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Student-Veteran Transition Strategies from the Military to Higher Education

Abstract

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore and describe the strategies that student veterans employed as they transitioned from active-duty military engagement to civilian college classrooms. Transition theory drove this study as it explored military-veteran transitions from the military to undergraduate programs. The research questions were, What thoughts, incidents, or people associated with your military service stand out for you? How did your military service and transition affect your college experience? and What thoughts or feelings stand out as you think about your transition? Transcendental phenomenological methodology was used for this study as it followed structured data collection methods including semi- structured interviews, questionnaires, and a collection of related documents. The study purposely selected veterans from the United States military who served at least 12 consecutive months on active-duty and were enrolled or recently completed undergraduate programs as full-time students at large public 4-year research institutions in Upstate New York. Additional student veterans from other colleges and universities were recruited to participate by the participants of this study. Data analysis was structured, which began with theme development, and it was followed by coding to develop and describe the essence of the participants' transition experiences. The findings indicate that community college may contribute to student veteran's initial academic success following military service for its acceptance of military training credits and social climate that allows student veterans to complete the military-to-civilian transition process before transferring to 4-year schools. Recommendations include the Department of Defense standardizing out-processing procedures for better military to civilian transitions.

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Student-Veteran Transition Strategies from the Military to Higher Education

By

David L. Gardner

Submitted in partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree

EdD in Executive Leadership

Supervised by

Guillermo Montes, PhD

Committee Member

Peter W. Granger, EdD

Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. School of Education

St. John Fisher University

December 2023

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2023

Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to all the men and women who served this country, especially my military family members, Leo F. Gardner (USA), Daniel L. Gardner (USMC), and Jeffery P. Ryan (USAF), who faithfully served and silently struggled.

I would like to acknowledge and am very grateful for all my blessings that kept me uplifted and focused throughout this doctoral journey. I would like to acknowledge the valuable support and guidance of my Doctoral Committee Chair, Guillermo Montes, PhD, and my Doctoral Committee Member, Peter W. Granger, EdD. I would also like to acknowledge my doctoral group members: Drs. Melissa Greco-Lopes, Burnice Green, Jennifer Singer, and Abraham Steiner.

Several key individuals were instrumental in gaining the approvals needed to conduct my survey research and ultimately gaining access to a surprising number of willing student veterans. Thank you, Drs. Marie Cianca and Jill Pippin, and Mr. Kenneth Cisson.

Lastly, I would like to acknowledge my loving wife, Shannon P. Gardner, and my children, Darby and Connor, for without their support, encouragement, tolerance, and help, completing this doctoral journey would not have been possible.

Biographical Sketch

David L. Gardner is currently the Chief Financial Officer for the Department of Veterans Affairs' Maryland Health Care System. He is also retired U.S. Army officer, achieving the rank of Lieutenant Colonel. Mr. Gardner completed his Bachelor of Business Administration degree in Accounting and Finance at St. Bonaventure University and Master of Public Administration and Master of Business Administration degrees at Syracuse University. He entered the St. John Fisher University's Doctor in Executive Leadership program in 2021. Mr. Gardner pursued his research interest on student veterans' transition experiences from the military to the college classroom under the direction of Dr. Guillermo Montes and Dr. Peter Granger and received the Doctorate in Education degree in 2023.

Abstract

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore and describe the strategies that student veterans employed as they transitioned from active-duty military engagement to civilian college classrooms. Transition theory drove this study as it explored military-veteran transitions from the military to undergraduate programs. The research questions were, What thoughts, incidents, or people associated with your military service stand out for you? How did your military service and transition affect your college experience? and What thoughts or feelings stand out as you think about your transition? Transcendental phenomenological methodology was used for this study as it followed structured data collection methods including semi-structured interviews, questionnaires, and a collection of related documents. The study purposely selected veterans from the United States military who served at least 12 consecutive months on active-duty and were enrolled or recently completed undergraduate programs as full-time students at large public 4-year research institutions in Upstate New York. Additional student veterans from other colleges and universities were recruited to participate by the participants of this study. Data analysis was structured, which began with theme development, and it was followed by coding to develop and describe the essence of the participants' transition experiences. The findings indicate that community college may contribute to student veteran's initial academic success following military service for its acceptance of military training credits and social climate that allows student veterans to complete the military-to-civilian transition process before transferring to 4-year schools. Recommendations include the Department of Defense standardizing out-processing procedures for better military to civilian transitions.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

"Honor to the soldier and sailor everywhere, who bravely bears his country's cause. Honor, also, to the citizen who cares for his brother in the field and serves, as he best can, the same cause" (Varandani, 2021, para. 3). These words from 1863 reflect President Abraham Lincoln's appreciation to individual soldiers, officers, and units for their military service.

Service in the United States military is not just a job (American Friends Service Committee [AFSC], 2010; Mittelstadt, 2011). The military acknowledges this in recruitment advertisements that state, "Navy. It's not just a job, it's an adventure" (Department of the Navy [DON], 1981) and "Every team has a goal, but only one team in the world has what it takes to succeed no matter what gets in their way" (Department of the Army [DA], 2016). Military service is commonly a significant life accomplishment for people. Many service members view military life as a lifestyle outside the norms of society. This lifestyle frequently requires acclimating oneself and family to an ever-changing world of moves, new schools, new friends, and new languages and cultures. It may also involve life and death situations. Military service can create stress, both mentally and physically. Some employment websites list military service as one of the most stressful jobs available (Indeed, 2021; LinkedIn, 2018). It is a profession that involves killing or being killed, and it may cause one to bear witness to acts of unthinkable horror and violence. The Army's Talent Management Task Force's annual exit survey of nearly 38,000 troops lists the top reason for leaving the Army is related to a soldier's family's well-being (Winkie, 2021).

Leaving the military is not just leaving a job, it's leaving a lifestyle (Military-Transition.org, 2022). The transition out of uniform at the end of a service obligation represents a significant life change for military service members and their families that most civilians do not experience when changing jobs or careers. Military service members' bond with country, military service, individual service organization, and fellow service members and their families create voids to fill when taking off the uniform (Military-Transition.org, 2022). As a result, many service members have difficulty with the transition. Difficulties increase when transition leads to life as a full-time college student.

Chapter 1 describes the origins of the United States military from an events and legal basis. It defines key terms to include military, veterans, indoctrination, out-process, and student veteran. Additionally, Appendix A defines more terms used throughout this work. Lastly, Chapter 1 defines the research problem, poses the research questions, discusses the potential significance of the study, and offers a preview of the remainder of the study.

Background

To understand some of the challenges transitioning service members encounter, one must understand military lifestyle. The history of the United States military dates back to June 14, 1775. The Second Continental Congress founded the Army, the oldest component of the military, and 5 days later, commissioned George Washington to lead it as the Command in Chief. Following the birth of the United States of America, the First Session of the newly recognized Congress passed legislation, on September 29, 1789, to establish the United States military.

The Constitution of the United States is the supreme law of the land, superseding the Articles of Confederation, the nation's original constitution. The Constitution establishes the

foundation for the military and identifies the roles and responsibilities of the Legislative and Executive branches regarding the military.

The Constitution's Article I established the Legislative Branch of the government with a Senate and House of Representatives (2022) and consists of 10 sections:

> Section VIII, Clauses XI to XVI grant the Legislative Branch the ability to declare war, grant letters of marque and reprisal, and make rules concerning captures on land and water; to raise and support armies, but no appropriation of money to that use shall be for a longer term than two years; to provide and maintain a Navy; to make rules for the government and regulation of the land and naval forces; and to provide for calling forth the militia to execute the laws of the union, suppress insurrections and repel invasions. (United States Constitution, 2022a, Section 8)

The Constitution's Article II established the Executive Branch of the government with a President and Vice President. Section II states that "the President shall be Commander in Chief of the Army and Navy of the United States, and of the Militia of the several States, when called into the actual Service of the United States" (United States Constitution, 2022b, Section 2). Together, the Legislative and Executive Branches pass and enact laws, respectively, to fulfill their constitutional responsibilities. Some relevant laws follow.

The National Guard Act (1933) outlines the role of the National Guard. The Act provides two methods for National Guard activation by the United States Federal Government. Under Title 32, National Guard units remains under control of the state but under Title 10, control is transferred to the President.

The National Security Act (1947) restructured the United States military and intelligences agencies following World War II. The Act merged the Departments of the Army, Navy, and

newly established Air Force under the command of the also newly established Secretary of Defense. The Act also protected the Marine Corps as an independent service under the DON.

The Armed Forces Act "provided the legal basis for the roles, missions, and organization of each of the services as well as the United States Department of Defense" (Armed Forces Act, 1956, Title 10, Ch. 1041, 70A, Stat 1). The Army is the primary land force; the Navy is the primary sea force, with the Marine Corps as the DON's ground force; and the Air Force is the primary air power.

The National Defense Authorization Acts (NDAA) (Congressional Research Services, 2022) are annual congressional bills that "authorize funding levels and provide authorities for the United States military and other critical defense priorities, ensuring our troops have the training, equipment, and resources they need to carry out their missions" (Senate, 2022, para. 3).

Defense Appropriations Acts provides funding for the programs authorized in the Authorizations Act. The Defense Appropriation funds the Departments of Army, Navy (including Marine Corps), Air Force (including the Space Force), Office of Secretary of Defense, and Defense Agencies "including activities related to military personnel; operation and maintenance; procurement; research and development; and the Military Health System" (Senate, 2022, para. 4).

The Military

Today's Military (2023) states:

> The military of the United States consists of six branches in three separate departments, each with their own active-duty and part-time components. Each varies in service commitment, location, and how its members contribute to the overall mission of

protecting the country; though all components are on the same rank-based pay scale. (para. 1)

The majority of service members join the military by enlisting in one of its branches with the enlisted members contributing the majority of the military workforce. Officers represent a much smaller portion of the military and typically require a 4-year college degree to join. When enlisting in the military, all new recruits select a Military Occupational Specialty (MOS) to perform for the duration of their term of service. Both enlisted and officers participate in initial entry training (IET) to transition from civilian to military life and learn the tools for their new profession. Appendix B identifies enlisted MOS and Officer Branches. At the time of this writing, enlisted personnel and officers typically earn $21,000 and $43,000, respectively, in their initial year of service. At the completion of 4 years of service, enlisted personnel earn, on average, $34,500, and officers earn $77,000.

A pay gap exists between officers and enlisted personnel, which is more pronounced when service members become retirement-eligible at the 20-year mark of service. "The military has two retirement systems: the new Blended Retirement System (BRS) and the legacy High-3 system" (Navy Mutual, 2023, para. 2). The High-3 system is the most common for servicemen with an initial entry date into service between September 8, 1980 and January 1, 2018. The amount a service member receives annually as a retiree is calculated as: 2.5% multiplied by the number of years of service multiplied by the member's highest 36 months of basic pay. For example, an officer who achieves the pay grade of O-5 has an annual retirement at 20 years of service of roughly $69,000, while an enlisted person who achieves the pay grade of E-9 at 20 years of service receives only $40,000. This is significant as most military personnel retiring after 20 years of service are in their late-30s to mid-40s, and they normally receive retirement

payments for the rest of their lives. Table 1.1 displays the Enlisted Pay Chart, and Table 1.2 displays the Officer Pay Chart, both for fiscal year 2022 (Defense Finance and Accounting Service, 2022).

Table 1.1

Monthly Rates of Basic Pay for Enlisted Personnel

	Cumulative Years of Service											
Pay Grade	2 or less	Over 2	Over 3	Over 4	Over 6	Over 8	Over 10	Over 12	Over 14	Over 16	Over 18	Over 20
E-9							$5,789	$5,921	$6,086	$6,280	$6,477	$6,791
E-8						$4,739	$4,949	$5,078	$5,234	$5,402	$5,706	$5,861
E-7	$3,294	$3,596	$3,734	$3,915	$4,058	$4,303	$4,441	$4,685	$4,889	$5,027	$5,175	$5,233
E-6	$2,849	$3,136	$3,274	$3,409	$3,549	$3,864	$3,988	$4,226	$4,298	$4,351	$4,413	$4,413
E-5	$2,610	$2,786	$2,921	$3,059	$3,273	$3,498	$3,682	$3,704	$3,704	$3,704	$3,704	$3,704
E-4	$2,393	$2,516	$2,652	$2,787	$2,906	$2,906	$2,906	$2,906	$2,906	$2,906	$2,906	$2,906
E-3	$2,161	$2,297	$2,436	$2,436	$2,436	$2,436	$2,436	$2,436	$2,436	$2,436	$2,436	$2,436
E-2	$2,055	$2,055	$2,055	$2,055	$2,055	$2,055	$2,055	$2,055	$2,055	$2,055	$2,055	$2,055
E-1	$1,833	$1,833	$1,833	$1,833	$1,833	$1,833	$1,833	$1,833	$1,833	$1,833	$1,833	$1,833

Note. Rates reflect the fiscal year 2022 amounts and are rounded to the nearest whole dollar. In the public domain.

Table 1.2

Monthly Rates of Basic Pay for Officers

	Cumulative Years of Service											
Pay Grade	2 or less	Over 2	Over 3	Over 4	Over 6	Over 8	Over 10	Over 12	Over 14	Over 16	Over 18	Over 20
O-10												$16,975
O-9												$16,445
O-8	$11,636	$12,017	$12,270	$12,341	$12,656	$13,183	$13,306	$13,807	$13,951	$14,382	$15,006	$15,581
O-7	$9,668	$10,118	$10,325	$10,491	$10,790	$11,085	$11,427	$11,768	$12,110	$13,183	$14,090	$14,090
O-6	$7,332	$8,055	$8,583	$8,583	$8,616	$8,985	$9,035	$9,035	$9,548	$10,455	$10,988	$11,521
O-5	$6,112	$6,885	$7,362	$7,451	$7,749	$7,927	$8,318	$8,606	$8,977	$9,544	$9,814	$10,081
O-4	$5,274	$6,104	$6,512	$6,603	$6,981	$7,386	$7,892	$8,285	$8,558	$8,715	$8,805	$8,805
O-3	$4,637	$5,256	$5,672	$6,185	$6,482	$6,807	$7,017	$7,363	$7,544	$7,544	$7,544	$7,544
O-2	$4,007	$4,563	$5,255	$5,433	$5,544	$5,544	$5,544	$5,544	$5,544	$5,544	$5,544	$5,544
O-1	$3,477	$3,620	$4,376	$4,376	$4,376	$4,376	$4,376	$4,376	$4,376	$4,376	$4,376	$4,376

Note. Rates reflect the fiscal year 2022 amounts and are rounded to the nearest whole dollar. In the public domain.

“Indoctrination is the imposition of a system of values, beliefs, or doctrine on another (or others) that does not tolerate critical reflection or questioning of that system but demands acceptance of it as absolute truth” (Thompson, 2017, pp. 387–388). “Military indoctrination is a process by which civilians are transformed into military service members” (Britt et al., 2006, p. 31). This process is crucial to the development of the service member. The United States Army (DA, 2022b) stated that “each service will provide qualified instructors and support staff, to the greatest extent possible, to provide 100 percent manning of the agreed to requirement to transform civilians into Soldiers” (p. 180).

Military indoctrination differs from cult-like indoctrination. While cult indoctrination is designed to get its members to stay, commit themselves, and take part in what may be harmful activities, “military indoctrination simultaneously prepares individuals to kill and/or potentially sacrifice one’s life while developing more traditionally accepted standards of conduct and socially acceptable values” (Britt et al., 2006, p. 13). Military values, along with adherence to standards, “are designed to prevent the service member from becoming an automaton that simply follows any order regardless of its moral consequences” (Britt et al., 2006, p. 14).

The United States Army’s website lists the top 10 reasons civilians join the military. The highest rated reason is patriotism, with nearly 18% of all new recruits feeling a sense of patriotism or duty toward the American people (DA, 2022a). Further down the list, at only 6%, is the GI Bill. The poll showed that future college benefits were a significant reason to join the military, but not as significant as one’s sense of patriotism—meaning the typical service member puts the welfare of the nation, the Army, and their subordinates before their own.

The decision to join the military is a personal choice, as is the decision to stay in or leave after completing the terms of the contract. The vast majority of service members serve only an

initial term and return to civilian life, but some commit to service to, and past, the 20-year mark, which before 2018 was traditionally the point of retirement. The Department of Defense (DoD, 2018) reported 24,212 service members retired from the military in 2017.

The military offers incentives to eligible service members to retain them for further service. Some incentives include cash bonuses, choice of job type and/or location, and civilian education. Typically, the incentive is based on the needs of the military and requires additional years of service for the service member. Service members who opt for high-demand jobs and locations with longer term lengths often receive more incentives. In 2022, the highest demand for enlisted military occupation specialties were in Special Forces and Psychological Operations. These professions involve language and culture training that may require 18–24 months to complete. As such, longer contract terms are often required. These longer contract terms normally involve elevated incentives compared to lower-demand career fields.

There are tangible benefits to military service that are not available to civilians. Service members receive free room and board (or a stipend for both), clothing allowances, free medical care, 30 days paid vacation each year, special pays for specific military occupational specialties, tax advantages, and the privilege to shop at the base exchange and commissary where the price of goods and services are typically less than in the private sector. They may also invest in "the Thrift Savings Plan (TSP) which is a retirement savings and investment plan exclusively for Federal employees and members of the uniformed services" (TSP, 2022, para. 1). Other incentives service members may receive are tuition assistance for civilian education, the opportunity for advancement where they learn new skills or lead other service members, health and life insurance, free travel on military aircraft, and a retirement paycheck for the rest of their life. Lastly, the Servicemembers Civil Relief Act (SCRA) provides military members legal

protections that are not available to the public, to include protection from evictions, foreclosures, repossession, and civil court proceedings (Absher, 2023).

There are also intangible benefits to military service that are not available to civilians. For many, the camaraderie, the structure of a chain-of-command, and predictability of schedule make the military an easy environment to acclimate. The military operations order (OPORD) is a five-paragraph narrative, issued by one leader to subordinate leaders, which contains all relevant information on a particular mission. In the order, the task (the "what") and purpose (the "why") are clearly stated. And since the late 1980s, the Commander's Intent is also included. The Commander's Intent informs all members of the most important thing to accomplish in the event everything else goes wrong (Heath & Heath, 2007). All members of an organization understand what and why they do what they do. An old military mantra states, "The more one sweats in training, the less they bleed in battle." As such, members of the military train in their craft tirelessly. Through this constant training and celebration, bonds are formed between members. The movies *Saving Private Ryan* and *Band of Brothers* illustrate these bonds. Veterans often refer to other members of affinity groups such as "brothers," "battle buddies," and "partners." The high degree of bonds is usually not found outside the military.

They also understand the roles of the other members of the organization—and those roles are ever-changing. The role of women in American society and the United States military has changed dramatically over the past few decades. Table 1.3 reflects the simultaneous evolution of female roles in American society and in the United States military.

Table 1.3

Female Roles in Society and the Military Over Time

Time Frame	Society	Military
Pre-1940s	Women roles were defined as domestications and household work. Prior to 1920, women could not vote in the United States.	Women were confined to working as cooks, seamstresses, and nurses in the U.S. military during the 18th and 19th centuries.
1940s to 1970s	Women represented only one third of the American workforce.	Female roles expanded with the formation of the Women's Army Corps in 1941.
1970s to 2010s	Women represented a larger percentage of the American workforce and worked occupations previously worked only by men.	Women became integrated into the U.S. military in 1978, except they were not allowed to serve in combat.
2015 to Present	Women represent the most senior positions in publicly traded organizations and the United States government.	As of 2015, there are no more restrictions about what positions women can or cannot hold in the Army.

Note. Adapted from "Then and Now: How Women's Roles have Changed in the US Military," by T. Lakritz, 2019, *Insider*. Copyright 2019 by Insider. https://www.insider.com/women-in-us-military-history-2019-2#:~:text=Their%20roles%20expanded%20with%20the,cannot%20hold%20in%20the%20army.

Onboarding: Transitioning from Civilian to Military Life

To understand the transition student veterans experience in moving from the military to the college classroom, one must first understand the transition civilians experience when joining the military. The United States DoD employed 1,346,400 active duty, uniformed service members and 950,000 civilians in 2022 (DoD, 2021; NDAA, 2022). Like many large American businesses, people new to the military undergo onboarding, although the term used in the military for this process is *indoctrination*. "Onboarding is the process of helping new employees learn organizational culture along with details related to performance expectations" (Rabel & Stefaniak, 2018, para. 1). Many American businesses onboard employees at the time the employees begin to work at the organization. Bad onboarding potentially destroys the benefits achieved by hiring good employees (Smart, 2012). The same is true with military indoctrination. The method of onboarding varies by industry, company, and position, but it is generally intended to attract and retain good talent, enhance employees' engagement by making them feel welcome

and valued, decrease the learning curve, encourage socialization, and create a sense of belonging (WorkBright, 2023).

In 2022, the two largest private American companies, Walmart and Amazon, shown in Table 1.4, both employed versions of onboarding programs to incorporate new employees to each company's culture. Walmart onboarded new employees with a checklist of topics that included an overview of their operating model, brand, and associate value proposition; diversity and inclusion and safe workplace possibilities; and meetings with the employee's supervisor (Walmart, 2022a). Amazon's pre-employment onboarding began before new employees entered the office and consisted of email access, employee credentials, and necessary documentation. Once the new Amazon employee began to work, the remainder of the onboarding was self-guided (Amazon, 2022a). Like most onboarding programs in American businesses, employees participated in the programs during normal business hours and returned home at night.

Table 1.4

Employee Demographics of Largest United States Employers

	Department of Defense	Walmart	Amazon
Total Employees	3,500,000	2,300,000	1,298,000
Male/Female	67/33%	45/55%	53/47%
Percentage White	58%	63%	32.1%
Percentage Hispanic or Latino	15%	15%	23.6%
Percentage Black or African American	14%	13%	28.2%
Percentage Native American	N/A	N/A	1.5%
Percentage Multiracial	N/A	N/A	3.3%
Average length of employment	6.1 years	3.3 years	<1 year

Note. Adapted from "Amazon Demographics and Statistics," by Zippia. https://www.zippia.com/amazon-careers-487/demographics/; "Department of Defense Demographics and Statistics," by Zippia. https://www.zippia.com/u-s-department-of-defense-careers-763341/demographics/; "Walmart Demographics and Statistics," by Zippia. https://www.zippia.com/walmart-careers-116506/demographics/. Copyright 2023 by Zippia, Inc.

One notable exception was Arthur Andersen, an American accounting firm that provided auditing, tax advising, consulting, and other professional services to large corporations. Now defunct, in 2001, Arthur Andersen was one of the world's largest multinational corporations and was one of the Big Five accounting firms, alongside Deloitte and Touche, Ernst & Young, KPMG, and PricewaterhouseCoopers (Arthur Andersen, 2023).

