity. The main point of the identity scale is that people vary in the intensity of their identification as a veteran, depending not only on their military service but other mitigating factors that affect identity as well.

**Understanding Student Veteran Success**

I chose to move away from deficit models of student veteran experience to explore indicators of success and allow the reader to deduce obstacles from these success markers. While there are some clear obstacles to success that emerged from the data, I am comfortable with this approach because, as national data begin to emerge on the performance of student veterans in higher education, it is becoming clear that this is not a struggling population in the aggregate. The participants in this study identified several obstacles to success, despite not being directly asked to identify these challenges. These obstacles included being viewed as needing the same kinds of initial entry socialization to college that traditional students need, particularly orientation. The participants made minor comments that they neither feel welcomed to a campus when experiencing traditional student orientations, nor that there is much particular value in the experience. More directly relevant to this study’s findings are the challenges that veterans face when in the classroom with both faculty and non-veteran student peers. The solution to this may be found when campuses seek the elusive goal of becoming veteran-friendly, but this is difficult to achieve because all non-veterans on a campus would have to gain some degree of cultural competency around veterans and that may be a tall order, particularly
in the short term, for many colleges seeking to be veteran-friendly. Finally, when faculty do not allow veterans to express themselves and experience their education through their own lens, this can create friction that causes student veterans to drop classes or depart college altogether. While these may be extreme responses from this study’s participants, I also found this to be the case in an earlier study of veteran-friendliness (Vacchi, 2013). Seeking ways to provide student veterans with successful environments will likely only improve the performance of this population.

**Peer-to-peer Veteran Support**

All but one veteran in this study seemed to benefit from interactions with other veterans, but few interacted greatly (outside of academic assignments) with non-veteran students: Mica and Tanner may be the exceptions in this study’s data. The interactions among student veterans were described as supportive and positive in almost every case, with Tanner being the exception. Although these minor interactions between microsystems (Vacchi & Berger, 2014) appear beneficial, it would be presumptuous to view these as essential for student veteran success. These veterans all had a common connection in that they were frequently in the veterans’ lounge at one time or another on their respective campuses. Statistically, most student veterans at all campuses, including these two campuses, do not frequent the veterans lounge (SVA, 2011) and may not interact much with veterans or non-veterans socially on campus either: We just do not know. But we do know that there is rarely capacity on any campus for all student veterans to frequent a veterans’ lounge, and that rarely more than 15% of a given student veteran population frequents the lounge due to space and interest limitations (SVA, 2011). While it may be helpful to veterans along their trajectory to a post-college life,
data from this study suggest that interactions with other veterans are most important during the transition into the college environment, and during difficult times to help with personal challenges. It is my hope that this finding and discussion will provide a new perspective within the field when scholars may place too much emphasis on veteran-to-veteran social interactions on campus throughout the college degree cycle, arguing that this is critical for student veteran success. It is clearly important for some but is not a universal prescription for success.

**The Success Influencer**

Across the small sample for this study, it is clear that some individuals within a student veteran’s network may validate and support the student veteran in his or her pursuit of a college degree. This dynamic was observed for all participants, even Tanner who was reluctant to specify a success influencer at first. These influencers’ sparks helped build a phase of confidence that sustained the veterans through their educational processes. A success influencer is, therefore, defined as a person who had an easily identifiable effect on the success of the student veteran, much as a faculty or staff member might traditionally be credited.

As higher education is inclined to do, some may infer from these findings that practitioners should create opportunities to form these influencer relationships for student veterans early in their college process. However, much like how a productive mentor and mentee relationship develops, these influencers seem to emerge organically and cannot be created through, for example, a college orientation experience, or an academic adviser relationship, or even a formal campus mentorship program. For every participant, veteran success influencers emerged naturally without any intentionality on behalf of the
veteran or programming from the university. What may be helpful to student veterans is for practitioners to be aware of the likelihood of this success influencer’s emergence and potential to help the veteran succeed, to inform faculty and staff members that they may become an influencer for a student veteran and provide guidelines for what a good set of habits might be to instill in the faculty-student developmental relationship.

Given that veterans are a largely commuter and nontraditional student population, it is useful to reconsider the model and ideas for these students that was offered by Bean and Metzner (1985) during a time in which few in higher education focused on the student veteran. Although scholars few have used their model since it was first published, Bean and Metzner (1985) demonstrated empirically that the academic interactions of nontraditional students are so important to the success of these students that it led these scholars to conclude that social integration with a campus culture had a negligible, if any, impact on nontraditional student success. Because veterans are nontraditional students, in principle, this should hold true for student veterans as well and may well be worthy of further consideration and research.

Although social integration with a college campus is not determinative for nontraditional student success (Bean & Metzner, 1985), social contact or support still occurs in a student veteran’s life and may have an important influence on the success of student veterans. Thus, peer-to-peer support for the participants in this study was not a formal program but evolved organically as veterans joined the campuses at both BCU and BSU. All participants (except Tanner) embraced peer veteran support but otherwise had no formal mentorship programs in their college pursuits. This study found an array of sources of support: family, faculty, staff, and peer student veterans.
Familial Support

It is not the purview of higher education to be involved in the personal family dynamics of students; however, institutions can inquire about and be aware of whether there is support given to student veterans by family. Further, monitoring this support periodically may be appropriate because familial support for the student veteran may wane the longer a degree process takes. Support certainly waned in my case as a student veteran. In contrast, several participants noted the importance of the support they received from spouses, siblings, and/or parents. While this support was present for these participants, it was not the only source of support and was not typically linked in the veterans’ minds to contributing directly to their success as students. As such, familial support might only be a peripheral source of support, albeit helpful to the veteran.

Perhaps as a way of agreeing with Tinto’s theory of departure (1975), the sources of support that seemed to validate student veterans the most seemed to come from on-campus actors, but not from sources typically associated with traditional student success. These three sources, faculty, staff, and peer student veterans, all shared a common effect: validating the college pursuits of the student veteran.