In the 1960s, Arthur Andersen began a uniform training program to ensure the employees in every office, took the same approach to a problem. In 1970, Andersen purchased St. Dominick College in St. Charles, Illinois, to use for new employee indoctrination. Typically, employees spent 1 week in their new office to learn *how-tos* and *in-house culture* before reporting to the St. Charles campus, but once on campus, new employees were assigned rooms where they stayed for the duration of the indoctrination. This was before the advent of the Internet and cell phones, and employee rooms were void of televisions or phones to decrease external influences and distractions. New employees were instructed how to dress, eat, and interact with other Andersen employees.

The tour of duty began with an hour of orientation of the firm's core values—integrity, stewardship, and training. Brief lectures followed with topics that included how to behave in public, how to dress, and how to handle oneself at cocktail parties with instruction on how to hold hors d'oeuvres. After orientation, employee development continued for another 2 weeks for auditors and 3 weeks for consultants. By the end of program, employees had bonded with other new employees. Toffle and Reingold (2003) stated:

> Observations by several former partners include: "St. Charles created a wonderful glue for everyone around the work"; "to most of us that saw it develop and grow, it was a source of great pride"; "it was all done to create a unique mixture of tough love and

camaraderie, to mark these young souls with knowledge and values that were supposed to last their entire careers"; and "we got a common terminology and a common language, we not only go to know one another but used the same terms. (p. 31)

The Arthur Andersen regimented indoctrination program was more rigorous than those of Walmart or Amazon. Their immersion method of indoctrination more closely resembled the methods of the United State military but paled in comparison to the amount of indoctrination new recruits and officers experience when joining the military. Most people enter the United States military by enlisting in one of its six branches: Air Force, Army, Coast Guard, Marine Corps, Navy, and Space Force (USAGov, 2023). Unlike the onboarding processes of American businesses, military indoctrination often lasts several months. It is physically, mentally, and spiritually exhausting; and recruits cannot simply quit or go home at night.

Each military branch has the mission to transform civilians into service members. Every service member, both officer and enlisted, participates in some form of IET. The Air Force boot camp is a 6-week program that teaches recruits Air Force history, military lifestyle, and physical fitness, and it teaches recruits how to work and function as a group (Department of the Air Force [DAF], 2022a). The Navy's Recruit Training Command mission is to "transform civilians into smartly disciplined, physically fit, basically trained Sailors who are ready for follow-on training and service to the fleet while instilling in them the highest standards of Honor, Courage, and Commitment" (United States Marine Corps [USMC]. 2021, para. 2). The Marine Corps' IET is 12 weeks long and teaches recruits "core values, general military subjects, marksmanship, field skills, martial arts, combat conditioning, water survival, first aid, and close order drill" (USMC, 2016, para 2).

In the Army, IET is one of the new-recruit or officer's first Army experiences. IET consists of intense physical and mental training that transforms a civilian into a soldier in the United States Army, Army Reserve, or Army National Guard. The nature of this training is intense and challenging. Generally, enlisted personnel attend IET with Basic Combat Training (BCT) followed by Advanced Individual Training (AIT). Commissioned officers attend IET with an Officer Basic Course (OBC). The distinction between BCT and OBC is noticeable and largely because of the officers' previously obtained basic military understanding from participation in commissioning sources such as military academies, Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC), or Officers Candidate School (OCS). Gateway to the Army Association (2022) states:

> The purpose of Initial Entry Training (IET) is not to break recruits. In fact, the combination of physical training, field exercises, and classroom time makes individuals strong and capable. It's a tough process, but a rewarding one that many service members value for life. (para. 3)

IET, depending on the Army Branch or Military Occupational Specialty selected, lasts between 7 and 18 months. Following IET, soldiers receive continued training and participate in rituals and ceremonies at their permanent duty stations throughout their terms of service to better strengthen their bond to the organization they serve.

The essence of all Army training is to advance the skills of an individual soldier, team, and unit. The Army Study Guide (2020) states:

> *United States Army Field Manual 7-0* provides the training and leader development methods that are the basis for developing competent and confident soldiers and the units that will win decisively in any environment. Training is the means to achieving tactical and technical competence for specific tasks, conditions, and standards. Leader

> development is the deliberate, continuous, sequential, and progressive process, based on values, that develops soldiers and civilians into competent and confident leaders capable of decisive action. (para. 6)

Military Service

Like the United States military, both Walmart and Amazon offer career development. Walmart and Amazon, respectively, state, “Our unique combination of pathways, perks and pay means you can build just about any career you want here, no matter where you start or what you aspire to do” (Walmart, 2022a, para. 1) and

> We believe everyone should have the opportunity to learn new skills and build their career at Amazon or elsewhere. That’s why as part of our mission of being Earth’s Best Employer, we’ve made a $1.2 billion commitment to investing in the upskilling of our employees with free skills training, tuition support programs, a variety of certifications, and more to help improve the abilities of our employees. (Amazon, 2022a, para. 1)

Walmart and Amazon employees develop skills that are desired in their respective industries, and they can easily transition from one job or location to another.

Bolman and Deal (2017) discussed four frames that shape organizations: structural, human resource, political, and symbolic. Arguably, all four apply to the United States military, but the symbolic frame best explains how service members are absorbed into the culture of the organization. The military emphasizes rituals, ceremonies, and values as part of its symbolic frame.

Military service is difficult, demanding, and dangerous. Emphasis on rites, ceremonies, and values bonds its members in ways unknown to most civilian occupations. Rituals of initiation induct newcomers into communal membership (Bolman & Deal, 2017). Newcomers to

the military are inducted as recruits at one of 65 Military Entrance Processing Stations (MEPS). Every recruit, regardless of demographic or branch of service, is inducted the same way. They raise their right hand and recite the oath of enlistment that is administered by a commissioned officer in front of the United States flag. After induction, recruits ship to their respective training bases to participate in IET for their initiation into their respective services. Service members report for basic training or boot camp and are issued uniforms. Additionally, male recruits have their heads shaved. Bolman and Deal (2017) referred to this as a rite of passage that reveals cultural values and ways to the newcomer or recruit.

Ceremonies are more elaborate than rituals, and they often intertwine several rituals. Ceremonies convene at times of transition or on special occasions. Ceremonies further cement camaraderie in units and consist of individual and organizational achievements. Some examples of military ceremonies include graduation from military schools, deployment homecomings, military balls, awards, promotions, and retirements. Many military ceremonies include a guest speaker and invocation. Some are formal, black-tie affairs with the dress uniform required for attending service members. Other ceremonies are less formal and include family or friends of the service members in the ceremony. Ceremonies are work events, but they are meant to be fun.

Each of the services teach new recruits' values as part of their indoctrination. Most service members memorize their service's values and can recite them on command. Although the service missions are different, the services' values are similar. Table 1.5 identifies the Marine Corps' values. Table 1.6 identifies the Air Force's values, and Table 1.7 identifies the Army's values.

Table 1.5

Marine Corps Values

Value	Definition
Honor	Marines are held to the highest standards, ethically and morally. Respect for others is essential. Marines are expected to act responsibly in a manner befitting the title they've earned.
Courage	Courage is not the absence of fear. It is the ability to face fear and overcome it. It is the moral, mental, and physical strength ingrained in every Marine. It steadies them in a time of stress, carries them through every challenge and aids them in facing new and unknown confrontations.
Commitment	Commitment is the spirit of determination and dedication found in every Marine. It is what compels Marines to serve our country and the Corps. Every aspect of life in the Corps shows commitment, from the high standard of excellence to vigilance in training.

Note. Adapted from "Marine Corps Values," by the Marines, 2021. Copyright 2021 by the U.S. Marine Corps. https://www.marines.com/life-as-a-marine/standards/values.html#:~:text=OUR%20VALUES,and%20in%20our%20Nation's%20communities.

Table 1.6

United States Air Force Values

Value	Definition
Integrity First	An Airman is a person of integrity, courage, and conviction. They must be willing to control their impulses and exercise courage, honesty, and accountability in order to do what is right even when no one is looking.
Service Before Self	An Airman's professional duties take precedence over personal desires. Every Airman is expected to have the discipline to follow rules, exhibit self-control and possess respect for the beliefs, authority and worth of others.
Excellence in What We Do	An Airman strives for continual improvement in self and service in order to propel the Air Force further and to achieve greater accomplishment and performance for themselves and their community.

Note. Adapted from "A Profession of Arms: Our Core Values," by the U.S. Air Force, 2022. Copyright 2022 by the U.S. Airforce.
https://www.doctrine.af.mil/Portals/61/documents/Airman_Development/BlueBook.pdf

Table 1.7

United States Army Values

Value	Definition
Loyalty	Bear true faith and allegiance to the U.S. Constitution, the Army, your unit, and other Soldiers. Bearing true faith and allegiance is a matter of believing in and devoting yourself to something or someone. A loyal Soldier is one who supports the leadership and stands up for fellow Soldiers. By wearing the uniform of the United States Army, you are expressing your loyalty. And by doing your share, you show your loyalty to your unit.
Duty	Fulfill your obligations. Doing your duty means more than carrying out your assigned tasks. Duty means being able to accomplish tasks as part of a team. The work of the U.S. Army is a complex combination of missions, tasks, and responsibilities—all in constant motion. Our work entails building one assignment onto another. You fulfill your obligations as a part of your unit every time you resist the temptation to take "shortcuts" that might undermine the integrity of the final product.
Respect	Treat people as they should be treated. In the Soldier's Code, we pledge to "treat others with dignity and respect while expecting others to do the same." Respect is what allows us to appreciate the best in other people. Respect is trusting that all people have done their jobs and fulfilled their duty. And self-respect is a vital ingredient with the Army value of respect, which results from knowing you have put forth your best effort. The Army is one team and each of us has something to contribute.
Selfless Service	Put the welfare of the nation, the Army, and your subordinates before your own. Selfless service is larger than just one person. In serving your country, you are doing your duty loyally without thought of recognition or gain. The basic building block of selfless service is the commitment of each team member to go a little further, endure a little longer, and look a little closer to see how he or she can add to the effort.
Honor	Live up to Army values. The nation's highest military award is The Medal of Honor. This award goes to Soldiers who make honor a matter of daily living—Soldiers who develop the habit of being honorable and solidify that habit with every value choice they make. Honor is a matter of carrying out, acting, and living the values of respect, duty, loyalty, selfless service, integrity, and personal courage in everything you do.
Integrity	Do what's right, legally and morally. Integrity is a quality you develop by adhering to moral principles. It requires that you do and say nothing that deceives others. As your integrity grows, so does the trust others place in you. The more choices you make based on integrity, the more this highly prized value will affect your relationships with family and friends, and, finally, the fundamental acceptance of yourself.
Personal Courage	Face fear, danger, or adversity (physical or moral). Personal courage has long been associated with our Army. With physical courage, it is a matter of enduring physical duress and at times risking personal safety. Facing moral fear or adversity may be a long, slow process of continuing forward on the right path, especially if taking those actions is not popular with others. You can build your personal courage by daily standing up for and acting upon the things that you know are honorable.

Note. Adapted from "The Army Values," by the U.S. Army, n.d. Copyright by the U.S. Army. https://www.army.mil/values/

Service in the military differs from employment in nearly every other industry, organization, or career. The DoD is America's oldest and largest government agency whose mission is to "provide the military forces needed to deter war and ensure our nation's security"

(DoD, 2023, para. 1). This is accomplished by “maintaining land, sea, and air forces that can deploy, fight, and win the wars of the United States” (DA, 2023, para. 1). Codified by Title 10, only members of the military are permitted to perform this mission. As previously noted, military service is difficult, demanding, and dangerous. Emphasis on rites, ceremonies, and values bond its members in ways unknown to most civilian occupations. Service members become further embedded in the military culture and the norms of their organizations. Their lexicon often comprises acronyms and abbreviations that are foreign to most Americans. In addition to the military jargon, many service members adopt the languages and cultures in the location where they are stationed. Roughly one in five service members learn foreign languages while in the military (Bardenwerper, 2008).

There are 4,800 U.S. military sites in over 160 countries and colonies, as of 2022 (DoD, 2022c). As of 2022, 82% of the countries in the world have one or more U.S. military sites. Service members are assigned to one or more military sites during their terms of service. Roughly 160,000 to 180,000 active-duty service members are stationed outside the United States at any given time (DoD, 2022c). In addition to indoctrination to the military, service members also adopt to the cultures in which they serve. Military service often changes people from who they were prior to joining.

Offboarding: Transitioning from Military to Civilian Life

When the terms of service expire and service members transition back to civilian life, they are different people from who they were prior to joining the military. Yet, the only training service members receive prior to discharge is a series of briefings on general topics over a 1- to 2-week period. The deliberate transition individuals experience when transitioning from civilian to military life is not replicated when they transition back to civilian life. While this may be

adequate for the civilian workforce, it is not adequate for most military service members. Many recently separated veterans feel that they are still soldiers, sailors, airmen, or marines, but instead of wearing camouflage, they wear civilian attire (Finley, 2022). As such, full transition is often delayed and does not occur until after service members are already discharged from the military and in the next phase of their lives. Often, both the new civilian attire and settings are completely foreign to their previous situations.

Many organizations focus more on employee recruitment and retention than on employee separation. In fact, Cushing (2014), for Aberdeen Strategy & Research estimated that only 29% of organizations have offboarding programs. "Offboarding is the formal dissociation process of an employee from an organization when an employee resigns, retires, or is terminated and is important to an organization's safety and reputation" (Oberoi, 2022, para. 3). Miller (2020) stated:

> Employee offboarding can have a lot of goals, such as: reducing the risk of litigation if something was not handled well during the employee's tenure or his or her departure; gathering information about what factors caused the employee to leave; increasing the chance that a top-performing employee who leaves will consider coming back in the future; covering all aspects of the employee's departure systematically. (para. 3)

Common offboarding processes include communication of intent and document preparation, organizational property turn-in, restriction of access to company property, knowledge transfer, final documentation, and exit interviews (Miller, 2020; Penning, 2022).

The United States Government Accountability Office (2019) estimated that 200,000 American service members transition from the military to civilian life each year. As part of the transition process, service members offboard. In military jargon, are *out-processed* from their

respective branches of the military. The military-to-civilian process is less time consuming with less emphasis than the civilian-to-military process experienced when recruits enter military service.

The DoD out-processes successful service members with dignity and respect, but the individual military services differ in their processes and their intended post-service relationship with the service member. For example, the USMC states that "earning the title Marine has value that lasts a lifetime" (Marines, 2022, para. 1) and advocates for separating Marines to serve as brand ambassadors for future Marine recruitment (DON, 2021; Marines, 2022; Oberoi, 2020).

> The Marines further state that Marines fight with purpose in the Corps, and after their military service is complete, Marine Veterans find new ways to apply that same sense of purpose towards bettering their communities. Trained to be victorious on all fronts, Marines are uniquely capable of fighting for these communities so that they too can overcome the challenges they face. (USMC, 2023, para. 1)

An output of the Armed Forces Act is the DoD Transition Assistance Program or TAP as it is commonly called (DoD, n.d.). TAP is a joint effort among seven federal organizations, the Departments of Labor (DOL), Defense (DoD), Education (USDOE), Homeland Security (DHS)/ U.S. Coast Guard (USCG), Veterans Affairs (VA), the Small Business Administration (SBA), and the Office of Personnel Management (OPM), to provide transitioning service members with employment and job training assistance, but there is just one tool available for service members to assist with their transition. "The mandatory components of TAP are applicable for all service members who have at least 180 continuous days or more on active duty or in the National Guard or Reserve" (DoD, n.d., para. 2). TAP "provides information and training to ensure service members transitioning from active duty are prepared for their next step in life—whether pursuing

additional education, finding a job in the public or private sector, or starting their own business" (DoD, n.d., para. 1).

TAP is available in both resident and virtual environments. The TAP online curriculum provides service members who are unable to attend TAP in-person, due to military necessity, the ability to fulfill their TAP obligations and is also available to veterans and spouses of service members through the Transition Online Learning (TOL) system. The DoD (n.d.) and the DOL (2022) TAP training resources include Employment Fundamentals of Career Transition (EFCT), which is designed to lay the foundation of the transition from military to civilian life; the Wounded Warrior and Caregiver (WWC EFCT), which is designed to meet the needs of transitioning service members who may be wounded, ill, and/or injured; Department of Labor Employment Workshop (DOLEW), which covers emerging best practices in career employment, including in-depth training to learn interviewing skills, building effective resumes, and using technology to network and search for employment; and Career and Credential Exploration (C2E), which offers a unique opportunity for participants to complete a personalized career development assessment of occupational interests and abilities.

There are also shortcomings to the Armed Forces Act (2012). For example, "little emphasis is placed on supporting and building up the resilience of the military member to address the broad range of challenges they frequently face during their transition to non-military life" (Whitworth et al., 2020, p. 26). Persistent and fundamental deficits exist within the newly restructured program, to include lack of uniformity between services, installations, and commands; narrow focus; absence of a guiding theoretical framework; lack of individually tailored approach; and use of outdated learning approaches.

By law, participation in TAP starts no later than 365 days prior to transition for those who are separating or retiring, and it is recommended that retirees begin the transition process at least 2 years prior to retirement. But actual start dates vary by service, installation, and command (Whitworth et al., 2020). For many service members, the decision to stay in or leave the military is not made until much closer to their expiration of term of service (ETS).

Although TAP is a DOL program for the DoD and the DHS's Coast Guard, at the time of this study, each DoD service component had their own website with varying degrees of information. For example, the DA's TAP website (DA, 2022a) was robust with an overview of the program, upcoming events with a virtual calendar, and a job fair calendar. While the focus was still only on post-service employment, the website was more helpful than those of the other services. The DON's TAP website (DON, 2022a) was void of information or design. It simply listed links to other resources. The USMC is a component of the DON, yet it had its own TAP website (USMC, 2023). The Marine Corps website more resembled the Army's than the Navy's but still provided limited information. The United States Space Force, at the time of this writing, used the United States Air Force's TAP model, which only provided information on the program's background and a "Contact Us" link for more information (DAF, 2022b). Although the five models were directed by the same United States Code, they were quite different. These differences created ambiguity in the design and impacted the service members' outcomes of the program.

The TAP emphasis on post-service employment serves only a segment of the transitioning service members. "This one size fits all approach does not reflect the broad range of military members and their different capacities to manage the transition" (Whitworth et al., 2020, p. 27). TAP briefings or sessions addressing VA benefits, employment, and resilient transitions,

which compose major portions of this program, continue to use outdated teaching approaches that rely heavily on Microsoft PowerPoint presentations, and they rarely use more current learning approaches.

"While many separating military members successfully adapt to civilian life, 40% to 75% describe some difficulties managing this major adjustment" (Whitworth et al., 2020, p. 25). Table 1.8 highlights some challenges veterans encounter.

Table 1.8

Veteran Difficulty Returning to Civilian Life

Difficulty	Veterans Agree
Their transition was stressful	76%
It took more time than expected	59%
It was confusing	52%
It was more difficult than they expected	48%
Their first salary was worse than expected	38%

Note. Adapted from "The Military's Not Just a Job . . . It's Eight Years of your Life!" by American Friends Service Committee, 2010. Copyright by AFSC 2010. https://afsc.org/sites/default/files/documents/The%20Military%27s%20Not%20Just%20a%20Job....pdf

Veteran groups argue that the connection to the military, organization, and fellow service members is what makes leaving the military difficult. "Connection is why we're here, it's what gives purpose and meaning to our lives, and belonging is in our DNA. And so 'tribe' and 'belonging' are irreducible needs, like love" (Brown, 2022, p.1). The military gives service members a sense of purpose, but it also gives them the comfort and security of shared empathy that comes from connection (LinkedIn, 2018). "Human impulse for connection is so strong that the fear of disconnection can be overwhelming" (Eisenberger, 2012, para. 1). Many service members are more afraid to return to society than they are to return to combat.

Every service member has a transition experience. “Veterans who were commissioned officers and those who had graduated from college are more likely to have an easier time readjusting to their post-military life than enlisted personnel and those who are high school graduates” (Morbin, 2011, p. 7). Transitioning from the military to college classroom creates additional challenges. There is a consensus among veteran groups that transitioning from military to college is one of the most difficult challenges faced by student veterans (Gentlemen, 2005). Many studies (Ahern et al., 2015; Jennings et al., 2006; Kraus et al., 2017; Perkins et al., 2019; Whitworth et al., 2020;) relate to service members transitioning from military service to civilian life. Fewer studies (Cipher et al., 2018; Richardson et al., 2014; Sitzes et al., 2021) relate to service members transitioning, and veterans who have recently transitioned, from the military service to college classrooms. The studies tend to concentrate only on the issues that impede academic success, and they fail to link the military transition experiences to college classroom outcomes.

Many factors are considered prior to military separation. For example, prudent service members consider future matters, such as finances, living arrangements, transportation, and military training, which may transfer to college credits. In fact, these topics are normally discussed with military career counselors prior to discharge. There are other factors, however, that many transitioning service members do not consider, including how their experiences in the military and transition from the military may impact their experiences in higher education.

A student-veteran is a college or university student who served in a branch of the military. McGhee (2021) stated:

> Considered nontraditional students, student-veterans are usually older than traditional undergraduate students. They are also more likely to be married or have children, and

often have jobs off campus. Additionally, they often enter degree programs with transferable credits from college courses taken during active duty or from prior learning assessments. (para. 1)

Distinguishing a student veteran from a traditional college student is problematic. Many student veterans do not self-identify as former military service members to their college classmates and many colleges, and universities do not maintain adequate records that identify student as veterans (Gilbert & Griffin, 2015). Since September 11, 2001, the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) provided veteran education benefits to more than 2 million student veterans. This review only examined student veteran that served after September 11, 2001. Most relevant studies for this era of veteran were published after 2006 because of the time one serves in the military before becoming a veteran.

Most military personnel undergo final physical examinations prior to discharge. These physicals are often referred to as "ETS" for Expiration – Term of Service or "retirement" physicals, and they determine service-connected injuries. The severity of the service-connected injuries determines the veteran's disability rating and compensation, as shown in Table 1.9.

Table 1.9

Monthly Rates of Disability Compensation

Disability Rating	Veteran (Alone)	Veteran (with Spouse)
10% Disability Rating	$152.64	$152.64 No change
20% Disability Rating	$301.74	$301.74 No change
30% Disability Rating	$467.39	$522.46
40% Disability Rating	$673.28	$747.41
50% Disability Rating	$958.44	$1,050.57
60% Disability Rating	$1,214.03	$1,325.22
70% Disability Rating	$1,529.95	$1,659.15
80% Disability Rating	$1,778.43	$1,926.69
90% Disability Rating	$1,998.52	$2,164.79
100% Disability Rating	$3,332.06	$3,517.84

Note. Rates reflect the fiscal year 2022 amounts for veteran and veteran with spouse. In public domain.