Faculty as Success Influencers

DiRamio and Jarvis (2011) interviewed Marcia Baxter-Magolda, a seminal scholar in the area of self-authorship, to support a publication that references self-authorship curriculum as a strategy for supporting the transition of student veterans out of the military and into college. Baxter-Magolda offers valuable insights into what may happen in the success influencer dynamic reported by the participants of this study, asserting that it is important for faculty to respect the feelings and thoughts of students
and to collaborate with students to solve their own problems through the use of students’ own experiences as opportunities for growth (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011). She conceptualizes this as a theory *self-authorship* (Baxter-Magolda, 2007). Participants in this study experienced this self-authorship, or validation, as they explored the academic process with their faculty. For example, Mica talked about preferring those professors who allowed him to interpret course material through his own lens and who encouraged his complex way of thinking over faculty who simply expected regurgitation of course content. Discovering this validating dyadic relationship with a faculty member, specifically Mica’s political science professor Natasha, was what prompted me to adjust this study to explore the success influencer and what those dyadic relationships are like.

Veteran interactions with faculty may be the most important contact with any campus agent for the student veteran, according to relevant theory and frameworks offered by Weidman (1989) and Bean and Metzner (1985), on which I based my conceptual model, particularly because faculty members are the campus agents with which nontraditional students, such as veterans, interact most frequently. Astin’s theory of student involvement (1984) offers that frequent interaction with faculty is more strongly related to satisfaction with college than any other type of involvement or, indeed, any other student or institutional characteristic and low satisfaction is a primary cause of student departure (Tinto, 1975; Astin 1984).

While this study did not focus on the specifics of faculty and student dynamics, several best practices emerged as I spoke with those faculty members identified by participants as important to a veteran’s success as a student. None of these best practices are unique tools a faculty member would use only with student veterans; these are
universal practices and apply to faculty members working with all students. In fact, Mica’s professor Natasha indicated that, while she does not treat all students like Mica, she certainly is not giving any special treatment to Mica; rather, she is reflecting his passion for learning with an in-kind level of faculty engagement around the material being taught in the class. According to this study’s participants, these practices include: meeting veterans where they are as students; encouraging diverse opinions, perspectives, and solutions; and accommodating student veterans’ nontraditional student needs.

**Meet students where they are.** Student veterans, as nontraditional students, may approach the academic process differently from traditional students for a host of reasons related to veteran identity or military acculturation to training. Student veterans may not ask questions during the in-class session out of respect for the training process and time allotted for class time so that the instructor can cover the required material. This is similar to some military instruction in which students are expected to learn the material as the instructor teaches and questions are to be held until a practical application period. It may take time for veterans to gain comfort with asking questions in their courses and learning that it is not a disruption of a class to ask a question. Veterans may also think in binary terms, or *black and white*, and may not be used to navigating gray areas or subtleties of opinion being part of a classroom dynamic. Many military members are taught right versus wrong and effective versus ineffective techniques, and this can condition the military mind to think in a binary manner—particularly that there is *one correct solution*. Finally, veterans may be behind in some basic class subjects such as math, English composition, or college writing and may require some remedial instruction.
Faculty who are aware of and supportive of students who are at various levels of preparation and capability, particularly in courses taught early in the college course of study, may help student veterans succeed and may serve to validate these veterans in their college pursuits. However, this approach is not limited to student veterans and arguably should be employed for all student populations. A caution is also not to presume that veterans enter with deficits in learning or preparation. Deficit modeling can have the reverse effect on any population and may discourage the collegiate desires of veterans as it can with any potentially vulnerable population. Presuming deficits coupled with possible imposter syndrome due to minimal financial obstacles, resultant from Post 9/11 GI Bill or other education benefits, may encourage student veteran departure. While departure may be the right solution for some student veterans due to a bad fit with the institution, generally higher education institutions pursue retention at their university as this is regarded more favorably than departure decisions when rating and ranking universities.

**Encourage diverse opinions, perspectives, and solutions.** Higher education purports to encourage diversity and prides itself as a haven for diverse thinking, but these lofty ideals may not be realized in daily practice. Unfortunately, many colleges are known for their liberal views which may lead to suppression of politically or socially conservative perspectives. While research is inconsistent, veterans tend to be more conservative than many traditional students and many professors. Accommodating diverse perspectives for veterans may mean faculty members should tolerate opinions with which they disagree but have validity in the true universe of ideas. In fact, it may mean that professors should enthusiastically encourage ideas with which they disagree.
In this study, the generally politically liberal Natasha disagreed with the application of US military force advocated by Mica, yet she encouraged the presentation of his ideas since they were offered with sound facts and logic. This had the powerful effect of validating who Mica was as a person and as a student and may have been a critical experience in propelling him through his college degree program at BCU.

This notion is neither limited to working with student veterans nor successfully implemented by some faculty members. An easy example might be a political science professor who is politically liberal shunning the politically conservative perspective of a student veteran, despite the validity of the veteran’s opinion. The important aspect of this observation is that a professor may not be aware of the extent to which he/she is discouraging the development of a student. While some may think that these faculty best practices are a given, or expected of faculty, this is clearly not the case in practice, at least for the majority of the faculty of the participants of this study.

**Accommodating student veterans’ nontraditional student tendencies.** A clear commonality among the participants of this study was a desire to be serious about the academic enterprise, which frequently meant minimizing time with immature student peers. Exploring the interesting phenomenon about student veterans seeming to want to avoid group work (Vacchi, 2013), it is not that student veterans are averse to participating in groups; after all, these former military members are well-versed and comfortable in team dynamics that are the cornerstone of military service. Rather, student veterans appear to share a reluctance to participate in group work for two reasons. First, veterans generally do not want to become the de facto leaders of group work, either because they
were leaders in the military or because of a lack of interest in trying to keep immature student peers accountable to their school work—many times it is a combination of both.

The second reason student veterans are reluctant to work in groups with student peers is concern about having to pull more load than they should have to, given the distribution of group work (Vacchi, 2013). Student veterans are averse to performing poorly, or failing, for similar reasons to the weakest link analogy that discourages veterans from seeking help at disability services (Vacchi, 2013). Due to this aversion to failure, or poor performance, if a veteran detects that a less mature or less responsible student is not pulling his/her part of a group’s workload, the veteran will feel it is incumbent upon him/herself to also shoulder that load. This is not a dynamic that is limited to student veterans; many of the best college students have a similar tendency to pull workload for other students to ensure their personal grade does not suffer due to imbalanced group work. These two reasons are common among student veterans in this study, and anecdotally I have heard this as a common theme around the country from VSOs and student veterans alike.

The implication for this reluctance to participate in group work is that student veterans, like their nontraditional student peers, may have preferences for how they undertake college that differ from those of traditional students. One of those is a reluctance to participate in group work; the other is that time may be limited to focus on school due to other family and life responsibilities, such as work or taking care of a home and raising children. From the data in Table 2, only three of 11 student veteran participants attended college without also working a part-time job. It is understandable how much the traditional university shapes its programs, policies, and practices toward
the traditional student, but the number of nontraditional students continues to grow in higher education (Hussar & Bailey, 2009), and meeting students where they are, and accommodating their individual needs as students, rather than overlaying a traditional student paradigm should be the cutting edge of running an academic institution.

Staff as Success Influencers

Staff members identified in this study as influencing the success of student veterans had some day-to-day responsibility within Veterans Services, oversight of those responsibilities, and close workplace proximity to Veterans Services that facilitated day-to-day exposure to student veterans or served as an academic adviser for a student veteran. At BCU, many veterans sought the support of Amos, who took personal initiative to support the success of student veterans without it being part of his official duties at BCU.

In contrast, no participant identified the full-time staff member at BSU as being an influencer of success, but rather as a reason to discontinue use of the veterans’ lounge. At BSU, Tanner identified an assistant dean of students as being helpful to his success, particularly in finding him on-campus employment outside of veterans’ services. While this might seem like special treatment for Tanner, it was more of a one-semester arrangement of convenience to move a student out of a toxic situation that was making Tanner, and other student veterans, uncomfortable in the veteran’s lounge in the semester before his graduation.

**Identify student veteran needs.** The participants of this study emphasized how important it was for someone at the university to understand and to address their needs and those of other student veterans. Since both campus’s participant groups included
students who were on-campus at the time that contemporary veterans’ services began, it is fair to say that the initial needs of student veterans were quite simple: to process education benefits in a timely and accurate manner. This is a theme that has occurred throughout the student veteran literature, whether it was sought specifically, or emerged inductively from the data of various studies (e.g., DiRamio, et al., 2008; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010; Vacchi 2013). It was unclear if benefits were being processed well at BSU at the time of data collection, but it was certainly being done better than it was before a staff member was assigned to be the dedicated veterans benefits processor. At BCU, a competent staff member in the bursar’s office clearly influenced a marked positive change when he began processing benefits instead of the staff member whom he replaced in that function.

The other need that these veterans intimated was a desire for a space in which to interact, or to hang out, with other veterans around whom the veterans felt they could relax in between classes. While many scholars seem to think this requires the creation of a lounge space on campus for veterans, this issue may be more complex than *if you build it they will come and be successful*. Veterans appear to seek relaxation in between classes. Can this only happen for veterans in a veteran lounge? Or are there other places on campus where a veteran can feel comfortable? Perhaps the goal of a campus is to foster veteran-friendliness in every space on campus that provides an alternative to isolating veterans in a lounge, something that may not be in the long-term developmental best interests of student veterans (Vacchi & Berger, 2014).

**Remove obstacles to success.** Beyond education benefits processing, which can be a significant obstacle to reducing stress for student veterans, it is important to identify...
other needs of student veterans and to meet those within reason. At BSU, many veterans
needed additional test-taking time, note takers, or special testing accommodations, but
were uncomfortable seeking the designation as a disabled student due to the negative
stigma and avoidance of a weak link label (Vacchi & Berger, 2014). A veteran-friendly
policy evolved at BSU that allowed any student veteran to receive a limited set of
academic accommodations through the Disability Services Office once they were
validated as a military veteran, to include issuance of a smart pen for digital audio
recording of lectures, additional test-taking time, note takers, and special testing
accommodations. As veterans joined the campus at BSU, many student veterans,
including anecdotal observation of non-participants, identified this package of disability
services as helpful to their success as students. This initiative was a collaborative effort
between the Dean of Students Office, the Disability Services Office, and the Veterans
Services Office at BSU.

At BCU the evolution of veterans’ services was a more recent phenomenon than
for the BSU veterans’ services situation. While there was a well-established lounge in its
second generation at BSU, the BCU veterans had just secured an initial lounge, which
was a closed off space underneath a stairwell in an academic building. Although it was
noisy during class change periods, the veterans universally appreciated having their own
space to relax in between classes and meet with other veterans. Other needs sought by
the BCU veterans were to be recognized on campus with a memorial and to have a
dedicated staff position created to support them, which eventually became a full-time
position. In the years since this data collection, BCU student veterans have moved into a
new permanent lounge space that is more appealing than the space under the stairs.
These were all initiatives of the student veteran leadership in conjunction with Amos as a university advocate for veterans. As at BCU, the veterans at BSU advocated for a full-time staff member to advocate on their behalf as early as 2005 and succeeded.

**Treat veterans equitably compared with other student populations.** A recurring theme of these participants, best intimated by Mica, Kerry, and Myron during the BCU focus group interviews, is that they did not want, nor did they seek, special treatment as students because of their veteran status. Many participants intimated this because of their receiving generous education benefits and wanting to demonstrate that they can do the work on their own; essentially that they are worthy of being in college and funded with what amounts to a full-ride scholarship. This can cut both ways, as some veterans, such as Myron at BCU, try to avoid perceptions as a weak link (Vacchi & Berger, 2014) by avoiding seeking help upon entry to college. Myron might have benefitted from identifying that he had adjustment issues upon entry to college from the Air Force, which in turn may have helped him avoid a two-semester suspension from BCU. Many veterans could benefit from counseling assistance, or other services, available at colleges across the country to help with some aspects of the transition from a military to civilian context.