Problem Statement

The purpose of the military's IET is to transition civilians into military service members. This is accomplished by reframing each trainees' perception of self over time, which ranges from 7 to 18 months. There are rituals of initiation to induct new recruits into the military. Basic training or boot camp are considered rites of passages that help reveal cultural values. Symbols in the form of badges and crests are used to convey socially constructed meanings, and graduation ceremonies celebrate service school completions. After successfully completing IET, service members better understand the structural, human resource, political, and symbolic frames of the United States military. This is when bonds strengthen between service members, commitments are sworn to organizations, and camaraderie is established.

At the completion of their military contract service terms, service members return to civilian life. In the time they were in the military, several things changed. The service members grew older and more experienced. They became familiar with the structure and brotherhood of military service. The deliberate transition they endured going from civilian to military life was not replicated when they transitioned back to civilian life. For most, they wore military attire on one day and civilian attire on the next, but they still felt and acted as military service members. As such, the transition often occurred after they were already discharged from the military and in the next phase of their lives.

Theoretical Rationale

In the United States, transition from high school to college is the norm for students. "Of the 3.1 million high school completers who graduated in the first 9 months of 2020, some 2.0 million (or 63 percent) were enrolled in college in October 2020" (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2022, para. 1). The Harvard Office for Equity, Diversity, Inclusion, and

Belonging (OEDIB, 2022) stated that college preparation begins during the freshman year of high school with primary focus on academic success, participation in extracurricular activities, and creation of a college resume. High school counselors often assist students in preparing college applications and college selection (Post University, 2022). “For decades, both the United States government and American culture sought to steer young people toward college as the path to both their individual and national success” (Ponnuru, 2019, para. 1). But not all high school students immediately transition to college (Bouchrika, 2022). The students who do eventually return to college, are termed *nontraditional*.

Roughly 38% of undergraduate students in the United States are considered nontraditional (Barrington, 2022):

> Non-traditional students typically meet one or more of the following seven criteria: 1. They are over the age of 24, 2. They have a GED, 3. They work at least part-time, 4. They have a child, 5. They are a single parent, 6. They waited at least 1 year to start college, and 7. They are first-generation student (FGS). Students who meet just one of these criteria are considered non-traditional, but many students meet more than one. (para. 5)

Student veterans are also considered nontraditional students. Table 1.10 shows the student-veteran demographics.

Table 1.10

Student-Veteran Demographics

Year	Demographic
2018	Most student veterans were between the ages of 24 and 40.
2018	15% of student veterans were traditionally aged (ages 18 to 23).
2018	47% of student veterans were parents and 47% were married.
2018	62% of student veterans were first-generation college students.
2017	73% of student veterans were male and 27% were female.
2016	60% of undergraduate students who received veterans' education benefits were White, 16% were Black, 14% were Hispanic, 3% were Asian, and 7% were "other" or multicultural.

Note. Adapted from "Veteran Students in Higher Education Factsheet," by the Postsecondary National Policy Institute, 2019. Copyright by PNPI 2019.https://pnpi.org/download/veteran-students-in-higher-education-factsheet/

Student veterans have additional challenges from most other nontraditional students as military-to-college transition are unique to student veterans. Moving from a highly structured, hierarchal environment in the military to a less-rigid environment on a college campus is often difficult for veterans to navigate. Several theories were considered for this paper: dialogical self-theory (Hermans & Geiser, 2011), academic integration and social integration (Tucker, 2023), self-efficacy (Grimell & van den Berg, 2020), military (Norwich University Online, 2018), and grounded theories (Ackerman et al., 2008; Granger, 2016).

Dialogical self-theory is a popular theory that examines veterans following service in the military from the aspect of how veterans perceive themselves and the roles they fulfill in society. While this theory aligns with veterans' perceptions, it does not consider the lived experiences achieved in the transition process.

"Tinto's academic integration and social integration theory conceives the more academically and socially integrated a student is to the college environment, the more likely the

student will persist through college" (Santos-George, 2012, para. 1). While this theory aligns with college success, it does not consider the lived experiences of student veterans.

Self-efficacy refers to a set of beliefs one holds about their ability to complete a particular task. Although self-efficacy is linked to academic achievement, it was not the best theory for this study because this study's focus is on military to college classroom transition.

Military theory is linked to normative behavior and trends beyond simply describing war. Although closely aligned with the research topic, this theory was not chosen because it does not involve the military-to-college transition.

Lastly, grounded theory was considered. Grounded theory is a general research methodology and is often used to study military-to-civilian transitions (Granger, 2016). Although this is one of the more popular methodologies for related research topics, it still was not the best for this topic.

Schlossberg's (1984) transition theory was developed specifically for adult transitions; it is an applied framework, and it is heavily used in the literature on the transition to college (Anderson et al., 2012). Schlossberg's transition theory focuses on adult transition experiences throughout life and how they cope and adjust (Gilbert & Griffin, 2015). As such, Schlossberg's transition theory was the most appropriate theory for this study.

Schlossberg's (1984) transition theory originated because a need existed to develop a systematic framework that would facilitate an understanding of adults in transition and direct them to the help they needed to cope with the "ordinary and extraordinary process of living" (Patton et al., 2010, p. 213). Schlossberg defined a transition as "any event, or non-event that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles" (Silver & Roska 2017, p. 249).

> It is important to note that perception plays a key role in transitions as an event, or non-event, and meets the definition of a transition only if it is so defined by the individual experiencing it. To understand the meaning that a transition has for a particular individual, the type, context, and impact of the transition must be considered. (Patton et al., 2010, p. 1)

Schlossberg's (1984) four fundamental coping factors, referred to as the 4S framework are: Situation, Self, Supports, and Strategies. Situation is the event or *trigger* that caused the transition. Self is how an individual views life, such as socioeconomic status, gender, age, stage of life, state of health, and ethnicity. Support is the social relationships individuals have with family, friends, and communities, and strategy is how an individual modifies the situation to manage stress.

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this study was to use Schlossberg's (1984) transition theory to address how student veterans implement strategies to succeed in academia after serving in the United States military.

Research Questions

The guiding questions in this study are based on student-veteran transition strategies as undergraduate students following completion of their military service. The questions are in response to the defined problem statement with a detailed focus of the lived experiences during military service, the lived experiences of transition from the military to civilian life, and the lived experiences of the college classroom. The data in this research were gathered to answer the three research question:

1. What thoughts, incidents, or people associated with your military service stand out for you?
2. How did your military service and transition affect your college experience?
3. What thoughts or feelings stand out as you think about your transition?

Potential Significance of the Study

TAP is an "outcome-based statutory program that bolsters opportunities, services, and training for transitioning Service members in their preparation to meet post-military goals" (DoD, n.d., para. 1). A gap exists between the TAP's intent and the actual services received by many transitioning service members.

Chapter Summary

The transition process for civilians entering military service is quite detailed. Months and years of immersion and indoctrination shape service members into different people from whom they were prior to joining the military. The initial transition is lengthy and reenforced daily through established values, symbols, and rituals. Military service consists of adherence to norms and traditions that do not often transfer to civilian life. Some Military Occupational Specialties also do not transfer to civilian life. Service members have experiences, good and bad, that cannot be duplicated anywhere else.

The transition process from service members returning to civilian life is much less detailed. Upon completion of the military contract, service members are discharged from the military and sent back to society with little preparation or time to transition. This lack of preparation poorly prepares many for the next chapter in their lives.

Chapter 2 is a literature review of studies related to the topic of this research. Chapter 3 describes the research design and methodology. Chapter 4 identifies the findings and themes, and Chapter 5 discusses the findings and limitations and gives recommendations to stakeholders.

Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

Introduction and Purpose

Chapter 2 covers a wide range of topics that include transition experiences that transfer to college classrooms (Cipher et al., 2018; Richardson et al., 2014; Sitzes et al., 2021), military training experiences that transfer to college classrooms (De La Garza et al., 2015; Kirchner & Pepper, 2020; Smith et al., 2017), and combat experiences that transfer to college classrooms (Hammond 2016; Livingston et al., 2011). The purpose of this study was to review literature on student-veteran transition experiences to higher education with a focus on undergraduates in the United States.

Significant Empirical Findings

It is generally agreed that the traditional undergraduate college student is between the ages of 18 and 21, not married, lives on campus, and attends classes full time. Nearly two-thirds of college students are nontraditional (Barrington, 2022). Barrington stated that nontraditional students typically meet one or more of the seven criteria shown in Table 2.1.

While students who meet just one of the criteria shown in Table 2.1 are considered nontraditional, many students have more than just one criterion. Student veterans are a type of nontraditional student, as they meet one or more of the seven criteria, but student veterans experience some challenges reentering academia that nonstudent veterans normally do not. The VA (2017) reported typical challenges faced by student veterans shown in Table 2.2.

Table 2.1

Nontraditional Student Characteristics

Characteristics
Over the age of 24
Have a GED
Work at least part time
Have a child or children
Are a single parent
Waited at least 1 year to start college
Are a first-generation student (FGS)

Note. Adapted from "A Nontraditional Student's Guide to Community College," by K. Barrington, 2022. *Community College Review.* Copyright 2022 by Community College Review. https://www.communitycollegereview.com/blog/a-nontraditional-students-guide-to-community-college

Table 2.2

Student-Veteran Challenges

Challenge
Student veterans are less likely than non-veteran students to invest time outside of the classroom on activities not essential to the completion of their course because of parenting responsibilities, work, or other factors.
Student veterans report difficulties transitioning from a military style of technical learning and a hierarchical organizational structure to a university learning environment.
Military service members and veterans relocate often due to service, and these frequent moves make it challenging for veterans to establish residency in any one state for purposes of qualifying for in-state tuition rates at public institutions.
Because of deployments while in school, some veterans experience the loss of scholarships, tuition dollars, and academic credits during the academic school year.
Student veterans often face mental health challenges.
Between 7% and 8% of student-service members and veterans reported a past suicide attempt
Up to 35% report having suicidal thoughts.

Note. Adapted from "VA College Toolkit: Characteristics of Student Veterans," by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2022. Copyright 2022 by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. https://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/student-veteran/learn-about-student-veterans.asp

Theme 1: Military Training Experiences That Transfer to the College Classroom

Prior military experiences and influences shape student veterans in college. Military identity remains even after student veterans leave the military and begin college life. Four studies, Persky and Oliver (2010), Hinton (2013), Gilbert and Griffin (2015), and Hart and Thompson (2016) examined student-veteran transition experiences of veterans transferring their military experience for college credits.

Military Occupational Specialties. In studies of veterans returning to community college, Persky and Oliver (2010) and Gilbert and Griffin (2015) reported factors that student veterans considered in attending community college, to include the degree of ease for processing military credit into college credits. Both studies used mixed-methods approaches with qualitative research as the primary method for the case study. Homogenous samplings of more than 30,000 students identified 1,300 as veterans. The veterans were divided into two categories for the study: current student veterans and former student veterans. A Checkbox® 4.4 survey with 11 questions was emailed to the veterans but only 60 veterans responded. The low number of respondents is problematic for quantitative research but is not unusual for this type of approach. Yet, 60 responses created a large sample size for qualitative research and validated the study.

Military personnel continuously train within the parameters of their MOS, but some MOSs require additional skills. For example, interpreters/translators are not only trained in foreign languages, but they also receive training in conflict resolution and self-defense, which are courses typically offered at many American colleges. Student veterans prefer attending community college because the community colleges are often more willing than 4-year schools to accept transfer credit for military training (Absher, 2022). The findings of the study are strong

because of the very large sample size, the design of the study, and the validity of data collection and analysis.

As Persky and Oliver (2010) noted, many student veterans convert military training to college credits. Hinton (2013) studied the impact that "previous interactions with teaching, learning, and writing in the Marine Corps had on student veterans' current perceptions and expectations of teaching, learning, and writing in a first-year college composition classroom" (Hinton, 2013, para. 1). Hinton interviewed 10 student veterans of the Marine Corps about the impact military-style writing had with their college-level writing during their first-year college composition courses.

The novice-to-expert model illustrates how new (or almost new) writers operate in first-year composition courses. Student veterans often fail to fit into this model successfully based on previously learned writing experiences in the military. The challenge is compounded by the level of military writing experience each student veterans received. United States Army Regulation (AR) 25-50, *Preparing and Managing Correspondence* (DA, 2020) and DA Pamphlet 600-67, *Effective Writing for Army Leaders* (DA, 1986) provide the principles for Army writing. These publications instruct the military writer to "put the Bottom-Line Up Front" (BLUF). The BLUF is accomplished with a short, clear purpose sentence. The purpose statement tells the reader what to expect when reading the paper but not the writer's conclusion (DA, 1986).

Hinton's (2013) study found that the 10 student veterans were confident in their writing abilities based on their experiences in the Marine Corps, but that prior experience disrupts the novice-to-expert paradigm. Hilton's study also found that student veterans who viewed their military writing experiences negatively felt less confident in their college-level writing abilities and, again, disrupted the novice-to-expert paradigm as they had to unlearn what they had

previously learned to adjust to the new situation (Hilton, 2013). The study used a purposive sampling for a small sample of 10 student veterans.

Hart and Thompson (2016) also focused on the impact that military writing had in the college classroom. “The purpose of this study was to report on institutional approaches to veteran enrollments in writing classes and to recommend a reorientation of those approaches toward asset-based professional orientation and course development” (Hart & Thompson, 2016, p. 345). The researchers conducted a national survey of writing instructors and received more than 400 responses.

The findings suggest the importance of classes designed with the student veteran in mind. The first category was veteran focused and the second was veteran friendly. The veteran-focused course was designed specifically for veterans and service members, their families, and others affected by war. But “enrollment in Veteran-Focused courses is not limited to only those groups” (Hart & Thompson, 2016, p. 350). The courses consisted of material and activities that focused on the needs of the veteran and their families. For example, student veterans were provided options with seating within the classroom and accommodations for out-of-class responsibilities such as work, medical appointments, and Army Reserve or National Guard obligations. Furthermore, veteran-focused courses provided alternative options on readings or films that student veterans found difficult to accomplish.

Veteran-friendly courses are similar to veteran-focused courses because they present a safe space for student veterans. The distinction between the two is that in veteran-friendly classes, the instructor is aware of the veteran’s presence in the classroom and organizes the course material, activities, and assignments based on the strengths and challenges of the veterans and service members. “The research concluded that veterans’ lived experiences help shape

classroom discussions, and their professional writing experiences stand to enrich students' consideration of various academic and non-academic literacies" (Hart & Thompson, 2016, p. 363).

The Hart and Thompson study used a sample of 400 writing instructors, over 2 years, chosen from a national survey. This robust sample and time to compare results helped strengthen the validity of the study. The researchers followed up with site visits at two campuses with high student-veteran populations to validate the findings from the initial survey.

Leadership Skills. Members of the military are taught leadership and teamwork from their very first exposure to the military—IET. As they progress through their terms of service, service members continue to serve in teams. They also receive leadership training and are put in positions of increased responsibility. These learned skills transcend beyond the military and are another aspect of one's life, even after military service is complete. Four studies, Albright et al. (2020), Camacho et al. (2021), Patterson et al. (2019), and Sullivan and Yoon (2020) examined how student-veteran leadership skills impacted their transition experiences.

Sullivan and Yoon (2020) investigated how student veterans perceived the impact their military skills played on their academic performance. Through online surveys and interviews, the researchers received data from 97 participants. The quantitative data were collected by using the Likert scale of 1–7 (1 = *strongly disagree*; 7 = *strongly agree*) for questions concerning the participants' military and college experiences.

The researchers measured the online surveys for the impact of the independent variables of commitment, discipline, and motivation dependent variables of self-efficacy and academic motivation. They also coded the data obtained in the interviews for potential themes. The themes that emerged included communication, diversity, leadership, and drive.

The findings of the Sullivan and Yoon study are consistent with Albright et al. (2020). Albright et al. (2020) conducted analysis on student veterans enrolled in higher education in the United States. Homogeneous sampling was used with the 2011–2014 American College Health Assessment (ACHA) to find college students who had previously served in the military.

> Of the total student sample, 2,658 (2%) indicated that they had previously served in the military. The researchers use the following question to measure the construct: "How many hours a week do you volunteer (0 hours, 1–9 hours, 10–19 hours, 20–29 hours, 30–39 hours, 40 hours, more than 40 hours)? (Albright et al., 2020, p. 388)

Descriptive statistics identified the mean, standard deviation, frequencies, and percentages and found that veteran students were older in age, more likely to identify as White, male, and be graduate students (Albright et al., 2020). "In the study sample, a greater proportion of service members and students-veterans (42.3%) were civically engaged than non-veteran students (38.7%). These estimates are slightly higher than other national reports of civic engagement among college students" (Albright et al., 2020, p. 389). Like the Persky and Oliver (2010) study, the low rate of respondents indicated this study was problematic, but because the results were consistent with the other studies in this literature review, it was reliable.

Another study with similar results was conducted by Camacho et al. (2021) to examine transition experiences of student veterans pursuing undergraduate degrees in Engineering. In the study, the researchers conducted 90-minute interviews with 60 student veterans. Of the 60 student veterans, 21 were from the Navy, 18 were from the Marine Corps, 10 were from the National Guard, six from the Air Force, four were from the Army, and one was from the Coast Guard. The student veterans were enrolled in colleges within proximity to four military bases in the United States. The results show that "student veterans greatly valued their military-learned

skills, such a patience, discipline, and technical skills, that gave them an advantage in their engineering studies" (Camacho et al., 2021, p. 1).

Similar to the study of engineering students, is the Patterson et al. (2019) study on student veterans in undergraduate nursing programs. The researchers' goal was to "examine how veterans transfer learning from their military experience to their Bachelor of Science in nursing education" (Patterson et al., 2019, p. 125). Eleven student veterans participated in the research that consisted of semi-structured interviews. Three researchers analyzed the data independently and four themes emerged: "embracing and living core professional values, learning from a team-based framework to achieve a common goal, learning how and when to communicate with faculty and healthcare members, and incorporating learned behaviors into everyday professional practice" (Patterson et al., 2019, p. 125). The researchers' data analysis observed strong control measures for individual researcher's roles and a strong chain of custody for the data collected. The Camacho et al. (2021) and Patterson et al. (2019) studies used strong measures, coupled with the similar results of other like studies, which strengthened the findings of their study.

Theme 2: Transition Experiences That Transfer to College Classroom

Ryan et al. (2011) used Schlossberg's (1984) transition theory in their study of American service members' strengths, needs, and challenges during transition from the military to higher education. They did not assume that simply transitioning from the military constituted a uniform situation for the participants. Instead, they examined whether the transition from the military to college was a personal choice and a result of effective planning or if it was caused by an external event, for example being medically or dishonorably discharged from the military. Ryan et al. found that, in almost all cases, the decision to leave the military was a personal choice and the transition experience was positive. This difference was significant as students who perceived

their transition negatively may require greater assistance in coping with the transition. Themes with positive and negative transition experiences are summarized in Table 2.1.

Transition Experiences. Hornor (2021) examined veterans' educational intentions and factors influencing college choices. Hornor interviewed 30 veterans with similar lived experiences. All 30 veterans were separated from military service and were eligible for military benefits. The semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions were recorded, transcribed, and coded to find common themes, patterns, and categories. When military education benefits were earned, 20% of the veterans studied did not plan to use their benefits after separation from the military for the following reasons: "lack of interest or belief in higher education, performance concerns, and perceived lack of resources or competing responsibilities" (Hornor, 2021, p. 249). This study was valid as it followed a scientific research method and would likely achieve the same results if conducted again under the same conditions.

Transitions to Community College. "The majority of research concerning student veterans was conducted at the university level, with minimum analysis performed at the level where the vast majority of returning veterans attend school: the community college" (Jones, 2017, p. 107). Community college students experience nearly six times the risk of dropping out than students at 4-year schools (Wheeler, 2012). While there are many reasons one may drop out of college, the Wheeler research focused on student veterans who dropped out for reasons connected to their experience and transition from the military. One factor that contributed to student-veteran dropout rates was their transition experience from the military to college. Ghosh et al. (2019) conducted structured interviews with 134 student veterans to better understand how the preparations of their career transitions impacted their academic satisfaction. The criterion-based sample resulted with 34 women and 100 men who had recently separated from military

service and enrolled in community college. The researchers used Qualtrics to process the inputs. The results showed a validity coefficient above .30 between military career transition preparedness and academic satisfaction in community college. This high coefficient was a strong gauge that the better one prepared for their military career transition, the better their academic satisfaction was in community college.

Gilbert and Griffin (2015) applied Schlossberg's (1984) transition model to transitioning American veterans. In their study, they surveyed veterans to examine how institutions can influence veteran transitions to higher education. The researchers used purposive sampling across seven institutions in Pennsylvania that were grantees of the Veterans' Education in Science and Engineering grant programs. They conducted semi-structured interviews that ranged between 30 and 60 minutes with 28 student veterans at the seven different locations. All interviews were recorded and transcribed. Student veterans were asked the following questions:

> What assisted you in adjusting from military to student status and making your transition into college? Were there any campus services or programs that were particularly useful? How would you describe the overall climate of the institution toward veterans? And, how accessible do you feel like the student services here are and do they meet your needs? (Gilbert & Griffin, 2015, p. 79)

After all interviews were transcribed, data were organized through a systematic coding process, consistent with the constant comparative method. The researchers found common themes among the 28 participants. For all 28 student veterans, the situation of transitioning from military to college triggered coping mechanisms. There were three categories of coping responses: "modifying the situation, controlling the meaning of the problem, and managing stress after the transition" (Gilbert & Griffin, 2015, p. 75). "Individuals implement four different

coping modes as they engage in these responses: information seeking, direct action, inhibition of action, and intrapsychic behavior" (Gilbert & Griffin, 2015, p. 75).

Gilbert and Griffin (2015) noted other common themes relating to the participants situations. Several student veterans articulated concerns about a decrease or absence of income and conversion of training received in the military into college credits. The student veterans also shared common themes for support. In most cases, the student veterans described challenges gaining support on campus, particularly with peers. One factor leading to this support issue was that the student veterans interviewed in this study expressed that they did not have much in common with the traditionally aged college students and did not connect with them as a strong source of support. How student veterans viewed themselves was likely the most surprising of the survey results. The student veterans in the study, largely, did not self-identify as "veterans" on campus. The study also found that institutions offered aid for student veterans to develop strategies for navigating the transition from military to higher education and that students who did not identify as veterans did not use the available aid. The Jones (2017) study used a sample of 28 student veterans for semi-structured interviews from seven different locations. Data were transcribed and validated through coding. These two factors made the study moderately strong.