Special treatment can manifest in two ways in the eyes of the participants: academic and personal assistance. Academic assistance is when a faculty member might pass along a student veteran or give them an extra bump to a grade without it being deserved. Many veterans tend to view this kind of well-intended help as demeaning because it is undeserved and comes from a deficit perspective. Veterans are also individuals who have persevered through the dissonance of adapting to military service.
and may feel as though academic help, especially favoritism from faculty, is inappropriate, even unethical. Personal assistance is anything in a non-academic vein of help that appears to be help that would be given to someone who is weak. While I do not agree that students who seek help are weak, veterans tend to avoid being perceived as weak links (Vacchi & Berger, 2014), and many participants felt that student veterans who use help services, particularly counseling or disability services, can be perceived as weak links, similar to the perception this kind of help-seeking created when these participants were in the military.

**Veteran Peers as Success Influencers**

Participants at both sites identified other student veterans as influencers of their success, primarily, Aram at BCU and Dino at BSU. While these two student veteran influencers of success did not see themselves as anything special in the ways of helping others, this may be the critical point to understand how they were so influential in helping other veterans succeed, particularly early in the college experiences of other veterans. Dino served as a VA work-study, and Aram was a leader in the student veteran organization before VA work-study student students became a regular part of the landscape at BCU. What both did was forge a path for veterans that followed, while sharing their successes and failures with new student veterans to help these new students avoid similar pitfalls.

Another critical aspect of what these two influencers did for other veterans was to serve as an accountability mechanism when other veterans needed to be corrected or counseled. In particular, Dino did see this as an informal role of his since he was a retired senior non-commissioned officer who cared for, counseled, and developed
soldiers for over 20 years in the Army. This role is particularly valuable because many times a non-veteran will not be able to communicate difficult issues effectively, or correct problematic behavior in veterans because of a lack of camaraderie or respect the veteran may have for the non-veteran. Some advocates assert this is the key reason that veterans should be hired as veterans’ services officers (VSOs) for college campuses because they will be able to connect with and mentor other veterans through shared experience. However, this may not be the best use of the time of a VSO, particularly if this staff member also must perform the duties of a VA benefits certifying official. It may be ideal to seek veterans such as Dino or Aram to serve in a capacity as senior peer mentors for new student veterans, or for veterans who frequent the veterans lounge.

DiRamio et al. (2008) suggested that a formal peer-to-peer mentorship program would be an effective way to achieve such a result for all incoming veterans. While this may be true in the abstract, proposals such as this appear to be difficult to implement at many campuses across the country, including at BCU and BSU, among others I have closely observed over the last several years. There are several challenges for such a proposal. First, finding enough committed and motivated mentors can be a big challenge. These upper-division veterans are typically focused on the increased rigor of advanced courses, securing internships, and preparing their resumes for employment after college; they may not have the time or the inclination to commit to such a formal program. Second, finding enough willing first-year student veterans can be a challenge. Typically, these folks are so busy adjusting to civilian life and managing their lives that there is little time for anything on campus other than going to and from classes. Finally, the quality control of such a program would be hard to monitor with even more time-consuming
training and structure that might make the program even less desirable for both veterans and mentors. What may be more effective in supporting the transition into college is a transition course, as advocated by Money (2015).

Scholars have argued for the advantages of a veteran transition course for several years. The focus of Money’s (2015) dissertation is on the composition of effective transition courses for veterans. The critical aspect is that the curriculum be designed for and around veterans, as opposed to traditional students, and focused on the individualized needs of the course’s participants. Money (2015) finds that effective transition courses are discussion-based, introduce veterans to the plethora of help services available on campus, and encourage use of those services, as needed. A final aspect of the transition course is a concentration of instruction on career preparedness, which some higher education professionals may think is too early in the college life cycle of a student veteran. However, many veterans transfer in with some college credits and most take less than eight semesters to graduate when they transition out of the military, despite many taking a combined total of more than six years to persist to graduation. Further, even a short stint in the military can generate a complicated array of experiences that may, or may not, be appropriate for a resume. Thinking about converting military jargon and approaches into civilian language is a skill that should be developed early in the college process for veterans (Money, 2015).

Implications for Practice

As a qualitative researcher, I must guard against the tendency to overgeneralize and overreach regarding the implications of a study that explored the experiences of 11 student veterans. The direct findings of this study may only be useful for these
participants, or perhaps only useful for the two sites used for this study. An alternative is to think these implications have a broader applicability because of the consistency of data across the participants and the congruities between these findings and what anecdotal observation in the field supports, reinforces, and already recognizes. In either case, this judgment is for the reader to decide.

In some regards, the findings of this study did not surprise me, other than the success influencer dynamic. Given this, what I put forward as implications for practice can be considered on their merits by the reader, based on the trustworthiness of this study’s methods and the context into which the reader may consider transferring these findings. Perhaps the most significant finding is that student veterans appear to succeed, even without special programs or accommodations, and still, it appears that an actor of the campus community facilitates this success through a process of validation during a veteran’s pursuit of a college degree. Whereas family members may support and encourage student veterans, this support did not seem to be assigned any direct credit for a veteran’s success in college, in the opinions of the participants: It was nice to have, but not essential. However, staff members, faculty members, and peer student veterans appear to have a direct influence on veteran success, each in their own way, perhaps suggesting a holistic approach to more intentionally creating environments for student veteran success.

A theory of what student veteran success might be, given the findings of this study, may be elusive but would start with academics and the academic experience. A theory of student veteran success would also include the presence of a success influencer along the college journey who validates the veteran in their decision to pursue a college
Another component of this theory would offer that financial distractions are minimized or eliminated suggesting a requirement for timely and accurate processing of education benefits. The final two components of an initial theory of student veteran success would be for veterans to create structure for their academic pursuits and to be disciplined in adhering to the structure and that there is sufficient support, from on campus or off campus, for the veteran to persist as a student.

Many prior studies highlighted the difficulties veterans have when the military and civilian cultures collide in classrooms, and this study found the same but took the notion one step further in focusing on exemplars of successful interactions as student veterans identified faculty as their success influencers. Choosing to focus on the academic experience is in line with the scholarship of Bean and Metzner (1985) and others who clearly demonstrate that the academic experience is so much more important than the social experience, that the latter is not essential for nontraditional student success. Faculty are at the forefront of the academic experience and are the group that holds the key to success in college for veterans and if faculty can be prepared for their likely role as influencers of success, not only will this happen more regularly for all student veterans, it might happen across an array of faculty members for each student veteran.

While academic interactions and experiences are the most important for student veterans, this leaves the student experience, or areas typically situated within student affairs, as of secondary significance, and perhaps student affairs professionals should be looking to support those veterans in real need of additional support and structure as they undertake a college degree. This can be done by utilizing entry assessments to identify
veterans in need, such as those offered by Diamond (2014) and Young (2012). While many veterans bring their own support and structure, some do not, so this may be an appropriate place for student affairs practitioners to help student veterans who either want or need support. It is important to remember that, with this conceptualization of the role of student affairs, the focus for support is likely on about 15% of the student veteran population or roughly the number that frequent a formal veteran’s space on campuses so equipped. A theory generated from this study would not suggest ideas that all student veterans should be exposed to additional programming for them to succeed as students.

In the end, we must view student veterans holistically, rather than in individual stages, when considering programming. Student veterans in this study were uninterested in orientation programs and connecting with traditional students, which agrees with observations from Minnis (2014) and Money (2016). So perhaps creating a separate program, as these two scholars have suggested, would be wiser than mainstreaming veterans with traditional students. Another idea is that, perhaps, when only a few student veterans show up for a campus-sponsored event after a great deal of advertising, programmers should be satisfied with getting those few there: After all, these are mature students, and they are perhaps better equipped to decide about attending such events than a traditional student might be. A corollary to this notion is for student affairs professionals to reduce, or eliminate, programming that does not demonstrably reinforce the success of veterans’ academic pursuits.

To view student veterans holistically is to consider college as a prolonged transition that the veteran is making from serving in the military to working in the civilian world (Diamond, 2012; Minnis, 2014; Money, 2016; Vacchi & Berger, 2014);
thus, examining the way in which our veterans holistically experience the institutional context seems appropriate. The whole environment suggests that the entire campus should move in ways that are veteran-friendly, something that I have addressed in another study which generated the theory of veteran-friendliness (Vacchi, 2013). While veteran-friendliness is a concept easily discussed but difficult to achieve on a college campus, it must involve student veteran success as an outcome.

Along the way in creating success environments for student veterans, it was clear from the voices of these participants that institutions should create an environment in which help-seeking is not stigmatized, and campus community members should eliminate stigma wherever possible by mainstreaming help services. How this is accomplished appears to be an elusive goal for many campuses, but this needs to be accomplished. In particular, we need to discourage weak link legacy thinking from military service and encourage the use of disability services by ensuring veterans understand that use of disability services is normal for all students on a college campus.

Peer student veterans have a unique ability to identify with and communicate strategies for success to subsequent classes of student veterans in ways that are beneficial to both the student and the institution. Clearly, a smoother transition results in greater student satisfaction, retention, and eventually superior student performance, rather than failure or departure. The primary drawback is that peer relationships may not be universally successful or influential, and the limited scope of this study’s sample may slant these findings into suggesting that this is required for student veterans. Clearly, these veterans all frequented the veteran lounge where these peer-to-peer relationships can evolve regularly and organically, however, only a small percentage of a given
campus’ student veterans voluntarily frequent the lounge, leaving open the likelihood that, while helpful, most student veterans succeed despite having this kind of emergent peer-to-peer relationship. Rather than creating formal programs to require or force peer-to-peer relationships, it may be more advisable to create social situations in which veterans may develop these relationships naturally as in a proper mentor-mentee relationship. Therefore, based on this finding, I would not recommend formal peer-to-peer mentorship programs, due to a relatively unsustainable need for involvement and management and a general unwillingness for veterans to be around other veterans on campus. Rather, facilitating connections through a transition course in which upperclassmen are available to student veterans on a more regular basis might be advisable.

Staff members have taught these transition courses, myself included, and facilitating success may be somewhat simple and straightforward for the supporting staff member. Student veterans will present their college with an ever-evolving list of needs, some essential, some not essential, and some superfluous. What may remain as essential is the foundation of what veterans appear to need every semester from staff members: timely and accurate education benefits processing and a dedicated staff member to create a consistent face for the institutions in both advocating for student veterans and addressing their needs. We need empirical evidence of the contribution to the success of veterans for other programming, without which everything else might be simply nice to do from a staff member perspective, but inconsequential to the success of the student veteran. This perspective may be jarring to some, particularly those that know my passion for supporting the success of student veterans, but there is little empirical
evidence that anything else specific is essential for student veteran success from the staff perspective. As Bean and Metzner (1985) found, aspects of the student experience that are not in the academic realm appear not to be important for nontraditional students, such as veterans, to succeed. Programming is fine, but until a study offers an empirically sound case for most social programs, I suggest viewing those as nice to do rather than essential for student veteran success.

An interesting corollary to my position, that social, or traditional student affairs, programming may not have much influence on the success of veterans, is the notion that veterans should be treated equally compared with other student populations. The natural inclination for student affairs practitioners may be to revert to a desire to do as much programming for veterans as they do for other populations. However, consider the populations that most targeted-programming supports: underserved or marginalized populations. While veterans may be outsiders to the higher education environment and may be underserved by some definitions, there is little evidence in the extant literature to suggest veterans struggle with equitable opportunity, access, or performance in higher education as an aggregate population. Veterans have financial access to higher education facilitated by the Post 9/11 GI Bill and other veteran education benefits, so this is not an obstacle to accessing an education for veterans. Further, the academic success data are beginning to emerge as the SVA and National Student Clearinghouse begin to report that real performance measures of student veterans are as good or better than non-veterans (Cate et al., 2017). Perhaps the only measure that suggests an access issue is the percentage of students who have military service in the current student population at about 3.5% compared with the roughly 7.4% veteran population (US Census Bureau,
2017). But when these numbers are teased out, we can see that almost 50% of veterans are age 65 or older and are not generally considered college-going age (US Census Bureau, 2017). Finally, when we consider that the student veteran population has been flat at about 3.5% of college enrollments since 2010 (US Department of Veterans Affairs, 2017), it may be that without a financial obstacle to attending college, all or most veterans who want to attend college are enrolled or have earned a degree by the Post 9/11 era already.