Jones (2017) interviewed five student veterans of varied genders and racial backgrounds to describe the lived experiences of combat veterans' transitioning to community college classrooms in Florida. The interview questions were focused on academic and cocurricular experiences and were audio recorded for later transcription and coding. The research found that for various reasons, the student veterans of the Jones study did not take part in on-campus programs specifically designed for them. There are several reasons why students do not self-identify as veterans. Some simply may not want to be labeled a veteran. Some may not consider

themselves veterans because they did not serve for 20 years (VA, 2022a). The Jones (2017) study's findings were consistent with other studies that suggested similar results could be achieved with a larger sample size and larger geographical area.

Ahern et al. (2015) conducted a similar study to Jones (2017) by interviewing 24 student veterans on what was most helpful during transition to civilian life and what challenges made transition more difficult. The data were coded for frequencies and themes. Three themes emerged from the data: "Military as a family, normal is alien, and searching for a new normal" (Ahern et al., 2015, p. 3/13). The theme "military as a family involved the bond service members create with each other and giving up the family bond was difficult when military service was complete" (Ahern et al., 2013, p. 4/13). "The theme normal is alien meant that readjusting to societal norms was difficult after becoming acclimated to military norms" (Ahern et al., 2015, p. 4), and "the theme searching for a new normal meant that service members searched for new situations in their civilian lives where they felt the comfort and security known in their military lives" (Ahern et al., 2015, p. 7). The research found that the 24 student veterans experienced a sense of family with the other military members whom which they had served. They also experienced a sense of comfort with the routine schedules of military life, but as a college student, the schedule was alien. A similar study by Norman et al. (2015) examined perceptions of student veterans and barriers to them achieving academic goals. The study consisted of interviews and focus groups with 31 student veterans. The interviewers asked: "What was the most important reason for you to enroll in college after you left the military? and "Describe your college experiences since you left the military" (Norman et al., 2015, pp. 703–704). Three overarching themes relating to barriers and facilitators emerged. Norman et al. (2015) posited:

> The first theme was *personal features to include discipline and determination developed as a member of the military and exhibited as a college student*. The second theme was *how institutional structure helped or hindered student-veteran success*. Student veterans preferred the more regimented institutional structures and lost interest or direction when structure was less structured. And the third theme was *policy concerns*, for example how the structure of the GI Bill affected student veterans' school experiences. (p. 701)

Some student veterans used GI Bill benefits while enrolled in college, but financial aid varied between colleges and was often offset by the amount the GI Bill benefits provided. The Ahern et al. (2015) and Norman et al. (2015) studies stated specific research questions and defined the population. As such, they are valid. They are also reliable as they yielded similar results through different approaches.

Female student veterans represent an estimated one quarter of the total student-veteran population in American colleges and universities. Yet, there is little research on how their transition experiences differ from their male counterparts. Of the research that exists, common themes emerged. Ryan et al. (2011), Pellegrino and Hoggan (2015), and Albright et al. (2019) examined the different situations female student veterans experienced in their reentry to civilian life compared to their male counterparts. Pellegrino and Hoggan studied the experiences of two females' transitions from the military to community college. Using Schlossberg's (1984) transition theory in their study, they determined the trigger was the change in lifestyle, career, and geographical location of the two service members. The participants' other three "Ss" (self, strategies, and support) were impacted by the first S, situation. The researchers used a purposive sampling strategy to identify participants. They surveyed veterans who had transitioned from the military to community college in the past year and initially found 10 students to participate in the

study. Pellegrino and Hoggan (2015) isolated the findings of two female student veterans for their study.

The researchers studied how the two female student-veteran participants used coping factors during their first year as community college students. The research found that the two females' situations had many similarities. They were both military veterans, wives, mothers, and students. But their experiences in the military, their transitions to civilian life, and in community college were quite different. Their understanding of "self" also had many similarities. Both participants were aware that they were older than the other full-time students. They were both aware that typically students their age and older took classes part time and often in the evenings. They were both motivated to pursue their education and set good examples for their children. The two females differed with levels of confidence. One participant improved her self-confidence and self-assuredness by helping her children with homework and participating in intellectual conversations with other adults. The other participant struggled with ways to improve her self-confidence.

Pellegrino and Hoggan (2015) found that both participants' husbands supported their academics. In one case, the husband enrolled in school with the participant. The married couple coordinated schedules to accommodate household and children's requirements. The other participant, however, struggled with finding adequate childcare for her children. Her husband provided positive encouragement for her academic endeavors, but the persistent unavailability of adequate childcare negatively impacted her ability to participate in college.

Lastly, Pellegrino and Hoggan (2015) examined the participants' coping strategies. The researchers found that both participants completed homework assignments and studied in the evenings after their children were asleep. One participant also used the time in class, to the best

of her ability, to complete assignments. Both participants used the time management skills that they learned in the military to balance their time with competing requirements at home and in school. Both participants struggled with one or more courses but coped differently. For example, one participant blamed her instructor while the other blamed herself.

Pellegrino and Hoggan (2015) used the two female student veterans for their case study. The convenience of this sample suggested that results could be replicated if the study was again conducted in the same geographical location. Results may differ, however, if the study was conducted with a larger, more dispersed sample. The results, despite the convenience sample, were later corroborated with the Albright et al. (2019) research, thus giving credibility to the Pellegrino and Hoggan study.

Albright et al. (2019) also examined female student veterans in higher education. The homogeneous sample of 834 female student veterans at postsecondary institutions in the United States used the following dichotomously scored questionnaire:

> Have you received information on alcohol and other drug use from your college or university, Have you received information on depression and anxiety from your college or university, Have you received information on sexual assault and relationship violence prevention from your college or university, Have you received information on stress reduction from your college or university, And, have you received information on suicide prevention from your college or university? (Albright et al., 2019, p. 480)

Albright et al. (2019) calculated the frequency and percentages of the study statistics and found that women military service member and student veterans were older and reported being married with greater frequency. Of the women students with military experience, approximately 32% reported having been deployed to an area of hazardous duty. “Female student veterans

received health information from their university/college less often than women students with no military experience on the following topics: alcohol and other drug use, depression and anxiety, sexual assault and relationship violence prevention, and stress reduction" (Albright et al, 2019, p. 482).

The Pellegrino and Hoggan (2015) case study complements the Albright et al. large sample study. Each study used different research methods but found similar results that likely could be replicated if completed again, under similar conditions.

Theme 3: Combat Experiences That Transfer to the College Classroom

Transitioning from military service to civilian life can be one of the most difficult challenges faced by an individual (Gentleman, 2005). Transitioning from a combat experience is even harder (Stringer, 2007). "Service members have detailed life experiences that are often not understood by nonveterans" (Jones, 2017, p. 110). Evidence suggests that traditional college students have mixed views of student veterans on campus. Four studies, Ackerman et al. (2008), Kato et al. (2016), Schreger and Kimble (2016), and Noble et al. (2021) examined the perceived stigma of veterans in the classroom.

Schreger and Kimble (2017) studied 48 people who did not have any affiliation with the military to examine if implicit biases exist toward veterans. The researcher used an adapted version of the "Implicit Association Test (IAT), which is a psychological test to reveal unconscious attitudes, automatic preferences, and hidden biases by measuring the time that takes an individual to classify concepts into two categories" (Harvard OEDIB, 2022, para. 1). Participants viewed "pictures of individuals dressed in military attire in one picture and in civilian attire in another picture, coupled with words that either reflected mental stability (safe, sane, reliable, responsible) or instability (crazy, dangerous, unstable, unpredictable)" (Harvard

OEDIB, 2022, para. 1). An independent sample *t* test compared the mean score of participants' perceptions of individuals dressed in military attire to the mean score participants' perceptions of individuals dressed civilian attire. No statistical significance was found for sex, political affiliation, or previous exposure to an IAT (Schreger & Kimble, 2017). The participants also perceived veterans as "somewhat more mentally unstable than civilians" (Schreger & Kimble, 2017, p. 16).

While Schreger and Kimble (2017) studied nonveterans for perceptions, Noble et al. (2021) studied 103 student veterans for the same stigma. In this study, the researchers focused on the stigma relating to student veterans who seek psychological help. Researchers emailed surveys to student veterans to collect data. The responses were measured with the Stigma Scale for Receiving Professional Psychological Help and found that when student veterans are provided psychological help on campus, 63% of the veterans surveyed refused the help because of the perceived stigma from receiving the service (Noble et al., 2022). The study examined a different perspective on the topic of transitioning military personnel but yielded similar results to the remainder of the studies, adding reliability to the study.

The perceived stigma increased the difficulty of fully transitioning from military to civilian life. Rumann and Hamrick (2010) examined the transition experiences of student veterans who had deployed to war zones while in the military. The researchers used semi-structured interviews with six participants who expressed concerns with transitioning from combat to the college classroom. The findings of this study reflected the views of six veterans who transitioned to college in the early stages of the War on Terror. The same study, however, may have yielded different results with veterans who transitioned at different stages of the war.

For example, Kato et al. (2016) studied another small sample of veterans who had transitioned later than the Rumann and Hamrick (2010) study. In the Kato et al. study, 19 participants at a southwestern community college were interviewed to examine their transition experiences. All 19 student veterans acknowledged that readjusting from combat deployment to civilian life was challenging and that leaving a structured environment to an unstructured one created both employment and financial concerns. This sample of convenience may have yielded similar results if conducted in a larger geographical setting.

Ackerman et al. (2008) used grounded theory epistemology to build a framework to better understand student veterans' transitions from war experiences to the college classroom. The researchers interviewed 25 students on three geographically diverse American universities. They employed a purposeful sampling strategy, using a combination of both nonproportional quota and snowballing sampling techniques to identify potential participants. The researchers used nonproportional sampling to recruit female student veterans and snowball sampling as byproduct of the participants who referred other student veterans to participate in the study.

The researcher employed active interviewing techniques to build rapport with the participants and avoided manipulating their answers. Survey questions, such as "Please describe your service and Please describe your college experience allowed the participant to describe their experiences without interviewer interference" (Ackerman et al., 2008, p. 78).

Each researcher used pattern coding to analyze the interview transcripts. "Pattern coding was used to group segments of data into smaller numbers of themes of constructs" (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 69). The consensus of themes generated the conceptual framework and followed Schlossberg's (1984) model for adult transition of moving in, moving through, moving out. Moving in relates to the student veteran's initial call to duty and reporting to duty

experiences. Moving through relates to the student veteran's service experience including combat experiences, and moving out relates to the student veteran's experience leaving the military. Transitioning from the military to college, the student veterans entered a second moving in situation but with lived experiences from their military service.

The new moving in situation caused challenges for some student veterans. For example, some student veterans described irritation and impatience with their less-mature civilian peers. Others expressed some desire to connect with other veterans or visited the ROTC office (Ackerman et al., 2008). The researchers also found that many student veterans simply tried to blend in and did not self-identify their veteran status. In follow-up questions, the researchers found that many student veterans did not connect with nonveterans and did not feel comfortable describing their military service experience with them. The geographical spread of the study allowed for comparison of data. The results of the Ackerman et al. (2008) study followed Schlossberg's (1984) model for adult transition and are consistent with other studies in this literature review.

Mental Health. Two studies, Naphan and Elliott (2015) and Schonfeld et al. (2015) examined student veterans who experienced combat and how that experience impacted their transitions to college. Naphan and Elliott also examined student veterans' perceptions of transitions from the military to higher education to better understand what the transition was like for student veterans and the factors that affect how they negotiated the move back home. A portion of the study focused on student veterans with combat experiences.

The researchers nonrandomly recruited participants by distributing flyers at Student Veterans Club meetings and in the Student Veterans Office. Eleven veterans participated in the study. Interviews were semi-structured with open-ended questions about their military

experiences and transitions back to civilian life. The researchers analyzed the participants' responses with five systematic steps: familiarization, identifying a thematic framework, indexing, charting, and mapping and interpretations. The themes that emerged were: "The military's emphasis on task cohesion, military structure, military responsibilities and release anxieties, combat experience, and social cohesion in combat units" (Naphan & Elliott, 2015, pp. 39–40).

Nine of the 11 participants were deployed to combat areas, and each experienced varying degrees of combat. The varying degrees were the results of the number of deployments and locations, as well as the different MOS's the student veterans possessed while in the military. Their narratives revealed that once they left the military, "those who were exposed to the most combat had the greatest difficulties withdrawing from the expectations of the former role" (Naphan & Elliott, 2015, p. 42). Two of the participants were diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and self-medicated with alcohol and methamphetamine. The combat experiences, especially for the two student veterans diagnosed with PTSD, created barriers for learning in the college classroom. Another student veteran, who never experienced combat and had an MOS that was comparable to a civilian occupation, found the transition to the college classroom much easier than those who had experienced combat. The impact of these experiences for these student veterans were strong indicators for future success for student veterans who did not experience combat or failure in the college classroom for student veterans who did experience combat. The researchers' criterion-based sample was consistent with other studies and showed that the student veterans who were exposed to the most combat had the greatest difficulty with the transition to college life.

Similar to the Naphan and Elliott (2015) quantitative study, Schonfeld et al. (2015) conducted a separate, independent, quantitative study at the same time, yielding similar results. Schonfeld et al. used Qualtrics for an online survey with 173 student veterans enrolled in three public universities in the southeastern United States. The survey asked questions on military service to include years of service, wars in which they served, and date of discharge. The survey also asked health and behavioral questions, for example:

> Were you ever hospitalized for a military-related injury or health problem; While in the military, were you ever treated for a mental health or emotional problem, a substance abuse problem, or experienced an injury that left you unconscious; and are you familiar with signs and symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder? (Schonfeld et al., 2015, pp. 429-430)

Schonfeld et al. (2015) processed the online surveys with the IBM SPSS® Software Version 21.0 and yielded the following results. When participants were combat veterans of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, they were more likely to suffer from depression and PTSD, self-medicate, and have more difficulties adjusting to college life than their noncombat veteran peers. The researchers used strong quantitative data collection and analysis methods that resulted with findings comparable to other studies on the same topic.

Substance Abuse. Several researchers explored the impact that combat experience and PTSD had on student veterans in higher education. Aikins et al. (2015) compared 122 undergraduate student veterans with 116 veterans not enrolled in college, from New York City's low-income neighborhoods, to identify the prevalence of substance use and mental health problems among student veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan. The researchers used regression analysis of the veterans attending college and linear regression to examine the effects

of college attendance on life satisfaction (Aikin et al., 2015). The research determined which substances were most often used, the frequency they were used, and if they were first used before, during, or after the veterans' combat experiences.

Aikins et al. (2015) found that alcohol was the most often used substance by combat-experienced student veterans and that binge drinking, which is the consumption of an excessive amount of alcohol in a short period of time, was common. The research also found that many of the student veterans experienced traumatic brain injuries (TBIs), PTSD, major depressive disorders, and suicidal ideations. Life satisfaction was measured with the Satisfaction of Life Scale, and it yielded different levels of life satisfaction for student veterans than for nonstudent veterans. Student veterans were generally prouder of their military service than nonstudent veterans (94% to 86%, respectively), and they were twice as likely to use peers for support (62% to 32%, respectively) (Aikin et al., 2015).

Engagement. Krill Williston and Roemer (2017) conducted a study to examine post-deployment predictors of student veterans' academic engagement. Participants were recruited through blast email announcements at two New England public universities, community outreach programs, and snowballing sampling. Eighty-seven student veterans completed the online survey with questions on the following topics: "post-deployment social support, emotion regulation skills, psychological distress, academic engagement, quality of life, and demographics" (Krill Williston & Roemer, 2017, p. 410). As part of the survey, the participants completed the Posttraumatic Stress Disorder Checklist-Military Version (PCL-M) as an indicator for PTSD.

The researchers estimated the means, standard deviations, and zero-order correlations of the study variable and found that psychological distress negatively correlated with academic engagement (Krill Williston & Roemer, 2017). Conversely, post-deployment support showed a

positive correlation with quality of life and academic engagement. The researchers used sound data collection and analysis procedures to validate the data. This, coupled with a reasonably large sample size, made this a strong study.

In a similar study, Herrmann et al. (2020) examined how student veterans used mindfulness-based interventions on college campuses. “Mindfulness is the basic human ability to be fully present, aware of where we are and what we’re doing, and not overly reactive or overwhelmed by what’s going on around us” (Mindful, 2020, para. 1). The researchers conducted a cross-sectional study by administering a questionnaire to military veterans via the VA’s Salt Lake City, UT office. The questions included three themes: “demographics and participants mindfulness practices, perceptions and beliefs about mindfulness, and knowledge and interest in learning more about mindfulness and surveyed 185 military veterans” (Herrmann et al., 2020, para. 3).

Herrmann et al. (2020) used descriptive and inferential statistics to analyze the questionnaire responses. From the analysis, the study found that 30% of participants practiced mindfulness in the past year, mainly to reduce stress, PTSD symptoms, increase sleep, and to mitigate depression. Hermann et al. (2020) stated:

> Over 75% who practiced reported perceived benefit. Veterans rarely reported negative beliefs about mindfulness; 56% perceived an understanding of mindfulness and 46% were aware of Veterans Health Administration mindfulness offerings. In all, 55% were interested in learning about mindfulness, 58% were interested in learning how it could help, and 43% were interested in combining mindfulness with a pleasurable activity. (para. 3)

Community Lived Experiences. "A substantial minority of veterans struggle as they reintegrate into civilian life, reporting problems with vocational accomplishment, legal/financial/housing challenges, physical and mental health conditions, and social/interpersonal issues" (Perkins et al., 2019, p. 1). The literature reviewed for this study found that additional challenges are experienced depending on the demographics of the service member.

***Disabled Veterans*.** To date, the DoD (2022a) reported more than 53,333 service members were wounded in action in operations Iraqi Freedom, New Dawn, Enduring Freedom, Inherent Resolve, and Freedom's Sentinel. "Resulting injuries include hearing and/or vision loss, mobility impairment, and amputations" (DiRamio, 2017, p. 352). "In addition to the physical or visible manifestations of service-related injury, the current generation of veterans has given voice to invisible injuries and implications of military service" (Kraus et al., 2017, p. 41).

Black and Hispanic Veterans. Black and Hispanic veterans represent 12% and 8%, respectively, of the total veteran population. But those statistics expect to grow to 15% and 12%, respectively, by 2045 (Office of Health Equity, 2019). The preponderance of literature on service members transitioning to civilian life and college classrooms is derived from data with White males, who represent roughly three-quarters of the aggregate veteran population. Fewer studies have been conducted on other races and genders.

Ghafoori and Hierholzer (2019) studied the personality patterns among Black, White, and Hispanic combat veterans in Central California. The researchers drew a convenience sample from the VA Central California Health Care System. Participants were recruited with flyers, brochures, and clinical referrals. Ghafoori and Hierholzer used three instruments to collect the data. The Clinician-Administered PTSD Scale (CAPS) is a structured clinical interview that

measures the continuous measure of PTSD symptom severity. The Combat Exposure Scale (CES) is a self-reporting questionnaire that measures combat exposure with a 5-point Likert-type scale (0 = *no combat* to 4 = *heavy combat*), and the Million Clinical Multiaxial Inventory-III (MCMI-III) is a 175-item (True/False) self-report questionnaire designed to identify both symptom disorders and personality disorders. The research found a correlation between participants' high Likert scores for heavy combat and personality disorders.

Ghafoori and Hierholzer (2019) coded race and ethnicity as dichotomous predictor variables in the regression analysis. They assessed Black, White, and Hispanic groups with chi-square analysis and analysis of variance (ANOVA) for continuous variables. The one-way ANOVA compared personality disorders with the different races of Black, White, and Hispanic participants. The analysis revealed that Hispanic veterans were more likely to have personality disorders compared to non-Hispanic veterans. The Black and White groups were not significantly different from each other. This study indicated Hispanic student veterans may experience more difficulty than Black and White student veterans with transition to college.

Problem-Solving Skills. There was a gap in literature addressing positive military-to-college transition experiences for combat veterans. Most research was focused on the long-term negative effects of combat experience. A segment of this research was dedicated to successful coping strategies of negative experiences obtained in combat. For example, Albright et al., (2020) found student veterans reported that engagement in volunteer efforts reduced their feelings of depression. This is, however, a coping strategy for a negative experience and not an outcome of a positive experience from combat.

Lee et al. (2017) studied the possible long-term effects of combat exposure and found that combat exposure had direct short-term effects on positive appraisals of military service and

unit cohesion. Conversely, combat exposure had only indirect effects on veterans' long-term psychological well-being. Jennings et al. (2006) examined if "combat exposure and the perception of benefits from military experience were associated with greater wisdom later in life" (Jennings et al., 2006, p. 115) and found that a relationship between combat exposure and wisdom did exist. But, like most other research, "the wisdom was based on coping strategies" (Jennings et al., 2006, p. 121).

Grimell and van den Berg (2020), however, used dialogical self-theory to explore the process of transitioning from a military life to a civilian life and found that veterans perceive their civilian status as a continuation of their military status. The skills learned in the military are transferred to civilian life. Problem solving and conflict resolution skills learned in the military are also applicable in the civilian workplace. The researchers also found that veterans perceived their success in connection to their military uniform and the civilian clothes (white collar versus blue collar) worn in civilian life (Brinkmann, 2012).

Methodological Approaches for Research on Student Veterans

The following section of Chapter 2 discusses the details of the research methodologies found in the studies, and they are categorized each with others that use similar designs. The categories are quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-methods studies (Creswell, 2018).

Quantitative Methods

"Quantitative research is the process of collecting and analyzing numerical data. It can be used to find patterns and averages, make predictions, test causal relationships, and generalize results to wider populations" (Bhandari, 2020, para. 1). Types of quantitative research include descriptive, correlational, or experimental research. "Descriptive research aims to accurately and systematically describe a population, situation or phenomenon. It can answer what, where, when

and how questions, but not why questions" (McCombes, 2019, para. 1). "A correlational research design investigates relationships between variables without the researcher controlling or manipulating any of them" (Bhandari, 2021, para. 1), and "experimental research systematically examines whether there is a cause-and-effect relationship between the variables" (Bhandari, 2020, para. 5).

Questionnaires were the primary data collection method used to collect data on transition experiences from the military. Albright et al. (2019, 2020) and Owings et al. (2015) used homogeneous samples to collect their data through questionnaires using a Likert scale to measure and assess an individual's internal process variables that may serve as strengths or barriers when making a career transition.

Qualitative Methods

"Qualitative research is the opposite of quantitative research because it involves collecting and analyzing non-numerical data" (Bhandari, 2022, para. 1). "There are several approaches to qualitative research that tend to be flexible and focus on retaining rich meaning when interpreting data" (Bhandari, 2022, para. 4). This type of research is used to understand people's lived experiences.

Common research approaches include grounded theory, ethnography, action research, phenomenological research, and narrative research. Grounded theory collects rich data on a topic or topics of interest and develops theories inductively. "Ethnography researchers immerse themselves in groups or organizations to understand their cultures" (Creswell, 2018, p. 53).