Therefore, student affairs practitioners might reconsider efforts toward programming for student veterans and prioritize other more vulnerable populations ahead of veterans for programming priority. This is not a recommendation for eliminating programming for veterans; on the contrary, there may be specific conditions under which it makes great sense to have a veteran program, but social programs may not be what is needed: Academic programs are likely more what veterans need to support their success as nontraditional students. For example, veteran transition courses have been successful in facilitating transitions to higher education for years (Money, 2015), which may seem to contradict my sentiment that supporting transitions is not necessary. But would certain veterans benefit from transition courses? Would all veterans benefit with a more supported transition and move through the initial period of dissonance most veterans experience when joining a college campus? It may be that as student advocates, student affairs professionals may need to lead campus efforts to develop transition courses for student veterans and intentional academic support programs, such as peer tutor programs, utilization of campus tutor services in general, creation of quiet study spaces, encouragement of using faculty office hours, improved study habits, etc.
Perhaps the most important recommendations for practice revolve around the academic experience and likely present the greatest opportunity for institutions to support the success of their student veterans. This is not a surprise, as the student retention literature clearly demonstrates the importance of the academic experience for nontraditional students (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Cabrera, et al., 1993; Chartrand, et al., 1992) as opposed to those activities that traditionally comprise social integration with the campus, such as programming and social interactions in the spirit of a traditional student model.

The findings of this study suggest that faculty meet students where they are and encourage diverse opinions, perspectives, and solutions while accommodating student veterans’ nontraditional student needs. And while these things are likely policy or preferred practice at all higher education institutions, according to the participants of this study this was not a common practice among their faculty. This disappointing reality appears to be more commonplace and is supported empirically by numerous studies that have enumerated the ways in which veterans struggle to adapt to classroom environments and perhaps are not supported by faculty and students alike making classrooms among the most frequented places for veterans that are the least veteran-friendly (e.g. DiRamio et al., 2008; Livingston, et al., 2011; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010; Vacchi, 2013). Chief academic officers placing emphasis on supporting the diverse perspectives and needs of all student populations would allow institutions to take advantage of the great diversity present in college classrooms across the country and in the process, make these experiences and spaces more veteran-friendly and supportive of student veteran success.
Recommendations for Future Research

As a researcher in the emerging area of student veterans, I am surrounded by colleagues and student veterans who present ideas for research. Vacchi and Berger (2014) outlined the top ten broad areas for future research, but uncounted specific topics offer a vast breadth and depth of possible topics for both qualitative and quantitative researchers. However, numerous interesting research topics were presented by the participants of this study, which to me is not a surprise, but might be a surprise to some readers of this dissertation.

An exploration of the motivation to attend and complete college for student veterans may prove enlightening to understanding this population, for which the Burland and Hickes-Lundquist (2011) study may be the only empirical examination of this topic to date. At BCU, Kerry offered that for her it was to prove people wrong about her potential, while her peer Drew called student veterans “second chance chumps” because many student veterans did not see themselves as college-ready, or college-capable, as they barely completed secondary schooling, hence the motivation to join the military. And while he never met these two veterans, Sammy at BSU intimated a similar rationale for motivation, which is “the drive of getting it done for life success.”

From this study, two recommendations are to undertake phenomenological studies of two dyadic relationships. First, exploration of the phenomenon of intimate support given by Jane to her brother Jerry can be a potential exemplar of how to support the success of student veterans with significant combat-related injuries and trauma. This is a study I will undertake, but similar studies and relationships exist and should be studied as well. Second, exploration of the relationship between faculty and student veterans, both
positive and negative examples, will help us better understand what can be done well and what pitfalls to avoid in the classroom for faculty and veterans. From this kind of study, we may be able to develop a training and development package for faculty that may help improve accommodation and collaboration with student veterans, and other nontraditional students, in their academic experiences.

With the evidence from this study that veteran peer-to-peer mentorship programs may enhance the success of student veterans, I recommend a quasi-experimental analysis of the academic performance of student veterans in and out of mentoring programs. There are numerous potential confounding propositions in a study such as this, but perhaps it can be done. A phenomenology might also be useful, as it might explore what a successful and sustainable mentorship program involves.

A study that would be fascinating would be to consider the success of student veterans at open enrollment institutions and compare the performance of student veterans at selective and highly selective institutions with that of open enrollment institutions. Dueling hypotheses emerge with this research consideration. First, does reducing or eliminating the financial obstacle to college for veterans coupled with the expansion of open enrollment programs at both two and four-year institutions create opportunities for education to some students that were not historically believed to be college material and therefore suggest expanding an education benefit to other marginalized populations? Second, does reducing or eliminating the financial obstacle to college for veterans coupled with the expansion of open enrollment programs simply invite too many students into college that end up failing and therefore are not effectively utilizing these
government education benefits? Or does this expansion of opportunity increase both
groups of students?

There is little research on what a successful veterans services program looks like
at small, medium, and large academic settings, only anecdotal best practices listed by
organizations such as the American Council on Education and Student Veterans of
America. Similarly, who should staff veterans’ services offices? Are veterans better than
civilians at serving as VSOs? Are veterans with certain backgrounds better than other
veterans as VSOs? Should the VSO control the benefits certification process? Case
studies of offices of various sizes at institutions of various types and sizes would be
interesting and offer empirical rationales for institutions exploring the possibility of
creating veteran spaces and staffing.

This study underrepresented women veterans, but it was not my intention to seek
findings that were differentiated by gender. Kerry, as the lone woman participating in
this study, represents an interesting counter story to the stereotypes assigned to women
veterans and women student veterans. Her willingness to be around the men and to
participate in this study are counter to a perhaps unsubstantiated assumption that women
veterans do not want to be around the men, now that they are in college. Still, she was
the only woman participant and as such little can be concluded, but there is an important
implication for future research here: motivations for women student veterans to
participate in studies of student veteran populations. Another recommendation for future
research is to explore notions that women have negative experiences in the military, do
not want to be around men, and when returning to civilian society women want to forget
their military service. I do not know if this is the case, but the current media-driven
narrative is that this might well be true. In short, we need to know more about women and demographic minorities as student veterans.

Still another recommendation for future research is to determine if there is a way to increase student veteran participation in and access to disability services. In the specific case of Myron, it would have benefitted him if a culture were created in which he was either made to feel comfortable in seeking help for his transition issues, or was subjected to a screening, such as those offered by Diamond (2014) and Young (2012) to identify his issues and alert institutional representatives of the need for services.

Since many schools have instituted considerable programming and support, perhaps a pre-and post-statistical analysis of veteran graduation rates to determine whether what appears to be an already good graduation rate improves based on these services is warranted at certain campuses. This may be easy for campuses that track veteran status and can access veteran graduation data from before changes in veteran programming began. However, it may be more difficult for campuses that have not historically tracked veteran status among their enrolled student population. For campuses intending to begin intentional veteran programming, I recommend tracking veteran status and success immediately and tracking the possible effects that programming may have on a student veteran population for support for future programming and staffing budgets.

A fascinating statement made by Big State University veterans to Jane, when she intimated frustration at trying to get basic support programming started at BSU that validated her in her support and advocacy for veterans was that the veterans felt as though she has served in the military by following her brother Jerry’s service in Iraq and subsequent struggles with recovery and pursuit of a college degree. An exploration of
what perceptions veterans have about family members and the extent to which they have served along with their military member would be interesting. Another interesting study would be to explore what happens in the dynamic of non-veterans stepping up to be allies for veterans in their experiences on campus and how welcome those efforts are and what it takes to be accepted by the military or veteran community as a trusted ally.

While the field should be interested in traditional markers of diversity as we continue to disaggregate this important student population to better understand them as students, the field should also explore the differences in student experience for veterans depending on their specific socialization path to the military, and even combat versus non-combat roles within military branches. Perhaps the easiest way to demonstrate a possible difference in experiences and acculturation to the military would be to highlight the apparent differences between US Marine Corps service and that of the US Air Force. While not true for every service member, Marines are generally highly aggressive and infantrymen first, while Airmen are typically more reserved and corporate in their approach to military service. I do not suggest either is superior or inferior, rather the Air Force is an organization comprised of individuals who support the application of military force through combat air platforms and typically do not engage in the kinds of military training and combat that we see in the US Marines. Therefore, a recommendation for research to the field is to explore components of traditional and nontraditional diversity when we seek a better understanding of veterans as a population over all and as students.

Another important socialization pathway to explore for student veterans is the differences between students in the National Guard, Reserves, and active duty. The interruptions inherent in the military service of part time servicemembers suggests
potential differences in the military socialization and experiences as veterans, and student 
veterans, between full time and part time military servicemembers and veterans. Finally, 
an exploration of the differences between combat and non-combat military specialties 
may reveal differences in not only the motivations for service, as Burland and Hickes-
Lundquist (2011) found, but in the experiences of these individuals as veterans or student 
veterans. Thinking differently about aspects of diversity may also have benefits for 
studying all student populations.

A final recommendation is to empirically assess if veterans are truly struggling 
with transitions to higher education as the DiRamio et al. (2008) and Rumann and 
Hamrick (2010) studies suggest. As Baxter-Magolda asserts, the dissonance veterans 
experience in the military may be a contributing factor to their ability to negotiate 
transitions to higher education successfully whether they are smooth, or not (DiRamio & 
Jarvis, 2011). Maybe struggling is good and is a better vehicle to rejoin American 
society than an intentionally facilitated transition that smooths the process: That would be 
an interesting finding. And yet, even without formal transition programs or supports, 
data are clearly emerging demonstrating that veterans in the first few years of the Post 
9/11 GI Bill Era are graduating at rate of about 72% (Cate, et al., 2017). The participants 
of this study were clearly beyond any transition into college and were successful without 
the existence of formal transition programs, or even veterans’ services offices. Perhaps 
the implication here is for less specific programming and more veteran-friendly 
environments on campuses so that equitable, or appropriate, treatment of veterans is part 
of the culture of the campus. Studies, such as DiRamio et al. (2008) and Rumann and 
Hamrick (2010) have been guided by Tinto’s theory (1975) and Schlossberg’s 4S model
(1981). In the end, it may be that moving away from utilization of Schlossberg’s 4S model and Tinto’s theory and model may be the best direction for student veteran research in the future.

Conclusion

When I began this study, I endeavored to explore what factors contribute to student veteran success with a hypothesis that student veterans were not struggling as greatly as some of the recent studies suggested. Clearly, the academic experience is of great importance, if not the most important aspect of the student experience as Bean and Metzner (1985) demonstrated for nontraditional students. What this study reveals, is that those student veterans who experience support from staff and peers and are accommodated and integrated into the classroom by faculty and not marginalized for divergent opinions, experience validation in their higher education pursuits. This validation is a clear marker along the path to successful degree completion for veterans. As national data begin to show evidence that student veterans are succeeding, it is important to identify those factors that contribute to student veteran success and to replicate and reinforce those across the higher education landscape. This study suggests that those programs and services that are traditionally offered by student affairs divisions appear to be less important for student veteran success than a classroom environment and academic experience that is supportive and accommodating of the student veteran. While I do not advocate for arbitrarily ending veteran-friendly programming, I recommend to the field that a strong emphasis be placed on academic programming for veterans and ensuring veterans have adequate social supports during their academic pursuits.
This study began with a review of literature that highlights how veterans have historically succeeded in higher education and how it may be that recent scholarship that presumes veterans are struggling to succeed in college may not be supported by emerging data that suggest veterans are succeeding in the current generation as veterans always have. While offering a critique of recent scholarship, I also highlighted the value of recent scholarship and ways in which contemporary student veteran scholarship may connect more logically to the college impact literature through the nontraditional student scholarship of Bean and Metzner (1985) and Astin’s theory (1970; 1984). The literature review concluded with the scholarship that contributed to the development of my conceptual model, which includes recent scholarship and the seminal work of Bean and Metzner (1985) and Weidman (1989).