Action researchers and participants collaboratively link theory to practice driving social change. Phenomenological researchers investigate a phenomenon or event by describing and interpreting participants' lived experiences (Crewell, 2018). "Narrative inquiry is a type of

qualitative research focused on human stories. It examines human experience through life story interviews, oral histories, photo voice projects, biography, autoethnography, or other human experience narrative methods" (Ford, 2020, para. 1). Each research approach employs one or more data collection methods. The more common research data collection methods are observations, interviews, focus groups, surveys, and secondary research. Observations are recordings of what one sees, hears, or encounters in detailed field notes. Interviews involve personally asking people questions in one-on-one conversations. Focus groups involve asking questions and generating a discussion among a group of people. Surveys are distributed questionnaires with open-ended questions, and secondary research involves collecting existing data in the form of texts, images, audio, and/or video recordings.

Interviews and open-ended surveys were the primary data collection methods used to collect data on transition experiences from the military. Rumann and Hamrick and (2010), Owings et al. (2015), Ahern et al. (2015), Jones (2017), Patterson et al. (2019), Camacho et al. (2021), and Hornor (2021) used homogeneous samples to collect their data.

Persky and Oliver (2010), Gilbert and Griffin (2015), Naphan and Elliott (2015), Norman et al. (2015), Krill Williston and Roemer (2017), and Ghosh et al. (2019) used criterion-based samples to collect their data. The two methods are closely related. Homogeneous sampling selects similar cases to further investigate a particular phenomenon or subgroup of interest and criterion-based selects a sample based on preestablished criteria. Aikins et al. (2015) and Schonfeld et al. (2015) used quota sample to collect their data through surveys and interviews, respectively.

Mixed Methods

Using mixed-methods research provides strengths that offset the weaknesses of both quantitative and qualitative research. It also provides more comprehensive evidence for studying a research problem than either using quantitative or qualitative research alone (Creswell, 2018). Ghafoori and Hierholzer (2010), Robertson and Brott (2013, 2014), and Sullivan and Yoon (2020) used a combination of both quantitative and qualitative research methods. This type of research is termed mixed methods. Because researchers use data collection methods of both quantitative and qualitative research methods, some advantages are realized. Likely the most obvious advantage is a more complete and comprehensive understanding of the research problem than had it been researched with one methodology. Another advantage to mixed-methods research is a more precise perspective of a phenomenon, which in this case, was the transition from military to college student life.

Chapter Summary

Transitions at any stage in life can be difficult. The studies in this literature review highlight several triggers that make military-to-college transitions particularly difficult, to include the degree of combat experience, military occupational specialties, and how well one prepares for transition. The studies in this literature review have common themes because the search criterion was intentionally very specific. This produced articles that used samples for the studies that were not random, and the lack of random samples brands these studies as *suggestive,* and they should be interpreted with some skepticism. The aggregate review of 30 studies that yielded common themes through various methods, however, offers a higher degree of evidence in the findings and results. Additionally, 25 of the articles were studies conducted by teams of researchers, which is particularly important for qualitative studies as it provides the consumers of the research more confidence in the research than if it was conducted by a single individual

(Galvan & Galvan, 2017). Schlossberg's transition (1984) theory was the most common theory used in the 30 studies reviewed and is the most appropriate theory to use for this study.

Many studies exist that are related to United States military members transitioning from military service to civilian life. This paper reviewed articles on military transitions to college life and how the participants' experiences gained while in the military impacted their transitions after leaving the military. Experiences with combat, training, camaraderie, military's hierarchy, and routine schedule were factors in the service-member transition to college life. This research reviewed qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-methods studies that resulted in similar findings. The most common positive and negative themes are shown in Table 2.3 and Table 2.4, respectively.

Table 2.3

Positive Factors Associated with Transition

Major Themes	Examples
Positive transition experience	When the decision to leave the military was a personal choice, the transition experience was positive (Ryan et al, 2011).
	The better one prepares for their military career transition, the better their academic satisfaction is in community college (Absher, 2022).
	When student-veteran transitions from the military is positive, the student-veteran is more likely to achieve positive post-transition experiences as well (Robertson & Brott, 2014).
	Student veterans with strong support networks reported positive transition to college and quality of life experiences and when student veterans' transition from the military are positive, they're more likely to achieve positive post-transition experiences as well (Ahern et al, 2015; Norman et al, 2015; Gilbert & Griffin, 2015; Pellegrino and Hoggan, 2015; Wheeler, 2012).
Problem-solving skills	Some student veterans applied the problem-solving skills learned in the military to cope with college stress, using creative methods to complete schoolwork (Albright et al, 2022; Camacho et al, 2021; Patterson et al 2019; Sullivan & Yoon, 2020).

Note. Major themes do not include examples that were not consistent with more than one study.

Table 2.4

Negative Factors Associated with Transition

Major Themes	Examples
Negative transition experience	When the decision to leave the military was not a personal choice, the transition experience is negative (Ghosh et al, 2019).
	Twenty percent of the veterans did not use their benefits after separation from the military (Hornor, 2021).
	Financial aid varies between colleges and often offset by the amount the GI Bill benefits provide (Norman et al, 2015).
	Many student veterans do not self-identify as former military service members (Gilbert & Griffin, 2015; Jones, 2017).
	Some student veterans reported transitions from military to college triggered coping mechanisms (Jones, 2017).
	Many student veterans expressed concerns about post-military finances and transferring credits for training received in the military (Norman et al, 2015; Gilbert & Griffin, 2015; Hart & Thompson, 2016; Hinton, 2013; Persky& Oliver, 2010).
Mental health	Many student veterans express difficulty readjusting to civilian life and student veterans who served in the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq expressed additional difficulties (Ackerman et al, 2008; Kato et al, 2016; Schreger & Kimble, 2016; Noble et al, 2021).
	Perceived or actual stigma related to student veterans that seek psychological help (Schreger & Kimble, 2016; Noble et al, 2022).
	Student veterans developed their own coping strategies (Pellegrino and Hoggan, 2015).
Female veterans	Female student veterans military and transition experiences differ from their male counterparts (Albright et al, 2019).
	Female student veterans are more likely to be older and married than their male counterparts (Albright et al, 2019).
	Female service members and student veterans received health information from their university/college less often than women students with no military experience on the following topics: alcohol and other drug use, depression and anxiety, sexual assault and relationship violence prevention, and stress reduction (Ryan et al, 2011; Pellegrino and Hoggan, 2015).

Note. Major themes do not include examples that were not consistent with more than one study.

Chapter 3: Research Design Methodology

Introduction

Adults experience transitions at different points in their lives and these transitions often create increased feelings of stress and anxiety. Common transitions include changes in relationships, occupations, and location. Military-to-civilian life transitions are unique to veterans and military-to-college life transitions are unique to student veterans. *Transition stress* is what some veterans experience while adapting to life after military service. Moving from a highly structured, hierarchal environment in the military to a less rigid environment on a college campus is sometimes difficult for veterans to navigate. Veterans' experiences while in the military and during transition out of the military impact their later roles in life.

> Imagination, perception, and common structures play a major role in attaining an awareness of intricate experiences and provide an understanding of how specific feelings, perceptions, and awareness are aroused in consciousness. Perception is viewed as the primary source of knowledge, the source that cannot be doubted. (Moustakas, 1994, p. 52)

Adult transitions are common and there are several theories that discuss transition. Transitions are processes that occur over time and do not have defined end points. Schlossberg's (1984) transition theory best defines military-to-college campus transitions. Schlossberg (1981) developed a theory based on factors that influence a person's ability to cope with transition, and she defined a transition as any event or non-event that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles (Patton et al., 1998; Silver & Roska, 2017). Although Schlossberg's

transition theory was developed specifically for adult transitions, it is used extensively in the literature on transitions to college.

> It is important to note that perception plays a key role in transitions as an event, or non-event, meets the definition of a transition only if it is so defined by the individual experiencing it. In order to understand the meaning that a transition has for a particular individual, the type, context, and impact of the transition must be considered. (Patton et al., 2010, pp. 111–114).

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to address how student veterans implement strategies to succeed in undergraduate programs after serving being in the military by using Schlossberg's (1981) transition theory. The preferred analytic strategy, chosen by the researcher, relied on the theoretical proposal of Schlossberg's 4S framework that provided the qualitative thematic coding method (Creswell, 2018). Given that this research used Schlossberg's 4S model as the organizing and analytical framework, the researcher coded the data under the themes: Situation; Self; Support; and Strategy.

> Situation is the event or "trigger" that caused the transition. Self is how an individual views life, such as socioeconomic status, gender, age, stage of life, state of health, and ethnicity. Support is the social relationships individuals have with family, friends, and communities. And strategy is how an individual modifies the situation to manage stress. (Lawrence, 2018, p. 48)

This study examined the lived experiences of student-veteran transitions from a military setting to a college classroom setting. To achieve such, a rigorous qualitative design was used to achieve data collection and analysis. "The dissertation process began with the development of a proposal that set forth the exact nature of the matter that was investigated and a detailed account

of the methods that were employed" (Locke et al., 2014, p. 1). Qualitative research was conducted in a natural setting involving multiple methods of data collection. The collected data that emerged with the process were interpretive, and they involved personal reflection (Alase, 2017).

The resulting research questions of What thoughts, incidents, or people associated with your military service stand out for you? How did your military service and transition affect your college experience? and What thoughts or feelings stand out as you think about your transition? guided this research through the theorical lens of Schlossberg's (1981, 1984) theory of transition. Beginning with the setting, a public university in Upstate New York was chosen for its abundance of student veterans. Four student veterans were purposely selected as participants through a recruiting process for the study. Two additional student veterans from other colleges and universities were recruited by the research participants. The research followed the proposal application and acceptance of the St. John Fisher University Institutional Review Board (IRB). Data collection consisted of semi-structured interviews. Analysis of the data collected consisted of coding and the development of themes. Trust and confidence with participants' personal information, as well as ethical considerations, were discussed with each participant.

Research Design

A transcendental phenomenological descriptive research design was used in this qualitative study. This research design was selected for three reasons: each veteran's perception of the experience was researched, as opposed to being a phenomenon researched in a vacuum; therefore, it allowed the researcher to better understand the details of a single phenomenon, and the data collected were rich and impressive (Moustakas, 1994).

“Phenomena are the building blocks of human science and the basis for all knowledge” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 26). “In phenomenological science, a relationship always exists between the external perception of natural objects and internal perceptions, memories, and judgements” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 47). “Phenomenology depicts the shared experiences of those being studied and creates a composite description representing all of the individuals” (Kwandrans, 2020, p. 55).

Researcher Positionality

“Positionality is the practice of a researcher delineating his or her own position in relation to the study, with the implication that this position may influence aspects of the study” (Qin, 2016, p. 1). Thus, it is necessary to disclose positionality, when conducting qualitative research, to accurately and honestly capture the analytic process.

As such, I was a soldier with 27 years of service. I was a Sergeant in the 82nd Airborne Division, led a platoon in the 9th Infantry (Manchu), and commanded companies in the 10th Mountain Division and the United States Army Civil Affairs and Psychological Operations Command (Airborne). I was a staff officer on the Army Staff, the Joint Staff, and in the United States Army Special Operations Command (USASOC), as well as in USASOC subordinate units. I was a graduate of the Army Jumpmaster, Air Assault, Ranger, Pathfinder, and Psychological Operations Officer Qualification Courses. I deployed to the mountains of Honduras, the jungles of Panama, the deserts of Saudi Arabia and Iraq, the Demilitarized Zone of the Korean Peninsula, and the war-torn land of Albania and Kosovo. Over the course of 27 years, I transitioned from the Army three times. My first transition was to return to college and obtain a commission as an Army Officer; my second transition was to join the Federal Air Marshal Service following the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001; and my third transition was to

retire as a Lieutenant Colonel in 2013. My first transition from the Army was quite difficult. My second and third transitions, however, were somewhat easier. I did not have a strategy for any of my transitions other than the intentions already stated, but each transition differed in location and command support, my personal finances and post-military occupation, as well as my age and maturity level. Each transition may have also differed because of the experiences I had learned from each previous transition.

This research is important to understand the lived experiences of military personnel as they transitioned to civilian life and to the college classroom and the way they coped with the abrupt change in lifestyle and culture. The research is also quite personal as I had experienced this transition. By learning from each participant's experience, future service members may benefit in developing their own transition strategies. Also, I benefited by better understanding my own transition experiences and subsequent behavior. I could not completely remove myself from the research, as each of the participants' experiences had some similarities with my own. Therefore I bracketed, to the best of my ability, my concerns by separating my preconceived biases and judgments of my own transitions from the data collected and analyzed of the participants (Moustakas, 1994). I also understood that by identifying myself as a former soldier or retired officer, I connected with the participants (DA, 1999; Moustakas, 1994). Therefore, I informed each participant of my military status at the initiation of the data collection phase, and I diligently focused on the military and transition experiences of each participant.

Research Context

The setting for this study was one campus of the State University of New York. The region for the study was a county in Upstate New York with the demographic profile shown in Table 3.1.

Table 3.1

Demographic Profile in 2022 of the Setting for This Study

Identifying Characteristic	Amount
Population	117,124
Land area (square miles)	953.00
Persons per square mile	122.50
Persons under 18 years old (%)	20.90
Persons 65 years old and over (%)	16.80
Female persons (%)	49.92
White persons (%)	95.90
Black or African American persons (%)	1.20
American Indian and Alaska Native persons (%)	0.50
Asian persons (%)	0.70
Persons reporting two or more races (%)	1.60
Persons of Hispanic or Latino origin (%)	2.70
High school graduates–persons aged 25+ (%)	88.19
Bachelor's degree or higher–persons aged 25+ (%)	18.98

Note. Adapted from QuickFacts produced by the United States Census Bureau, 2022. https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/oswegocountynewyork,onondagacountynewyork/PST045222

Attention was given to undergraduate student veterans enrolled in public universities in Upstate New York. The rationale for this selection was based on the average number of student veterans in these institutions. New York State's higher education enrollment for the academic year 2020–2021 was 667,296 full-time and 240,194 part-time students in 4-year institutions (Sloane, 2019). In 2020, 650 veterans, 400 active-duty military, and 150 family members were enrolled in public universities and colleges in New York State (Empire State University, 2020). In 2023, 139 students used GI Bill benefits at one large New York State public university (College Factual, 2023). Unused Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits are transferable from veterans to their

spouse or dependent children, with the DoD's approval, which indicates that not all 139 students using GI Bill Benefits were veterans (VA, 2023). The large population of GI Bill users, however, provided an adequate sample size for this study. Therefore, the data were collected at just one public university.

Research Participants

A purposeful selection of six veterans who served a minimum of 12 consecutive months on active duty, regardless of combat experience or location of service, and who received an honorable discharge were used for this study. Further, four veterans were enrolled in an undergraduate program at the selected public university in Upstate New York. The selected research participants recruited two additional participants from private colleges and universities. There are various philosophies for appropriate sample sizes. For example, Creswell (2018) stated that the number of participants required is dependent upon the phenomena being studied. In the literature reviewed for this study, there were examples of effective qualitative research with as few as two participants and as many as 1,300 participants. Most phenomenological research, however, has a minimum of two and a maximum of 15 participants. Moustakas (1994) recommended a range from five to 25 participants for a phenomenological study. As such, this study selected participants until data collection saturation was achieved.

In the United States, the minimum age to join the military is 17 years. Potential recruits under the age of 18 require a parent or guardian's signature to join. This study only selected student veterans who had served 12 consecutive months on active duty before enrolling in a public 4-year university. As such, all participants in this study were 18 years of age or older.

Quota sampling began by contacting the university's veteran coordinator who contacted potential participants. Participant word of mouth fostered snowball sampling and led to

engagements with more student veterans. Preference was given to the participants who had most recently transitioned from the military to college life to form a more homogenous group for focused findings.

Demographic Survey

Six enrolled students and recent college graduates who served a minimum of 12 consecutive months on active duty and received an honorable discharge participated in this study. The participants were selected from public and private colleges and universities, and they were assigned pseudonyms to protect their identities and the identities of the institutions. All six participants were natives of New York State and entered military service at either the Syracuse or Albany Military Entrance Processing Stations (MEPS). All the participants were in their 20s at the time of their interviews. Four identified as White and two identified as Black or African American. Three served in the Navy, one served in the Marine Corps, and two served in the Army. Two participants had combat experience. None of the participants were married while in the military or while in college. Table 3.2 shows the participants' demographic information, which includes pseudonym, age, race, gender, military occupational specialty, combat experience, and number of years of service.

Table 3.2

Study Participants' Demographics

Pseudonym	Age	Race	Gender	Military Branch	MOC	Combat Experience	Years of Service
Avery	27	Black	Male	Navy	Aviation Structural Mechanic – Safety Equipment	Yes	7
Bailey	26	White	Female	Navy	Aviation Boatswain's Mate	No	9
Chris	23	White	Male	Marine Corps	Infantryman	No	3
Dana	25	White	Male	Army	Infantryman	Yes	7
Ellis	29	White	Male	Navy	Nuclear Submarine Engineering Laboratory Technician	No	6
Finn	20	White	Male	Army	Infantry	No	3

Note. Pseudonyms were assigned to protect the participants' and universities' identities.

Participants' Profiles

The participants' privacy and confidentiality were protected by following predetermined procedures. The participants were afforded an opportunity to participate at a location of their choice. Some Zoom interview sessions showed participants' names on the screen. To protect participant identity and best maintain confidentiality, pseudonyms were assigned to each interview participant, as shown in Appendix C. Only the researcher knew the participants' true identities.

Avery. At the time of his interview, Avery was a junior, business administration major at a public university in New York State. In high school, Avery was interested in college but did not have a strong grade point average. His older brother joined the military and encouraged Avery to join as well. He served from 2012 to 2019 as an aviation structural mechanic with a specialty in safety equipment, achieving the paygrade E-5. Avery did not participate in college classes while in the military, although others in his organization did. His post-college plans included owning his own business.

Bailey. At the time of her interview, Bailey had recently graduated from a public university in New York State and had started graduate business management classes at the same school. Bailey is an accomplished musician and the first in her family to join the military. She originally considered playing flute in the USMC but later decided to enlist in the United States Navy. She served from 2014 to 2023, achieving the pay grade E-5. The first 5 years of her military service were served on a Nimitz-class, nuclear-powered supercarrier, which rotated from shore to sea duty every 6 months. While on shore, she participated in college classes but was unable to do so while at sea. Bailey reenlisted for another tour as a shipboard aircraft firefighter instructor in the Pacific Northwest. This was where she completed her associate degree. Following college, Bailey plans to return to the military as a commissioned officer.

Chris. At the time of his interview, Chris was a junior, studying adolescent education with a focus in social studies at a public university in New York State. He acquired a strong background in theatrical arts prior to joining the military and still enjoys performing today. Chris joined the USMC after graduating from community college in 2021. COVID-19 protocol required Chris to quarantine with another USMC recruit for 2 weeks in a Florida hotel prior to reporting to Paris Island, SC for boot camp. Chris achieved the pay grade E-4 and has post-college plans to teach social studies in a public school district.

Dana. At the time of his interview, Dana was a junior at a private university in New York State and a member of the Army National Guard. Dana did not grow up in a military family but always felt the desire to serve. He enlisted in the United States Army as an infantryman and served two combat tours in Iraq. Dana reenlisted for a second tour and was assigned to an infantry unit in Korea where he achieved the pay grade E-6. While in Korea, Dana decided to leave the military at the end of his enlistment and enter college as a business major. Dana was

unable to attend college classes while assigned in the United States, but he took two college classes and achieved college credits with the College-Level Examination Program (CLEP) while in Korea. Upon graduation, Dana intends to return to the Army as a commissioned officer.

Ellis. At the time of his interview, Ellis had recently graduated from a public university in Wisconsin and was employed as a software engineer at Google. Ellis enlisted in the United States Navy while still in high school under the Delayed Entry Program and reported to boot camp 3 months later. His interest in military service was primarily for educational benefits. While in the Navy, Ellis served on a nuclear-powered cruise missile attack submarine and achieved the pay grade E-6. His military specialty was nuclear engineering, which provided 85 college credits. As such, Ellis did not participate in other college classes because the classes he needed were upper level and not compatible with his work schedule.

Finn. At the time of his interview, Finn was a freshman at a community college in New York State. Finn enlisted in the United States Army under the Delayed Entry Program specifically for the educational benefits. He served in the Infantry and deployed to the Horn of Africa for nearly 1 year. Finn served 3 years on active duty, achieved the pay grade E-3, and continued to serve in the Army National Guard. At the age of 20, Finn was the youngest participant in this study and the closest to 21.8 years, which is the average age of full-time undergraduate students (Statista, 2023). Finn's command encouraged professional growth, but college courses were not possible because of operational requirements. Finn was unsure of his post-college plans but was interested in becoming a New York State Trooper.

Instruments Used in Data Collection

The researcher served as the main instrument of inquiry and analysis in this qualitative research (Patton, 2015). In this study, a limited number of open-ended virtual interviews,

conducted with participants via Zoom and/or Microsoft Teams, captured a diversity of information to answer the research questions. To maintain consistency with the multiple interviewees and create opportunities for more detailed feedback, five guiding interview questions were used (Appendix D). Four additional general interview questions (Appendix E) were used to allow the interviewees to communicate their experiences. The open-ended interview questions were phrased to distinguish the social context of the transition experience. For example, questions began with "Tell me about," "In the military," or "On campus" to facilitate a story and to identify the different surroundings or people who influenced the participants' perceptions of their experiences.

In addition to the open-ended interview, answers to secondary research questions, consisting of demographic information, were collected via a study application. The demographic information included:

- name of participant
- email address of participant
- current age of participant
- age of participant when military service began
- length of military service
- rank or grade at end of service
- race
- gender
- current marital status
- marital status while in the military
- military occupational specialty
- number of deployments to Afghanistan
- number of deployments to Iraq
- cumulative number of months deployed
- service-connected disability rating
- enrollment status (full-time or part-time), (resident, hybrid, or online)
- current employment status

Procedures for Data Collection

The preliminary step included obtaining a letter of support from the participating public university that stated that the university was aware of this study, and it was pending IRB approval. The participating university's Human Subjects Committee reviewed the IRB packet for compliance with New York State requirements and participated in and facilitated the recruitment of participants. Upon approval of both universities, recruitment was facilitated by the participating public university emailing student veterans a recruitment flyer, as shown in Appendix F, which stated the purpose of this study, the characteristics of potential participants, and the email and phone contact information of the researcher. Interested student veterans scanned QR codes for the informed consent and demographics forms on the flyer to initiate participation.

The researcher contacted suitable participants via email addresses provided on the demographic form and gave potential interview date/time slots. The participants returned the email to the researcher with the top three prioritized slots. This process was reiterated until the collected data saturation was achieved. Lastly, the researcher confirmed interview dates/times with each participant via email.