The method used in this study was a focused life-history narrative, in which I concentrated on the life history of the participants in a snapshot of time, rather than their entire lives, in order to explore the participants’ perceptions about why they have succeeded in their baccalaureate degree pursuits. The data and findings suggest that faculty, staff, and veteran peers have a potentially validating effect on student veterans and that successful veterans experience this validation at some point during their time in college. The most prominent influencers of success appeared to be faculty members and several implications for how to approach veterans in the classroom were discussed in Chapter 5. The findings also suggest the importance of structure for the success of student veterans as they pursue their college degrees. Interestingly, the only service highlighted by participants as being central to their success was the timely and accurate
processing of education benefits and not the potential array of programming typically pursued by divisions of student affairs at many campuses.

As with many qualitative studies, this study appears to leave me with more questions than when I began, however I do feel as though I have a better understanding of what contributed to the successful degree attainment of these participants. Exploration of the potential effects on the student veteran experience by various programs espoused as veteran-friendly would be a good thing for any campus to explore, in addition to exploring the characteristics ideally found for a given institution’s veterans’ services officer. This study was an illuminating and gratifying experience which has made me a better scholar and has made me appreciate student veterans more.
APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW THEMES AND GUIDE

• Grand tour background question—take me from high school until today
• Describe people, places, services, etc. that contributed to your successful degree attainment
  – Transition to being a student
  – Campus Services
  – Off Campus Services/experiences
  – Family Members
  – Veterans Office
  – Other student veterans
  – Faculty Members
  – Non-veteran student Interactions
  – Spaces on/off campus (Library, coffee shop, apartment, etc.)
• (reinforcement/clarification) In what ways did this person, place, service affect your success?
• Describe how your personal background contributed to your own success in college?
• Describe how your previous academic preparation contributed to your success in college?
• Describe how you feel your military service contributed to your success as a student?
Figure 4. Interview guide.
APPENDIX B

VETERAN IDENTITY SCALE

An essential component of understanding a student veteran is to allow for the primacy of a variety of identities and that veteran identity may not be the predominant identity marker for a veteran. For example, the field is still waiting for a study that explores the experiences of women student veterans. It may be that for women, the veteran identity is not the dominant marker: just a background characteristic to a complex identity in which being an independent woman is of prime significance. Acknowledging that the degree of socialization to the military a veteran undergoes varies depending upon length and intensity of military service is important to understanding holistic veteran identity. Simply stated, if we envision a continuum (see Figure 5 below), the longer and more intense the military service the stronger the socialization to the military and the less likely socialization to the college campus is relevant at all for the success of student veterans (Vacchi & Berger, 2014). For example, someone who served in the Army Reserves for four years and does not deploy to combat might have a minimal military socialization. In contrast, someone who served the nation’s military for the same four years, but on active duty with two combat deployments, might have a significantly greater socialization to the military due to a total immersion in the military culture. Still, the individual chooses the extent to which he or she identifies as a veteran and so it is necessary to acknowledge veteran status, without presuming that it is the predominant characteristic of all veterans. Further, depending on the quality of military experience, particularly at the point of separation from the military, it is also feasible that someone with a long career in the military may have less of a military socialization than someone younger with substantially less years in the military due to the intensity of that service.
Some veterans who served an entire career during peacetime do not consider themselves to be veterans, despite earning that legal title. In the end, even a nominal military socialization, such as basic training, for all military members requires a consideration that all students with prior military experience might be better served by viewing them as nontraditional students since they have separated from their parents and families and become independent to a large extent.

An important corollary to this hypothesis, is that the veteran identity scale can be applied to scholars and practitioners as well. For those people that cannot identify well with veterans, we can position them at the left end of the spectrum and thus their credibility is diminished. Caution should be used when these people attempt to talk as experts on veterans, or even to advocate for veterans, because it is likely that their own biases and misconceptions will dictate writing or action, rather than what may be in the best interests of veterans. At the other extreme, those scholars that demonstrate a solid understanding of veterans and can accurately conceptualize veteran experiences and dynamics, we should seek these professionals to help advocate for veterans on campus, and in society, and we should seek these kinds of scholars to give voice to the student veteran population, regardless of veteran status.

Figure 5. Veteran socialization continuum
To expand upon this concept for situations in which I believe we already have examples at all of these levels in higher education, I offer the following. It is conceivable to have a poor scholar in the area of student veterans who served in the Navy Reserves for a short period a long time ago, and was a student veteran at one point, who appears not to be able to effectively conceptualize the experiences of student veterans. It is also conceivable to have a non-veteran run a more effective Veterans Services Office than a veteran. The reverse of each of these is also happening across higher education to some extent, with some non-veterans creating some poorly conceived student veteran scholarship. We also see higher education institutions dismissing very qualified non-veteran candidates for Veterans Services positions in favor of less qualified veterans.

I offer a challenge to higher education institutions to eliminate bias against non-veterans in searching for your Veterans Services staff. It takes years to build up the kind of relationships, experiences, and networks to be able to effectively run a staff department in a college or university, and very few, if any, veterans can walk into higher education and succeed in these jobs without the right educational background and set of experiences. Similarly, ignoring the potential value of a veteran’s background simply because they do not have higher education experience can place a non-veteran into a Veterans Services role for which they are not well qualified. The Veteran Socialization Continuum can help hiring managers conceptualize the kind of people they seek to hire into these positions. While a veteran with a great deal of higher education experience may be the ideal candidate, these individuals simply do not exist in the numbers needed to staff all colleges with this kind of professional. Rather, institutions might look for someone with a strong veteran socialization and the right set of higher education
background and experiences to hire. For in the end, with an ever-decreasing number of veterans in the United States, veterans and non-veterans working together is the only dynamic in which veterans should expect to work, and go to college, after serving in the military.
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165