"Convenience sampling is a method of collecting samples by taking samples that are conveniently located around a location" (Edgar & Manz, 2017, para. 1). All participants for this study were selected from the same college campus. However, this study does not represent a convenience sample because the veterans were selected based on pre-defined characteristics, not locality.

The initial four participants were notified of the research by a university Veteran & Military Services Coordinator. The two additional participants were recruited by the initial

participants. The participants completed two Qualtrics forms for demographics and informed consent, and they were contacted by the researcher to schedule 45-minute, semi-structured interviews. Data collection consisted of semi-structured virtual interviews and analytic memos written during all steps of the research process. Interviews were conducted on the Zoom virtual meeting platform and guided by five predetermined questions. Interview questions encompassed the participants' experiences with leaving the military and entering college. All interview questions were asked by the researcher, answered by the participants, and audio/visual recorded. On average, each interview lasted 45 minutes. The audio recordings were transcribed with Rev Audio Transcription Service (rev.com) and converted into Microsoft Word, yielding 75 pages.

Protection for Confidentiality

The participants' privacy and confidentiality were protected by following predetermined procedures. The participants were afforded an opportunity to participate at a location of their choice. Some Zoom interview sessions showed the participants' names on the screen. To protect the participant's identity and best maintain confidentiality, pseudonyms were assigned to each interview participant. Only the researcher knew the participants' true identities. Audio and video recording captured the interview data as did the researcher's handwritten notes. The recorded sessions were transcribed to Microsoft Word, which enabled the researcher to analyze the data through the phenomenological analysis process. No more than 3 years following publication of this work will the audio and video recordings be destroyed with commercial software.

Procedures for Data Analysis

The recorded semi-structured interviews were uploaded to the Rev Audio Transcription Service (rev.com) for transcription to Microsoft Word. The researcher transcribed a sample of the interviews, verbatim, in Microsoft Word for qualitative analysis to evaluate the reliability

with the transcription application. Each interview contained a story, therefore narrative analysis was used to evaluate and better understand the events and their effect on the participants. Inductive coding was used by starting from nothing and creating codes based on the data collected from the interview responses. From the coding, categories and themes were developed using Schlossberg's (1981, 1984) 4S framework.

Chapter Summary

Chapter 3 described the methods of this phenomenological study that was used to understand the perceptions of the participants regarding their lived transition experiences from military life to college campuses. In addition, the study sought to understand the most effective transition strategies used by the student veterans' transitioning from military service to the college classroom and how combat experiences supported or hindered learning for the undergraduate level student veterans. This study examined the lived experiences of six student veterans who had recently separated from the military and were enrolled in undergraduate courses in public and private universities and colleges. Through semi-structured interviews, the researcher collected data of the lived experiences of the participants. Analysis of participants' responses provided vivid insight of the existing military transition process at the time of the participants' interviews as well as the inherent transition strategies of the participants.

Chapter 4: Results

Introduction and Purpose

Civilians transition to enlisted military service members during one of the military service branches' versions of IET. In the United States Army and Air Force, enlisted personnel attend Basic Military Training and in the Navy and Marine Corps, they attend boot camp. The goal for each service is the same—to convert civilians into service members. Their transitions are further hardened over time by accomplishing milestone events such as military schools and graduations, organizational events, and training exercises. When service members' military contract service terms expire, the service members, now called veterans, return to civilian status. Their deliberate transition from civilian to the military, experienced throughout their time in uniform, is not replicated when they transition back to civilian status. As such, their transitions often occur after they are already discharged from the military and in the next phase of their lives. The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to use Schlossberg's (1981, 1984) transition theory to understand student veterans' strategies that led to success in undergraduate programs after serving in the military.

Chapter 4 includes a summary of the research design, interview process, research questions, theme development, and the research findings that support the themes. Three themes and one unexpected finding were revealed in the data analysis of the participants' military transition experiences. The following three themes were identified.

1. Military discharge does not make a civilian.
2. Leaders influence service members' college career paths.

3. Military-to-college transition: One size does not fit all.

The unexpected finding that emerged was that community college is a good transition point for some veterans. The findings derived from the analysis of the participants' lived experiences as told through semi-structured interviews, demographic survey responses, and through field notes. Chapter 4 concludes with a summary.

Research Study Design

A transcendental phenomenological descriptive research design was used in this study. This research design was selected for three reasons: each veteran's perception of their experiences was researched as opposed to being phenomena in a vacuum, therefore it allowed the researcher to better understand the details of a single phenomenon, and the data collected were rich and impressive (Moustakas, 1994).

Research Questions

This study was conducted to gather data to answer the three the research questions:

1. What thoughts, incidents, or people associated with your military service stand out for you?
2. How did your military service and transition affect your college experience?
3. What thoughts or feelings are present as you contemplate your transition?

Theme Development

This study's research theme development followed Moustaka's (1994) transcendental phenomenological data analysis process. Seventy-seven significant statements were identified in the interview transcripts that identified the structural descriptions of the lived experiences that influenced the military-to-college transitions. The significant statements were analyzed and grouped into categories for codes as shown in Table 4.1.

Table 4.1

Initial Coding from the Interview Transcripts

Initial Code	*n* of participants contributing ($N = 6$)	*n* of transcript excerpts assigned ($N = 6$)	Sample quotes
Reason for joining the military	6	6	I needed to figure out what I wanna do with my life. – Chris
First military experience	6	7	My first experience entering was, was fear. – Avery
Military support	6	6	A couple of times I would go to, like, the therapy thing that they would have. Um, and sometimes I would call my parents. – Ellis
College planning	6	10	I am living proof that lack of preparation doesn't prevent you from succeeding in college, I pretty much left the military and went to a local community college. – Dana
Out-process experience	4	7	I don't feel like 2 weeks is enough time. I don't remember anything that I learned from [TAP], which means that there probably wasn't anything particularly valuable in it. – Ellis I did the entire thing asynchronously without interacting with people. – Ellis
College experience	5	8	Be committed, as committed to college as you were to the military, and you'll be as successful in college as you were in the military. And don't worry about the ups and downs, that's just part of life. You had them in the military, you'll have 'em in college too. – Dana
College support	5	13	[Best friend from the military] keeps me motivated and he inspires me [in college]. – Chris
Soft skills	5	12	Able to deal with the unusual better now. – Chris Learned that to be a good leader, you needed to be a better follower. – Dana

Note. The initial codes with corresponding quotes from the interview transcripts with corresponding quotes.

The codes were further grouped into categories for themes as shown in Table 4.2 and four themes emerged from the analysis of the participants' lived experiences as college-student

veterans and their transitions from U.S. military active duty. One of the four themes, community college is a good transition point for some veterans, was unexpected, and it is not commonly found in existing literature. The four themes and the research questions they support are shown in Table 4.3.

Table 4.2

Grouping of Initial Codes to Form Themes

Theme	*n* of participants contributing ($N = 6$)	*n* of codes assigned ($N = 6$)
Theme 1: Military discharge does not make a civilian	6	4
Theme 2: Military-to-college planning: One size does not fit all	6	4
Theme 3: Leaders influence service members' college careers	6	2
Theme 4: Community college is a good transition point for some veterans	6	3

Note. The initial codes from the interview transcripts that formed the themes.

Table 4.3

Research Questions and Emergent Themes

Research Questions	Themes That Address the Questions
What thoughts, incidents, or people associated with your military service stand out for you?	Theme 1: Military discharge does not make a civilian.
How did your military service and transition affect your college experience?	Theme 2: Military-to-college planning: One size does not fit all. Theme 3: Leaders influence service members' college careers.
What thoughts or feelings are present as you contemplate your transition?	Theme 4: Community college is a good transition point for some veterans.

Note. The themes that support the research questions.

Theme 1: Military Discharge Does Not Make a Civilian

With the first theme, military discharge does not make a civilian, the student veterans described the difference between military indoctrination and military out-processing, how indoctrination makes a service member, but military discharge does not necessarily make a civilian. In this research, the participants recall their initial military experiences, formal and informal rituals and ceremonies, and their experiences leaving the military.

Military Indoctrination. Four of the six participants (66%) joined the military for a change in their lives, and they left home within weeks of enlisting. Avery was interested in "a steady paycheck," Bailey and Chris "needed a change," Dana sought "an adventure," and Ellis and Finn both "joined for the education benefits," and they both enlisted under the Delayed Entry Program while still in high school. To all six participants, the military was a very different environment from anything they'd previously experienced. They described their respective service's IET in terms of impositions of values, beliefs, or doctrine. Chris said, "Joining the military was a shock to the system. It was just the weirdest, like, transition 'cause you go from a nice, like, decent life at home and then you go into this very like drastic different environment." Both Bailey and Dana asked themselves, "What have I gotten myself into?" To illustrate how different military indoctrination is from private sector business, Dana recalled, "A drill sergeant said that he was going to pop out our eyeballs and socket [expletive] us." When asked about military indoctrination, Finn said, "I'm not going to lie. It was one of the first times I've been truly terrified in my life. Like, 'oh my God, what is going to happen? What did I do? Why did I join?' You're terrified."

Following basic training for the Army and boot camp for the Navy and Marine Corps, service members learn their assigned jobs as the second part of IET. Ellis stated that a military

education is "a fear-based learning program that's like being in prison, and with a cult-like following of procedures." For others, the military structure started to feel normal. Avery said, "I enjoyed the structure. I enjoyed meeting new people and the culture." Finn said,

> It was scary. It was, but I adjusted to it after a couple weeks. It was hard, the hours getting up in the morning and it wasn't something I was very used to at all. But it was also good. Honestly, I enjoyed it, most of it. There's always those moments. But yeah, I really enjoyed it. (Finn)

Rituals and Ceremonies. All six of the participants said that through rituals and ceremonies, they were further immersed in military culture. Four of the six participants (66%) spoke of informal rituals, although not sanctioned by the military, as the ones that deepened their bonds with the organization and people serving it. Avery said that the rituals were "valuable" and that he "loved that part about the military." Bailey said that "receiving an [informal] safety award as her first military award was a significant event." Chris said that the noncommissioned officers' (NCO) "tradition of blood stripes (pounding the rank into the collarbone of the newly minted NCO) made Chris feel part of the leadership team when he made corporal" (E-4). Dana spoke of hazing rituals that had positive impacts on the service members involved and the organization. Dana spoke of "worm races" where new soldiers raced from one end of the barracks hallway to the other crawling like worms inside their sleeping bags. Upon completion of the race, the new members of the organization were inducted as "members of the platoon" and an informal ceremony followed, "celebrated with beer."

Formal ceremonies also cemented the bond between the service members and the organizations. All six participants spoke of military school graduations and formal inspections as

significant emerging events. Dana said that he received a unit belt buckle after completing his first 25-mile road march with his organization in Korea. Dana also said,

> We did dining-ins, hail and farewells, and command inspections. These were ceremonies that weren't much fun, but because of the difficulty, and because you were doing them with your friends, they helped establish camaraderie. And now, a couple years later, looking back, seem quite funny and not nearly as bad as we thought they were at the time. (Dana)

Military Support System. The military enlists residents from all 50 states, four U.S. territories, and in some cases, foreign countries. As such, the diversity of the military is as vast as the number of people it commands. All six participants developed strong bonds with diverse groups of people in the military. Avery said he had "a very diverse group of different friends in the military. Some were male, some were female, some were straight, and some were gay. They are lifelong friends." Bailey said that all of her "friends were completely different than she would've ever expected, and it helped her, greatly, to learn more. And it was great." Chris said that his "friends from the military are the best friends he has." Dana said that he had a

> Great group of friends that came from all over, all over the place . . . Some of us would go out wearing ball caps, others would wear cowboy boots. It was just kind of a funny mix of folks. We refer to each other as brothers, we loved each other, and we would do anything for each other. That's the tight knit organization you want in combat. (Dana)

Ellis said that his "closest friends, to this day, are still people he knew in the military." And Finn said, "I made a lot of friends there that I still talk to this day, and I am so grateful for them and all from different states and across the country, but you always stay in contact with them."

These military friendships were the support systems of the participants while serving in the military, and in some cases, at present, as college students. The strong bond between service members helped support each other in times of crisis or with the ebb and flow of personalities in a profession with routine reassignments of supervisors. All six participants relied on military friendships for support while on active duty. Finn said the people around him during his enlistment “helped me tremendously and I made so many friends.”

All six participants experienced exceptional leaders. Avery spoke of a caring commander, “When you sat down, had your meeting with the [commanding officer], he asked about the books that you read. It was very personal. He was a good man.” Bailey spoke about her team, to include a Navy lead petty officer (LPO), who was the senior petty officer in the pay grades E-4 to E-6, who provided mentorship, direction, and a bond for her. She said, “My LPO and everyone that I worked with closely, my team, they were the ones that were right there. They were fighting for me, like they had my back.” Chris spoke of two NCOs who “supported me the whole time.” Ellis spoke of an officer that provided career support, motivation, and a bond.

Military Out-Process. Leaving the military is much different than leaving any other job, and it is a point of contention with the researcher of this study. Service members return their government-issued equipment in a state that is serviceable and clean. Lost or unserviceable equipment is either purchased by the service member or the value deducted from the service member’s pay. Medical, dental, and education records are updated, and a discharge is issued via the Certificate of Release or Discharge from Active Duty, commonly referred to by the form number, DD-214. The DD-214 is a summary of a veteran’s active-duty service and lists the dates of service, medals received, the reason and type of discharge, military occupational specialties, education, and overseas service. The DD-214 is, arguably, the most important service document

as it is used for proof of military service and veterans' benefits that include VA home loans, education and training programs, medical care, employment, social security, and deals and discounts at various businesses. In this study, all six participants received honorable discharges.

While the process of leaving the military is standard, the level of support each participant received from their respective organizations varied greatly. Avery out-processed online because his organization's personnel office had recently closed. He said, "It was very hectic. I didn't even have my (DD-214) to look over and sign online until about a month and a half after. Then, they eventually get it to you." Conversely, the Navy allowed Bailey to begin out-processing 1 year prior to her discharge due to the limited availability of personnel services during the COVID-19 pandemic.

TAP. The DoD TAP provides transitioning service members with employment and job training assistance to aid in their transitions. It is mandatory for all service members who served 180 continuous days or more on active duty or in the National Guard or Reserve, and it is available in both resident and virtual environments. The TAP online curriculum provides service members who are unable to attend the TAP in-person, due to military necessity. Three of the six participants (50%) completed TAP with the residential program. Ellis deployed for sea duty 2 weeks prior to discharge and completed TAP through the virtual environment. Ellis said,

> I don't feel like 2 weeks is enough time. I did the entire thing asynchronously without interacting with people, and I don't remember anything that I learned from [TAP], which means that there probably wasn't anything particularly valuable in it. (Ellis)

Finn also completed TAP online but had a different experience than Ellis:

> So, they gave us these courses called TAP classes, and we did 'em online while we were all over there [Horn of Africa]. And when we had downtime, and we did a lot of these

> classes that teach you how to get a job, how to use your benefits, what your benefits do, your home loans, your Post 9-11 GI bill that you get. And they really, really, really were good with helping us and they taught a lot of people, and they helped a lot of people get jobs too. And they gave you a lot of resources to use and a lot of helplines that you can go to get a job and they help you. You can have people help you create a resume to help you get a job. They can help you. They have people, educated people, on standby. You can always email to help you get your benefits into school and get your money and your tuition paid for. And they were really, really good. (Finn)

Transition from the Military. Transitioning was the aspect of military status that the participants found most challenging. The out-processing that occurred at the end of their terms of service was informative but did not help transition them back into civilian mindsets. As Bailey commented, “Civilian clothing did not make me a civilian. It made me a former sailor in civilian clothing.” Dana considered his transition experience typical of other service members, stating, “When you leave the military, the military doesn’t necessarily leave you.” As such, the transition process is often lengthy and occurs after military discharge. At the time of the interviews, all six participants struggled with transitioning. Ellis said, “Adjusting to civilian life takes a long time,” and Finn said that transitioning was even more difficult immediately following his deployment to the Horn of Africa:

> Honestly, it was weird when I got back home. It’s weird being back in a social aspect of life again, just for little things, like going out grocery shopping or driving and stuff like that. It’s just a whole different thing, and it takes some getting used to, for sure. The first 2 weeks I got home, when I went out, say [to] the mall or the grocery store or just out at a social event, you don’t talk to anybody really. You’re kind of antisocial, kind of just

> taking in everything again, on how it was you're not used to having, that you were away with the military for a year and you really didn't get a lot of social events, especially on deployment. It's a lot different, honestly, getting used to it, it was a lot different for me because I was so used to being over in Africa. (Finn)

Illustrated through the lived experiences of the six student veterans, the theme "military discharge does not make a civilian" emerged. The participants' experiences in the military, during deployments, and leaving the military contributed to their eventual transitions back to civilian life, which at the time of the interviews, was still ongoing.

Theme 2: Military-to-College Planning: One Size Does Not Fit All

All six participants planned to attend college following their military obligations, but only two (33%) were proactive in their planning. Avery, Bailey, Chris, and Dana made college plans after they were discharged. Ellis and Finn began their college planning while still in high school and to use the military's education benefits as a means of support for college. Despite when college planning occurred, at the time of the interviews, all six participants were successful in their college careers.

Avery believed that no plan is flawless stating, "You're not gonna have a perfect plan." Avery further stated, "I didn't have a set plan. I was scared to leave." Dana described his planning like this:

> I am living proof that lack of preparation doesn't prevent you from succeeding in college, I pretty much left the military and went to a local community college. It certainly wasn't the most direct route from high school to college, but it [worked]. What I do from this point on is completely up to me. (Dana)

College Courses While in the Military. Three of the six participants (50%) had access to college courses while on active duty. Operational requirements were the primary factor that prevented all six participants from taking full advantage of the available education programs. Avery made the conscience decision not to take college classes even when they were available. He said,

> Regretfully, that's [college] not something that I did. I didn't think, at that time, that I had an interest in college. I was ready to make the military a career and I didn't see the value in [college] at first. (Avery)

Avery reflected, "It kind of reminds me of my ignorance during that age."

Bailey and Ellis took advantage of college courses while on shore duty but curtailed their education during their rotational sea duties. Chris, Dana, and Finn all served in the infantry. Although these three participants were interested in college classes, operational requirements prevented them from taking any. Dana later participated in two computer science classes and received college composition credits through CLEP while stationed in Korea.

College and Major Selection. All six participants began their college careers at local community colleges. Bailey and Ellis chose schools near their active-duty bases before transferring to 4-year schools. Avery, Chris, Dana, and Finn chose schools near their hometowns. All six participants made the decision to attend their respective schools based on the support that they had at the time. Bailey and Ellis received support from their military organizations in terms of funding and time to attend classes. Bailey and Ellis also participated in classes alongside their military friends. Avery, Chris, Dana, and Finn received support from family and friends. All four initially returned to their parent(s)' homes to begin their college careers.

All six participants chose college majors based on their interests developed in the military. None of the participants previously knew friends or family members who worked in the fields they chose to study. Avery chose a career field based on income potential. He said, “Someday I wanna make six figures.” Bailey considered several careers to include musician, flight attendant, and lawyer. She was unsure what to study but began with lower-level business classes, which she enjoyed. She said, “I didn’t wanna major in business. But once I took a course I was like, ‘okay, I kind of love it.’” Chris’ inspiration for a college major came from substitute teaching at his former high school. Chris reflected on his seventh-grade social studies teacher’s classroom presence, saying “Like, she made social studies the most interesting subject ever. And from that point forward, it was my best subject and one I liked the most. So, I think she had the biggest influence on me.” At the time of his interview, Dana planned a career as an Army officer and chose a major that was “tangible after my military career.” Dana said,

> My first [college] class was accounting. When the professor walked in the classroom and spoke to us, he was very professional. His mannerisms were very reminiscent to that of a soldier, although he never served in the military. And I was just overwhelmed with the professionalism of this person. And the more I was in that class, the more I knew I wanted to study accounting. (Dana)

Ellis wanted to continue his studies in nuclear engineering “because I was already kind of familiar with that and I knew that I liked it.” But he lacked the adequate grades to transfer to a 4-year college. So, instead, he transferred to a private university as a liberal arts major. He “took an introductory computer science course, freshman year where [I] learned to code and really liked that. By the end of freshman first semester, [I] was a declared computer science major.” At the time of his interview, Finn was a freshman and had not declared a major.

The path from high school to college was different for all six participants. Each experienced their own challenges, but all six started in community college, developed support systems, and chose colleges and majors based on their experiences while in the military. Two of the participants (33%) began their college preparation while still in high school. The other four of the participants (66%) began their college preparation after military discharge. Despite when their plans were formulated, at the time of their interview, all six participants were successful in their college educations.

Theme 3: Leaders Influence Service Members' College Careers

Leaders coach, guide, and inspire others. The military develops new leaders beginning with the first day of IET. Throughout a service member's tour of duty, leadership development is continued with each position of increased responsibility. The military's emphasis on leader development is unmatched by any other industry—but not all service members become good leaders. The six participants of the study witnessed varying styles of leadership that had an overall effect on the climate of the organization and the careers of the participants.

Command Climate. The standard tour length for officers in command positions is 2 years. General officers are normally granted 1-year extensions. During a 4-year enlistment, it is likely to have three different commanders at every level in the chain of command. With each change in command, the out-going commander transfers the total responsibility of the organization and personnel to the in-coming commander. Less formally, the culture, or climate, of the organization changes as well.

Command climate is the culture of an organization. The commander sets the tone by what he or she says and does. As such, the commander owns the sole responsibility for the climate—whether good or bad. All six participants had more than one commander while on active duty

and all six experienced changes in the command climate with each change in leadership. Three of the six (50%) experienced both good and bad commanders. With the bad commanders, they experienced degraded command climates. Two participants (33%) reported toxic environments while they were in the military. Chris, Dana, and Finn served in infantry units and reported that they never had a bad commander, but they each experienced one or more NCO that had negative effects on the organization.

Avery, Bailey, and Ellis served in the Navy and equated their command climates with their ability to attend college classes. Each reported having some very good officers and some very bad ones. Avery commented that "the command culture climbed to almost an all-time low" and being "toxic" after one officer replaced another well-liked officer. Bailey remarked,

> The thing that I really liked about the Navy was that if you had a bad commander, or if you had a bad leader, you only had to put up with them for so long, and you knew that that was gonna continuously change. (Bailey)

Dana explained his command climates as changing with each command.

> People that were in supervisory positions at even at the lowest level had an impact on the overall command climate. But I would say there were peaks and valleys in it. I would say, for the most part, it was quite good. I do remember having a platoon sergeant at a particular point that just made life very miserable for everyone, and I think he was a miserable person, but that was on my first enlistment and that's when I seriously thought that maybe this wasn't the lifestyle I wanted after all. And he was only there for maybe a year and a half, but at the time, it felt like he was there for eternity. [Laughing] In hindsight, it still seems like a very long year and a half that he was there. (Dana)

Military leaders influenced the six participants. Some leaders were good influences, but in some cases, some leaders were not good influences. The six participants developed plans based on the climate of the commands they served. Eventually, those plans led to the six participants leaving the military and enrolling in college.

Theme 4: Community College is a Good Transition Point for Some Veterans

All six participants enrolled in community college in their hometowns or near their military duty stations to initiate their college careers. All six participants stated that community college was a good transition point from the military to an undergraduate program because their support systems were local, they were accompanied by other nontraditional students, military training credits were accepted, tuition was less expensive, and the other student veterans made them feel more in their element.

Military Training Credits. Colleges and universities have different methods for determining the number of military training credits they will accept and how the credits will be applied to a chosen degree. Some schools do not grant any credit for military experience while others accept nearly all credits. All six participants noted the acceptance of their military training credits as a factor for beginning their college educations at a community college. Ellis was concerned about his 83 credit hours obtained in the Navy's nuclear engineering program and was displeased with the TAP online assistance. He said,

> Some places will tell you that if you have a certain number of transfer credits from, like, other institutions that you have to come in as a transfer student and that you need a certain number of credits. So, there's, like, this, there's actually trade-offs to be made there that I don't think were communicated very well. (Ellis)

As a result, Ellis enrolled at a community college near his Navy base to maintain his military training with liberal arts credits.

Finn's National Guard leadership encouraged service members to enroll in community college for the military transfer credits. Finn said, "My team leader and squad leader know what I am going through and encouraged community college as a start. When I first started college, they texted me twice a week to check on me." Finn was the only participant that recalled discussing transfer credits during his TAP sessions.

Post-9/11 GI Bill Benefits. All six participants earned GI Bill benefits that they used or planned to use for college tuition. At the time of the interviews, five of the six participants (83%) used some or all of their GI Bill benefits. None of the participants used GI Bill benefits for community college tuition. Bailey and Ellis relied on military tuition assistance for their community college educations. Avery, Chris, and Dana used personal funds to pay for community college. Finn used a combination of military tuition assistance and personal funds and, at the time of his interview, he had not used any of his GI Bill benefits.

College Support Systems. As in the military, all six participants had support systems while in college. Bailey and Ellis's support systems in community college were other military service members. As such, both participants felt they "belonged" in community college. Avery, Chris, Dana, and Finn's support systems were their families and other community college students of comparable age—some of which were student veterans. Despite the support, four of the six participants (66%) were fearful about beginning college. Avery said,

> I knew that I hadn't done a math problem in almost 10 years. So, it kind of took my friend kicking me in the rear end and going, "Hey, man, you know, either go to school or shut the [expletive] up about it." And I'm really glad that he did. I dropped everything in

> my life, and I landed here in New York. I started in my hometown, and I went to community college where I graduated with honors, and I actually spoke at the commencement ceremony. (Avery)

Dana commented,

> It was a Saturday morning, I remember calling home [from Korea] to talk with my parents and asking if is it okay if I come and try college? I started at the local community college and then went from there. I knew that moving back home after being on my own for a couple years would be difficult, not only for me but for my parents. But without hesitation, my parents agreed. So that's what I did. (Dana)

Perceptions of Other Students. Four of the six participants (66%) had positive perceptions of traditional college students enrolled in the same college majors as the student veterans. Avery, Chris, Dana, and Finn compared the motivation and commitment of the traditional college students to the motivation and commitment of the members of their previous military organizations. Avery said,

> There's a lot of dedication, right? I mean, some of these kids are really driven and it's really awesome. They're incredibly supportive of each other, and I think that that's very relatable to what it's like to be in the service. I would say that the strongest comparison to my military friends. Very effective, very effective people. (Avery)

Bailey and Ellis did not feel the same way about the students in their programs or civilians in general. Bailey only associated with other veterans,

> 'Cause I just don't feel like anyone really understands. It's like sometimes I'll be like, "oh, this really reminds me of, like, general quarters [a term used to signal all sailors to man battle stations]" or something like that, cleaning stations, and it's just like nobody

understands what I'm talking about. And it's kind of crazy because that's all I knew for the past 9 years, and now it's like completely different."

Ellis also did not associate with other students:

> I mean, when I first got to college, I showed up and went to the dorms, and this was very shortly after I got out. So, I went from being around people who were, all sorts of ages to being around people who were just getting out of high school, who were about a 50/50 split of females and males, where the military is 90% or higher males. So, very different. I would say I didn't relate as closely to people. I did have friends in college, but it was hard to relate to people who were that much younger. (Ellis)

Soft Skills. Soft skills are personality traits that contribute to one's interactions with people and work. Military service personnel develop interpersonal and technical skills that aid them in working alone or as part of a team. All six participants noted valuable soft skills they learned in the military that contributed to college success. Avery did not recognize his learned soft skills as an asset until his second year of college. The other five participants immediately recognized the value. The soft skills that were mentioned most were leadership, time management, strategic planning, and adaptability in the face of adversity. Chris said it best: "I can deal with the unusual better now because the Marines gave me a goal, motivation, and confidence that transferred to my everyday life."

All six participants stated that community college was a good transition point from the military to an undergraduate program for several reasons, which included the location and structure of their support systems, the ability to transfer military education training as college credits, lower tuition costs, and the benefits that their soft skills played toward time and stress

management. This was an unexpected finding from the research, and it is not commonly found in current literature.

Summary

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to use Schlossberg's (1981, 1984) transition theory to understand student veteran strategies that led to success in undergraduate programs after serving in the military. The participants' lived experiences of military service, transition processes, and college classrooms were unique to each participant, but they shared some commonalities that formed the themes. The major themes that emerged from the data analysis were (a) military discharge does not make a civilian, (b) military-to-college planning: one size does not fit all, (c) leaders influence service members' college careers, and (d) community college is a good transition point for some veterans. All six participants acknowledged the stark contract between military indoctrination and discharge; that college planning occurred at different points in each participant's lives; the soft skills learned in the military contributed to college success; and that they had not fully transitioned from the military at the time of their interviews.

One surprising find was that all six participants enrolling at local community colleges helped with their transition process. Responses for the participants uncovered existing support systems with family, other active-duty personnel, and other student veterans; ease of military education transfer credits; lower tuition, which saved on GI Bill benefits; and the value of soft shills learned in the military. Overall, the participants of this study attributed their college success with beginning their college careers at community colleges.

Chapter 5: Discussion

Introduction and Purpose

The Government Accountability Office (2019) estimated that 200,000 American service members transition from the military to civilian life each year. Of the roughly 4.6 million veterans discharged since September 11, 2001, an estimated 3 million returned to college (Richman, 2017). More than 2 million of those veterans received VA education benefits. Student veterans often face challenges unknown to traditional college students. Existing studies have found high rates of health-risk behaviors, such as substance abuse and psychological disorders among veterans in college (Richman, 2017).

> Existing studies also cite problems for veterans adjusting to campus life and interacting with students. Student-veteran college dropout rates vary depending on the source, sample, and time frame of the data, but some common factors may affect student veterans' success in higher education include academic preparation, financial aid, institutional support, disability services, and social integration. (Statista, 2023, para. 4)

This research study explored some of the factors that impact student-veteran success in higher education. The purpose of this study was to address how student veterans implemented strategies to succeed in academia following their service in the United States military. The research questions of, What thoughts, incidents, or people associated with your military service stand out for you? How did your military service and transition affect your college experience? and What thoughts or feelings stand out as you think about your transition? guided this research through the theorical lens of Schlossberg's (1981, 1984) theory of transition.

Chapter 5 includes a discussion of the major findings as they related to the student veterans' lived experiences serving in the military, transitioning from the military, and succeeding in higher education. Chapter 5 discusses the research study's limitations, recommendations, and areas for future research and closes with a conclusion.

Discussion

This study's findings relate to college success following military service and they comprise four themes: (a) military discharge does not make a civilian, (b) leaders influence service members' college career paths, (c) military-to-college transition: one size does not fit all, and (d) community college is a good transition point for some veterans. Some factors relate to the individual, some factors relate to the military, and some factors are a combination of the successful relationship of both. These factors contributed to an environment that inspired the military service member participants to succeed in college following their terms-of-service obligations.

While the military service branch, occupational specialty, length of service, and experiences varied for the research participants, each of the four common themes were a prominent factor in the college success of those interviewed in this study. This research provides several findings relating to the lived experiences of the student veterans' transitions from military service member to college student. The findings integrated with the reviewed research, and the findings directly related to policy are discussed.

Findings Integrated with the Reviewed Research

There is extensive research on military service members transitioning to civilian life. Of that research, some of it relates to student-veteran transitions conducted at the university level. Little research relates to student-veteran transitions at the community college level—despite

being the level where most returning veterans attend school. In this study, all six participants began, or resumed, their college education at a community college. There are several factors that led the student veterans in this study to community college including their transition plans, military training transfer credits, personal finances, and GI Bill benefits, learned soft skills, and support systems.

Transition Plans. The student-veterans' college plans began at various stages in their military service. Some student veterans began planning before enlisting and some began planning during their military service. The six participants of this study began their transition planning and college selection process following their military service. In the literature reviewed, Ryan et al. (2011) found that positive transition experience from the military to college was the result of effective planning. Ghosh et al. (2019) found that the better one prepares for their military career transition, the better their academic satisfaction is in community college. The results of this study add to the Ryan et al. and Ghosh et al. studies, noting that the planning process can occur after one's active-duty service is complete. The participants of this study were uncertain of their college plans while on active duty, but they formulated effective, flexible plans soon after they were honorably discharged. At the time of the interviews, all six participants were successful in college and reported positive college experiences.

In other literature reviewed, Grimell and van den Berg (2020) found that veterans perceive their civilian status as a continuation of their military status. The results of this research study align with the Grimell and van den Berg study. All six participants of this study reported that upon discharge, they still felt like military service members. Two participants coped with this feeling by declaring college as their next "mission." Two other participants coped with it by

participating in ROTC or a local National Guard unit. And the last two participants coped with it by self-medicating.

Military Training. Many military occupational specialties provide training in critical skills that transfer into civilian life. All military service members participate in training programs with some lasting more than a year. When service members transition to college life, many wish to receive academic credit for their military training. Several studies exist on student veterans receiving military training credits in college. In one study, Persky and Oliver (2010) noted that one factor for student veterans choosing community college is the ease of converting military training to college credits. And in another study, Absher (2022) found that student veterans prefer attending community colleges because community colleges are often more willing than 4-year schools to accept transfer credit for military training. The lived experiences of the research participants in this study align with the existing body of knowledge regarding service members' military training credits. All six participants in this study chose attendance at a community college partly for their ability to transfer military training as college credit hours.

Veteran identity. Identifying a student-veteran on campus is often difficult. In the literature reviewed, Gilbert and Griffin (2015) found that distinguishing a student-veteran from a traditional college student is problematic. Many student veterans do not self-identify as former military service members to their college classmates and many colleges and universities do not maintain adequate records that identify student as veterans. The results of this study support the findings of Gilbert and Griffin. Recruitment for participants of this study was problematic as the university did not maintain records of students with veteran status. Recruitment was made possible by coordination with the university's veteran coordinator who only knew veterans by their participation in the university's Veterans Club. Of the six participants in this study, only

two identified as veterans on campus, but this was due to their affiliation with ROTC and the National Guard. The other four student veterans did not intentionally conceal their veteran status from professors or other students, but they simply did not initiate the conversation, wanting to experience college as a traditional student. All six participants felt comfortable discussing their military experiences when asked by professors or other students.

Personal Finances. Several studies discuss student veterans' concerns with personal finances while in college. Persky and Oliver (2010) and Gilbert and Griffin (2015) found that student veterans were concerned about a decrease or absence of income while attending college after leaving the military. The extent that the GI Bill will pay is another concern. Hornor (2021) found that when military education benefits were earned, 20% of the veterans studied did not plan to use their benefits after separation from the military. The results of this study add to the Gilbert and Griffin (2015) and Hornor (2021) studies. The six participants of this study included personal finances in their college selection process. Likewise, the student veterans saved money and earned GI Bill benefits while on active duty. Again, in all six cases, the student veterans in this study used personal finances to fund community college tuition, books, and living expenses, saving their GI Bill benefits for when they transferred to a more expensive 4-year university. Additionally, all participants of this study worked part-time jobs while in college and stated they wished they'd saved more money while on active duty.

Soft Skills. Soft skills are personality traits and behaviors, outside of technical skills that are learned through experience and are not necessarily attributed to age. Military service members develop soft skill by working with a variety of people from diverse cultures, demographics, and personalities. In the literature reviewed, leadership, teamwork, adaptability, and conflict resolution were some soft skills identified. Most soft skills have civilian

applications, and student veterans applied many of them in college. Norman et al. (2015) found that discipline and determination were two soft skills employed by student veterans. Pellegrino and Hoggan (2015) noted time management as another soft skill. Camacho et al. (2021) found that student veterans greatly valued their military-learned skills, such as patience and discipline. The results of this research align with the existing literature. The research participants reported use of soft skills as a significant factor in their college success and noted the lack soft skills in traditional college students. Group presentations with other students usually required the use of several soft skills as the student veterans occasionally took charge of the groups. In these cases, leadership, teamwork, dependability, adaptability, and conflict resolution were often applied.

In another study, Ahern et al. (2015) found that readjusting to societal norms is difficult after becoming acclimated to military norms. Service members search for new situations in their civilian lives where they feel the comfort and security previously known in their military lives. The research participants in this study add to the Ahern et al. study because the participants were more adaptable from their military service than they have been would without it. All six participants responded that their soft skill abilities were the result of their military experience and not something gained by simply getting older. One participant added that he can deal with the "unusual" better now.

Support Systems. Support systems are networks of people who provide physical, emotional, or financial support. Military service members are members, and sometimes the beneficiary, of support systems while in the military. When they transition to civilian life, the absence of support systems is often noted. As a result, many former service members try to reestablish support systems in their post-military lives. In the literature reviewed, Camacho et al. (2021) found that one factor leading to the success of student veterans enrolled in community

college near their military base was the support system of other military members and veterans enrolled in the program. Support systems are also found with family, friends, familiar surroundings, and college classmates of comparable age. Pellegrino and Hoggan (2015) found two cases where spouses were the support system for female student veterans. The results of this study align with the existing literature. The six participants in this study began their education at community colleges either near their military base or in their hometown. Two research participants began their educational journey at community colleges near their military base where the other students were mostly active-duty military or veterans. The student veterans shared norms with the other students and felt comfortable sharing ideas and working with them. Additionally, their military units provided tuition assistance for their classes. This support system contributed to the student veterans' initial success in college. Four of the research participants began their educational journey at community colleges in their hometown after they were discharged from the military. The support systems for these student veterans consisted of family, friends, familiar settings, and other students of comparable age. Five of the six research participants had already transferred to 4-year universities at the time of the interviews and noted that they no longer experienced the same support as they did in the military or in community college.

Combat Experience. The experiences of military personnel transitioning into civilian life can vary for the individual, but it is often one of the most difficult challenges faced by an individual. The experiences are more difficult when transitioning from combat. There are many studies on this topic. In two studies, Rumann and Hamrick and (2010) and Kato et al. (2016) found that readjusting from combat deployments to civilian life was challenging and that leaving a structured environment to an unstructured one created both employment and financial

concerns. Schonfeld et al. (2015) found that when participants were combat veterans of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, they were more likely to suffer from depression and PTSD, self-medicate, and have more difficulties adjusting to college life than their noncombat veteran peers. The results of this study align with the Rumann and Hamrick (2010), Kato et al. (2016), and Schonfeld et al. (2015) studies. In this study, two participants served in combat and both participants acknowledged additional challenges with re-immersion to civilian life due to the combat experience. The study also adds to the Rumann and Hamrick (2010) and Kato et al. (2016) studies regarding two research participants suffering similar stresses from their reoccurring sea-duty tours. In this case, both research participants described issues with trust and substance abuse.

Naphan and Elliott (2015) and Schonfeld et al. (2015) found that student veterans who experienced the most combat had the greatest difficulties transitioning. Conversely, Lee et al. (2017) found that combat exposure had only indirect effects on veterans' long-term psychological well-being. The results of this study did not align with the Schonfeld et al. and Naphan and Elliott findings, but they did align with the Lee et al. (2017) study. Two research participants each served more than 1 year in combat, but they did not appear to suffer as badly as the two research participants who had reoccurring sea duty. In fact, at the time of the interview, the two combat veterans were further in their transition journeys than the two sea-duty participants—despite being discharged from the military later.

Findings Directly Related to Policy

The findings in Theme 1: Military discharge does not make a civilian, of this study align with existing reports regarding service member difficulty with transitioning to civilian life following military service. Typical challenges student veterans face include difficulties

transitioning from a military style of technical learning and hierarchical organization to a university learning environment (VA, 2022a). The student veterans of this study shared experiences of their struggles adapting to civilian life and college environments. Additionally, the student veterans shared their learning experiences in the military as being part of their job. The findings of this study expand on existing literature by including experiences of military indoctrination and immersion into military culture fostered by informal (hazing) and formal rituals and ceremonies that included military school graduations. The student veterans shared that the longer they served in the military, the more immersed they became in the culture. However, upon completion of their service contracts, they were not deprogrammed to help transition them back into being civilians. As a result, all of the student veteran participants in this study reported that they were still in the transition process—despite some of them being discharge several years earlier.

The findings in Theme 1 of this study also align with existing policy regarding the TAP and out-processing the military. The DoD out-processes successful service members with dignity and respect, but the individual military services differ in their processes and their intended post-service relationship with the service member. Part of out-processing the military is the TAP. TAP is a joint effort among seven federal organizations to provide transitioning service member's with employment and job training assistance for all service members who have at least 180 continuous days or more on active duty or in the National Guard or Reserve. All six participants participated in TAP and successfully out-processed from the military. This is, however, where the finding and policy alignment stop. All six participants' out-processing experiences were different. The amount of time permitted, level of organizational support, and the value of TAP were different for each participant. One participant was given a full year to out-

process while another participant had only 2 weeks. Another participant deployed for sea duty 2 weeks prior to discharge and was required to out-process and complete TAP's virtual environment aboard a submarine. He reported that his TAP experience was "useless." All six participants felt TAP may have held value for other service members interested in post-military employment, but only one participant found value in TAP for transitioning to college.

Limitations

There are several limitations with this research study, but the conclusions are derived from the research data and are not the interpretation of the researcher. This study was limited by a sample of participants who were geographically similar before entering the military as well as after military discharge. Their military branch, occupational specialty, and transition experiences were unique to each individual and provided rich and impressive data, which allowed the themes and findings to emerge. As such, this limitation did not impact the research results. This study was also limited in access to the research participants. The participating university was unable to fully identify veterans from nonveterans. Despite this, an adequate sample size was achieved, thus not impacting the research results. Additionally, this study was limited by self-reported data regarding the accuracy of what the participants said, their biases, and their memories, but this limitation did not impact the research results. Lastly, this study was limited in the measure used to collect data. The researcher did not include interview questions concerning substance abuse and mental illness, although those topics emerged later in the study. This limitation also did not impact the research results. The limitations of this study are topics for future researchers to revise and gather data.

Recommendations

The results from this study provide several recommendations regarding the experiences of student veterans transitioning from active-duty military to the college classroom. The recommendations for future research are discussed first, followed by recommendations for the DoD, and recommendations for current service members considering transitioning to college following their service obligations as shown in Table 5.1.

Table 5.1

Summary of Recommendations and Basis

Recommendation for	Recommendation	Recommendation Basis
Future Research	Explore the experiences and perceptions of transitioning veterans who achieve 20 years or more of service.	Service members with 20 years or more service may experience different challenges with transition.
	Expand the population by exploring transition experiences of student veterans from outside of Upstate New York or student veterans who transitioned into graduate programs.	An expanded population will add validity to the findings of this study.
	Conduct a similar study with former members of the United States Coast Guard.	The Coast Guard is a component of the DHS, possibly resulting in different experiences and challenges.
	Conduct a quantitative study to explore the 4-year university graduation rate of student veterans who started in community college compared to those who started in a 4-year university.	A qualitative study could add validity to this quantitative study.
DoD	Standardize out-processing procedures for the DoD.	One standard for out-processing the military would benefit transitioning service members.
	Seek program licensure and academic accreditation.	This could ease college acceptance of military training.
Transitioning Student Veterans	Community college	Good environment for transition.
	Veteran organizations	Peer group, support, and network.
	Continued service	Tuition assistance.

Note. The recommendations are based on the findings and limitations of this study.

Recommendation for Future Research

The participants in this study were honorably discharged veterans of the United States military and students or recent college graduates at the time of their interviews. Their military service ranged from 3 to 9 years. Therefore, a future study that explores the experiences and perceptions of transitioning veterans who achieved 20 years or more of service is valuable. The findings of a study with an older population, more immersed in military culture, and transitioning to an undergraduate program could add to the body of knowledge on student veterans transition experiences. The recommendation would also provide more attention to the challenges student veterans encounter after leaving the United States military.

This study included undergraduate student veterans who were native to Upstate New York prior to joining the military and who had resettled in Upstate New York following their military service. A future study could expand the population by exploring transition experiences of student veterans from outside of Upstate New York or student veterans who transitioned into graduate programs. By adding the perspectives of a larger demographic, future research could align or add to the findings of this study. Additionally, a similar study with former members of the United States Coast Guard, which is a component of the DHS, could unveil trends or deviations from the DoD's system of out-processing and administration of the TAP.

Lastly, the body of knowledge on student veterans' transitions from the military to undergraduate college programs could be expanded with a quantitative study augmented that examines 4-year university graduation rates of student veterans who started in community college compared to those who started in a 4-year university.

Recommendations for the Department of Defense

Based on the finding in Theme 1: Military discharge does not make a civilian, the participants of this study highlighted the variations in out-processing procedures in the military. Differences in procedure were unveiled between the military service departments and between organizations within the same department. It is estimated that the typical cost to recruit and train a new member of the military is nearly $100,000. The average time between when an individual enlists and when they report for IET is 30–45 days, but when service members out-process from the military, they are often given less time to prepare for their life after the military. The findings of this study generate two recommendations.

The first recommendation is to standardize out-processing procedures for the Department of Defense (DoD). Each military service out-processes service members differently, and each organization within each service has their own variation on the process. The care and attention the military provides to creating a service member should be reciprocated when making a civilian. Create a military school that "makes civilians." Treat it like IET where every service member chooses a career field and reports to the transition school that specializes in that career field. Service members interested in employment would report to a transition school designed for post-military employment. Likewise, service members interested in college would report to a transition school designed for post-military higher education. This would generate a permanent change of station move where service members are instructed by civilian cadre and surrounded by other service members making the same transition choice. This would allow service members to have the deprogramming and transition they are not afforded by out-processing from their parent organization, and it would help them form networks that provide support following military service. The product of successful out-processing is a productive civilian and ambassador to the military.

The second recommendation is to seek program licensure and academic accreditation in each state with military training facilities. Title 10, United States Code, section 671 (10 U.S.C. § 671) requires a minimum of 12 weeks of basic training, or the equivalent, before a member of the Military Service may be deployed overseas. Upon completion of the initial military training, enlisted service members meet the initial foundational and developmental requirements to serve as an apprentice in their chosen career fields. Enlisted soldiers may participate in additional leadership or specialty training on their initial contract terms. Many of these skills are transferable to the private sector with comparable courses being taught at colleges/universities, trade schools, and corporate training programs. Upon completion of military service, many transitioning student veterans unsuccessfully seek acceptance of their military training as college credits—despite being in the same academic discipline. For example, one participant of this study received 83 hours of nuclear engineering courses in the Navy but upon discharge, his university only accepted them as general education credits. This could be remedied for future student veterans by the DoD achieving program licensure and academic accreditation in each state with military training facilities. The DoD could also partner with community colleges near military installations to assist service members with their transition from the military to college classroom. Community college is often the first step in student veterans' educational journeys. Beginning that journey with a military support system that encourages higher education would afford student veterans their reentry into education—sometimes after many years without any additional education.

Recommendation for Colleges and Universities

Colleges and universities often advertise their commitment to diversity. But most schools fail to include student-veterans as a diverse group. Appreciating and promoting diversity on a

college campus means knowing the circumstances and experiences of all students. That includes student-veterans. This means colleges and universities should understand military culture and appreciate of the lasting effects of deployments and combat. Additionally, not all student-veterans are served in the United States military. Foreign veterans also participate on American campuses. The six participants of this study provided recommendations for colleges and universities.

Create Veteran-Focused and Veteran-Friendly Campuses. Veteran-Focused campuses create inclusive environments where student-veterans can adjust to life following military service. Examples of veteran-focused and veteran-friendly campuses include schools with diversity statements and programs that include student-veterans, schools that offer courses specifically designed for servicemembers, veterans, and their families, and help remove the stigma of military service.

Promote Diversity by Embracing Student-Veterans. Higher education benefits from student-veterans on campus. The diversity of student-veterans and the cultural awareness generated in the military carries to college campuses following military service. Yet, many student-veterans struggle with their own new identities and their senses of belonging. While they are no longer military, many student-veterans don't quite identify as students either. The sometimes-lengthy military-to-college student transition causes many student-veterans to experience isolation instead of belonging. To better aid students transition from military, colleges and universities should foster inclusive environments for student-veterans. For example, colleges and universities should develop diversity statements that include student-veterans and add student-veterans as a core group in the schools' diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility/belonging programs. Another example is for colleges and universities to be

"veteran-friendly" by providing safe space and offering programs, support, and resources that values accessibility and belonging for military servicemembers and veterans. Campus climate assessments determine the extent that students, including veterans, feel welcomed, valued, and supported.

Veteran-Focused and Veteran-Friendly Courses. Colleges and universities should provide courses that are designed specifically for veterans and servicemembers, their families, and others affected by war that consist of material and activities that focus on the needs of the veteran and their families. For example, student-veterans are provided options with seating within the classroom and accommodations for out-of-class responsibilities such as work, medical appointments, and Army Reserve or National Guard obligations.

Remove Military Service Stigma. Colleges and universities should foster supportive cultures to reduce stigma associated with military service. Perceptions exist that student-veterans are less mentally stable then non-veteran students. Additionally, student-veterans perceived stigmas with seeking psychological help. This perceived stigma makes transitioning from military to civilian life more difficult.

Recommendations for Current Service Members

"Congratulations and thank you for your service!" These are words often heard by veterans. But from one veteran to another, it is meant wholeheartedly. Veterans achieve a life milestone many people will never know, and upon discharge, they are equipped with training and skills few others possess. Veterans are special—that is very clear! As they embark on life's journey following military service, they are well equipped to handle life's challenges, but occasionally they need help. The intent of this research is to provide some of that help. The lived

experiences of the six participants of this study provided recommendations for current or past service members are considering higher education after their military service.

Community College is a Good Transition Point for Some Veterans. Community college may be a good fit for service members and veterans because of the support systems, military training acceptance, and lower tuition cost. Additionally, community college students are often older, more mature, and have life experiences that traditional college students do not possess. Student-veterans often feel more comfortable in the community college environment as they gain a foothold in higher education. The community college experience affords veterans with time to mentally transition from the military before transferring to a 4-year college.

Veterans Organizations. Another recommendation from this study is joining veteran organizations or clubs. These organizations are excellent for disseminating information on veterans benefits and providing support for veterans in need. They are also excellent for making friends and networking with people with similar backgrounds.

Continuing Service. Service to the country can continue with reserve component organizations. Additionally, many reserve or National Guard organizations assist with college tuition. Two participants in this study continued their service by joining their local National Guard units. The Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) is another option to serve. Veterans possess leader/follower skills that traditional college students have not yet learned. The military offers commissioning programs at many colleges and universities with scholarships opportunities and monthly stipends for living expenses where student-veterans can apply these skills.

Conclusion

Service in the United States military is not just a job (AFSC, 2010; Mittelstadt, 2011) and leaving the military is not just leaving a job. The transition out of uniform at the end of a service

obligation represents a significant life change for military service members and their families that most civilians do not experience when changing jobs or careers. Many service members have difficulty with transitioning and the difficulties increase when transition leads to full-time college enrollment.

The DoD implements policies and processes for service member out-processing at the end of military terms of service, to include participation in TAP. Service members, however, receive different levels of organizational support and time to complete the program and out-process. Further, some service members complete TAP online due to operational requirements. Upon discharge, most military service members still act and feel “military,” although their surroundings and circumstances are very “civilian.” The transition that occurs with a DD-214 does not mentally occur with the veterans until sometime later—often months and years later. The delayed transition complicates the veteran’s adjustment to new careers and experiences, with college classes just being one of them.

This transcendental phenomenological research study allowed the researcher to examine the lived experiences of six student veterans enrolled or recently graduated from college. Five men and one woman participated in this research study. Three of the participants served in the U.S. Navy, two of the participants served in the U.S. Army, and one participant serviced in the U.S. Marine Corps. Each of the participants had more than 3 years’ experience in the military, and two participants served in combat. Data were collected using demographic surveys, semi-structured interviews, and field notes. The three forms of data were analyzed to identify themes.

The findings from this study add to previous research on military service-member transitions to college (Albright et al., 2020; Gilbert & Griffin, 2015; Hart & Thompson, 2016; Hinton, 2013; Persky & Oliver, 2010). The results of this study also support and expand research

in the field of DoD policy and procedures for separating service members. Three themes emerged from the data collection:

1. Military discharge does not make a civilian.
2. Leaders influence service members' college career paths.
3. Military-to-college transition: One size does not fit all.

During the interview process, an unexpected finding emerged that community college is a good transition point for some veterans. The six participants of this study began their higher educational journey starting in community colleges for several reasons. The community colleges were located where the student veterans had support from family, friends, or the military; community college tuition was often lower than 4-year colleges/universities; the student veterans had more in common with community college students than they did with traditional students; and community colleges are often more receptive than 4-year colleges/universities regarding military training credits.

Recommendations were discussed to suggest future research that would explore the experiences and perceptions of transitioning veterans who achieve 20 years or more of service, the transition experiences of student veterans who were former members of the United States Coast Guard, and a quantitative study to explore 4-year university graduation rates of student veterans who started at a community college compared to those who started at a 4-year university.

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to use Schlossberg's (1981, 1984) transition theory to understand student veterans' strategies that lead to success in undergraduate programs after serving in the military. The primary goal was to identify how transitioning service members successfully planned and enrolled in college following their

military service. The participants of this study shared their experiences with military indoctrination, deployment, combat, out-processing, transitioning, and college. The participants in this study earned GI Bill benefits and were honorably discharged from the military.

The DoD sets the industry standard for the size of the defense budget, advanced weaponry systems, extensive naval fleet, air units, large combat units, and elite special forces. An opportunity exists for the DoD to add productive and functional former military members to the public by the way it out-processes its separating service members. The experiences shared by the student veterans in this study address how they transitioned from the military and succeed in higher education.

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Appendix A

Definitions of Terms

Bad Conduct Discharge. This discharge can be imposed by a special court or general court. It is given as part of a court punishment to enlisted personnel only. Officers cannot receive this discharge. It is often given for the conviction of:

- absent without leave
- drunk while on duty
- driving while under the influence
- adultery
- disorderly conduct
- bad checks

Combat. A deliberate, violent action intended to physically harm or kill the opposition. For this work, it is defined as any combat zone service during a period of war after the Gulf War, or against a hostile force during a period of hostilities after November 11, 1998, in which Imminent Danger Pay is earned.

Combat Zone. Designated by an Executive Order from the President as areas in which the United States Armed Forces are engaging or have engaged in combat. An area usually becomes a combat zone and ceases to be a combat zone on the dates the President designates by Executive Order (DoD, 2022).

Department of Veterans Affairs Disability Rating. A VA disability rating is a percentage assigned to a service-connected disability based on the severity of the condition. Disability ratings are meant to compensate veterans for the average impairment in earning capacity caused by their service-connected condition(s) (VA, 2022).

Department of Veterans Affairs Disability Compensation. VA disability compensation (pay) offers a monthly tax-free payment to veterans who became sick or injured while serving in the military and to veterans whose service made an existing condition worse. Veterans may qualify for VA disability benefits for physical conditions (e.g., a chronic illness or injury) and mental health conditions (e.g., PTSD) that developed before, during, or after service (VA, 2022).

Dishonorable Discharge. This type of discharge is the worst anyone in the military can receive. It can only be given by a general court-martial for the highest of offenses, which are often accompanied by a prison sentence in a military prison (Veterans Authority, 2021b).

Dismissal. When you are an officer, you can be dismissed from military service. This discharge can be imposed by a special or general court and is often enforced alongside the maximum punishment as listed by the Manual for Courts Martial. It is an officer's version of a bad conduct discharge.

Entry-Level Separation. This form of discharge has no characterization. It is not honorable or general. It can be granted by a commander for members who were in the military for less than 180 days. In other words, it is for those who tried but could not make it during basic training and immediately after.

General Discharge (Under Honorable Conditions). This is often referred to as a general discharge and is bestowed upon those whose service was faithful and honest in spite of

some trouble—as determined by the commander. You might receive this discharge if you were discharged on the basis of:

- failure to maintain military standards in weight
- failure to maintain military standards in fitness
- failure to maintain military standards in dress
- failure to maintain military standards in appearance
- failure to progress in your training
- you received minor disciplinary infractions

GIB-SR Program. The Montgomery GI Bill for Select Reserve members, otherwise known as the MGIB-SR, is a VA educational benefit program that offers vocational and educational funding for military personnel currently enlisted in any branch of the Selected Reserves. This branch of the GI Bill can be used toward college degrees, flight training, vocational training certifications, and other career-oriented personal development activities. The MGIB-SR program has been recently accepted by the Small Business Administration as an appropriate method of payment for establishing a small business. To be eligible for the MGIB-SR program, the only requirement is that you complete the duration of your Selected Reserves service with an honorable discharge. Once the benefits from your GI Bill become available, up to 36 months of educational assistance will be ready for use (Veterans Authority, 2021a).

Honorable Discharge. Almost all enlisted service members receive an honorable discharge once their service ends. This means the service member met the standards of conduct and performance while enlisted and that the service was meritorious so as to receive a medal for bravery or valor. A service member could have disciplinary action on his or her record but if they

received a medal for valor on the battlefield, it may still get allow the service member to leave the service with an honorable discharge.

Hostilities or Imminent Danger Pay. Hostile fire pay is defined as pay to anyone exposed to hostile fire or mine explosion, while imminent danger pay is paid to anyone on duty outside the United States area who is subject to physical harm or imminent danger due to wartime conditions, terrorism, civil insurrection, or civil war (DoD, 2022).

MGIB-AD Program. The MGIB-AD program, otherwise known as the Montgomery GI Bill for Active Duty, is a VA educational benefits program that offers educational funding and career training for individuals currently enlisted as active-duty members of a military branch. Applicants accepted into the program can expect to receive VA educational benefits to use on tuition, books, and career training for up to 3 years. The exact amount each service member will qualify for depends on their duration of service, college fund availability, active participation in the MGIB-AD $600 buy-in program, and the course of study the individual plans to pursue. To be considered eligible for the VA benefits through this program, enlistees are required to have at least a high school diploma or GED, as well as 3 years of consecutive active duty in one of the following branches: the Army, Navy, Air Force, or Marines. Active-duty enlistees can apply for the MGIB-AD program by submitting an online application, or by visiting their VA regional office in person (Veterans Authority, 2021a).

Other Than Honorable Discharge. Of all the administrative discharges this is the worst. This is warranted if your discharge was for a pattern of bad behavior. Anyone who receives a court-martial conviction without punitive discharges is given this discharge characterization. This can include:

- a pattern of continued misconduct

- an act of serious misconduct
- abuse of authority
- fraternization

REAP – Reserve Educational Assistance Program. Established with the intention of also offering the vast educational benefits of the GI Bill for the Reserves, REAP can be used for vocational or institutional courses as well as for flight training. Unfortunately, the benefits gained from this program cannot be combined with financial assistance from any other VA programs. The amount that one is awarded by the REAP program is entirely dependent upon the duration of a one's active-duty service as a member of the reserves. Any members who serve a minimum of 90 days are eligible for approximately $686.80, while Reservists who serve in active duty for 2 or more years are eligible for up to $1,373.60. Applications are accepted through the U.S. government's VA site (Veterans Authority, 2021a).

Student Veteran. 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, legal veteran status, or GI Bill use (Vacchi, 2012).

The Air Force is part of the DoD. It's responsible for aerial military operations, defending the U.S. air bases and building landing strips. Its service members are Airmen. The reserve components are Air National Guard and Air Force Reserve (USAGov, 2023).

The Army is part of the DOD and is the largest of the military branches. It handles significant ground combat missions, especially operations that are ongoing. Army Special Forces are called Green Berets for their headgear. The Army's members are its soldiers. The reserve components are the Army Reserve and Army National Guard (USAGov, 2023).

The Coast Guard is part of the DHS. It provides national security and search and rescue for America's waterways, seas, and coast. It's responsible for stopping drug smugglers and others breaking maritime law. It enforces marine environmental protection laws. Service members are Coast Guardsmen and nicknamed "Coasties." The reserve component is the Coast Guard Reserve (USAGov, 2023).

The Marine Corps is part of the DOD. It provides land combat, sea-based, and air-ground operations support for the other branches during a mission. This branch also guards United States embassies around the world and the classified documents in those buildings. Marine Corps Special Operations Command (MARSOC) members are known as "Raiders." All service members are called Marines. The reserve component is the Marine Corps Reserve (USAGov, 2023).

The Navy is part of the DOD. It protects waterways (sea and ocean) outside of the Coast Guard's jurisdiction. Navy warships provide the runways for aircraft to land and take off when at sea. Navy SEALs (sea, air, and land) are the special operations force for this branch. All service members are known as Sailors. The reserve component is Navy Reserve (USAGov, 2023).

The Post-9/11 GI Program. Specifically designed for service members called into active duty on or after September 10th, 2001, the Post-9/11 GI Bill offers educational benefits for veterans interested in furthering their education. The funding applies to many educational and vocational uses, including tuition assistance, admittance fees, and housing costs. In some instances, a relocation allowance is offered to service members in need of transferring locations to attend the school of their choice. While the total payout received from the Post 9/11 GI Bill varies according to service status, length of service, and skills training, it does have the potential to fund up to $21,084.89 for individuals interested in attending private, public, or foreign

schools. Monthly housing allowances are paid out in amounts up to $2,700, while book stipends are usually an additional $1,000 grant. To qualify for this GI Bill benefits program, applicants must have at least 90 days of total service. Subsequently, to qualify for the maximum payout from the program, service members are required to serve a minimum of 36 months of total service (Veterans Authority, 2021a).

The Space Force is a new branch, created in December 2019 from the former Air Force Space Command. The Space Force falls within the Department of the Air Force. It organizes, trains, and equips space forces to protect the United States and allied interests in space and provides space capabilities to the joint force (USAGov, 2023).

Veteran. Title 38 of the Code of Federal Regulations defines a veteran as “a person who served in the active military, naval, or air service and who was discharged or released under conditions other than dishonorable.” (Veterans Authority, 2021b).

Appendix B

U.S. Army Career Fields and Branches

Acquisition Corps
Adjutant General's Corps
Air & Missile Defense
Ammunition
Armor
Chaplain
Civil Affairs
Construction & Engineering
Cyber Warfare
Electronic & Missile Maintenance
Electronic Warfare
Field Artillery
Financial Management
Infantry
Intelligence
Interpreter/Translator
Judge Advocate General Corps
Mechanical Maintenance
Medical
Military Police
Psychological Operations/Military Information Support Operations
Public Affairs
Quartermaster Corps
Recruiting & Retention
Signal Corps
Special Operations
Transportation
Transportation & Aviation

Appendix C

Pseudonym Choices

Addison
Adlai
Adrian
Aiden
Ainsley
Alby
Alex
Alexis
Ali
Amari
Amen
Amory
Andie
Andy
Angel
Archer
Arden
Ari
Ariel
Armani
Arrow
Arya
Ash
Ashley
Ashton
Aspen
Aubrey
Auden
August
Austin
Avery
Avis
Azariah
Bailey
Baker
Bay
Bellamy
Bergen
Bevan
Billie
Blaine
Blair
Blake
Brett
Briar
Brighton
Bronwyn
Brook
Brooke
Brooklyn
Caelan
Cameron
Campbell
Carmel
Carmen
Carroll
Carson
Carter
Casey
Cassidy
Celyn
Chandler
Channing
Charleston
Charlie
Chris
Christian
Clancy
Clarke
Clay
Clayton
Cleo
Cody
Corey
Cypress
Dakota
Dale
Dallas
Dana
Darby
Daryl
Dawson
Delta
Denver
Devin
Devon
Eden
Egypt
Eli
Ellery
Elliot
Ellis
Ellison
Emerson
Emery
Erin
Ever
Everest
Fabian
Finley
Finn
Florian
Flynn
Francis
Frankie
Gabriel
Gene
Gentry
Gillian
Glen
Gray
Greer
Hadley
Halo
Hampton
Harley
Harlow
Harper
Haskell
Haven
Hayden
Hero
Holland
Hollis
Honor
Hudson
Hunter
Indiana
Indigo
Jean
Jesse
Jody
Joe
Jordan
Journey
Jules
Julian
Justice
Kaden
Kadin
Kai
Kamryn
Keegan
Keelan
Keely
Kei
Keith
Kelly
Kelsey
Kendall
Kennedy
Kensley
Kerry
Kevin
Kieran
Kiley
Kim
Kingsley
Kylar
Kyle
Kylin
Kyrie
Lake
Landry
Lane
Lee
Lennon
Lennox
Leslie
Lincoln
Linden
Lindsay
Lyric
Macey
Mackenzie
Madison
Marley
Marlo
Marlow
Mason
Max
Maxwell
Memphis
Merit
Merritt
Micah
Michael
Micky
Milan
Miller
Monroe
Montana
Morgan
Moriah
Murphy
Navy
Nevada
Nicky
Nico
Nikita
Noel
Oakley
Ocean
Ode
Ore
Oswin
Owen
Paris
Parker
Pat
Payson
Peyton
Peace
Perry
Phoenix
Ray
Rayne
Reagan
Rebel
Reed
Reese
Regan
Reilly
Remi
Remington
Remy
Rene
Revel
Ridley
Riley
Rio
Ripley
River
Roan
Robin
Rorey
Rory
Roux
Rowan
Royal
Rudy
Rumi
Ryan
Rylan
Sage
Sailor
Salem
Sam
Samar
Sasha
Sawyer
Scout
Sean
Seneca
Shae
Shannon
Shawn
Shay
Stevie
Storm
Sunny
Sutton
Sydney
Sydney
Tanner
Tate
Tatum
Taylen
Taylor
Tennessee
Tennyson
Teri
Texas
Timber
Tobin
Toby
Tony
Tory
Tracy
Trinity
Tristan
Tru
Tyler
Umber
Unique
Val
Valentine
Vesper
Vick
Wallis
Wesley
West
Whitney
Wilder
Winn
Winter
Wisdom
Wren
Wyatt
Wynne
Xen

Appendix D

Guiding Interview Questions

Why did you join the military?

Prompts: What were you doing in life when you enlisted? Tell me about your family members who served in the military. What military benefits were you interested in (Travel, training, medical, educations)?

What was your military experience?

Prompts: What was your first experience in the military? What were some rituals or ceremonies you witnessed in the military? Tell me about your command climate. Tell me about your friends, how similar or different to you were they? Tell me about the command climate towards earning college credits while in the military? Prompts: What did it do to accommodate or impede higher learning? Did others in your unit take college training? Tell me about your experiences out-processing the military (When did you begin? What did you personally do to prepare for life after the military? GI Bill? Transfer Credit?). Tell me about your main challenges while in the military, during your transition, or as a student? And who/what has been your main support moving from the military to the college classroom? Tell me how the military met your expectations?

Tell me about your college experience.

Prompts: What motivated you to go to college? When did you decide to pursue higher education? What motivated you to pick your major? Tell me about the people you know who work in the field you are studying? Did you know these people before or after you joined the military? How were they impactful in your life? On

campus, do you identify as a veteran? If so, to who and why? If not, why? How are you treated by the faculty and students on campus who know you are a veteran? Tell me about your friends on campus. How are they similar/different to your friends in the military? And how are they different from non-college friends you have in the community? What activities involve your time outside the classroom? Do you participate in athletics, student clubs, employment, socialize?

What skills, including MOS and soft skills, from the military work for you as a student?

Prompts: Leadership, time management, anxiety management skills? How are these skills associated with the military as opposed to mere maturity?

Knowing what you know now, what would you do differently in preparation from college-life after the military? What would you recommend to someone transitioning from military to college today?

Appendix E

General Interview Questions

1. What thoughts, incidents, or people associated with your military service stand out for you?

2. How did your military service and transition affect your college experience?

3. What thoughts or feelings stand out as you think about your transition?

4. Have you shared everything you think is important about your transition experience?

Appendix F

Recruitment Flyer

Calling all Veterans

to participate in research!

A doctoral study is being conducted of student veteran transition experiences from the military to college classroom. The ultimate goal of this study to help future veterans better transition from the military and be successful in higher education.

If you are 18 years of age or older, served 12 consecutive months or more on active duty, and currently enrolled full-time in an undergraduate program, you can help with the research.

For more information or to participate, contact:
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Mobile:
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