THE ACT OF BECOMING A COLLEGE STUDENT: A CASE STUDY OF STUDENT
VETERANS' EXPERIENCES PRE-DURING-POST MILITARY SERVICE

A Dissertation

by

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This dissertation meets the standards for scope and quality of
Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi and is hereby approved.

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May 2017

ABSTRACT

        Each year the number of individuals who join the military is around 150,000, and many

only spend four to eight years in the military before leaving to find their next career as a civilian.

Many of these veterans enroll in higher education and begin to utilize the educational benefits

they earned through their military service. Student veterans represent a growing demographic

within higher education. Officials at these institutions need to gain new knowledge of the veteran

experiences and how those experiences inform their perception of self as a college student.

        The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand the transitional and

transformational experiences of military veterans who are now college students. More

specifically, the purpose of this case study (Creswell, 2007; Yin, 2003; Merriam, 2004) was to

explore the experiences of five student veterans in three universities and two states (Texas and

Ohio) to understand how they created a connection between their pre-during-post military

experiences, how they managed the process of change from military personnel to college

students, and the act of their transformation.

        This study employed constructivism (Christ, 2011) as its methodological framework.

Using Schlossberg's Transition Theory (Schlossberg, Waters & Goodman, 1995) and Mezirow's

Transformational Learning (Mezirow, 1996) as the theoretical frames, with interviews (Qu &

Dumay, 2011) as the primary source of data collection, An inductive analysis (Saldaña, 2011)

was conducted to analyze the data to conduct the case study with findings presented as rich

descriptive narratives (Creswell, 2007). After the interviews were completed and the analysis of

individual cases conducted, a case analysis (Yin, 2003) resulted in six themes: the path is not

straight, environments of learning, disorienting dilemma, uncompromising mindset, a part of the whole, and a shared sense of self.

This study informs university administrators and faculty about the unique student veteran demographic. The implications apply to higher education administrators as they prepare for the increased number of veterans who will be entering higher education in the future and higher education faculty as they prepare for unique instruction that these veterans expect.

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to the men and women who have and continue to serve this country with honor and courage. Thank you for your continued service to this great country, I am happy to call each one of you my brother or sister.

I also dedicate this to my parents, without them in my corner, I never would have been able to complete this dissertation nor would I have had the confidence to achieve the academic goals that I have achieved. Your love and patience have not gone unnoticed since the first day of freshman year when you dropped me off at WCU, thank you for everything!

Finally, I dedicate this to my sister who has supported me through this entire process and has given me more support than she will ever know. Thank you for everything Nishelle!

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To all the individuals above, I say one final *Thank You* from the bottom of my heart.

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

This case study brings together the experiences of military personnel and how those experiences may have subsequently informed their transition to the role of college student. While the post-military transition represents the manifestation of a new identity, it is the transformational process, itself, through which student veterans acknowledge and come to terms with their identity that is of interest in this study.

With more than two million United States military veterans returning from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, prior to 2008, and enrolling, or re-enrolling, in institutions of higher education (American Council on Education, 2008), some have argued (Cook & Kim, 2009) that colleges and universities were not prepared for the unique challenges presented by student veterans, nor for that matter, how to best serve war veterans, now students. Typically, colleges and universities serve traditional students, those who enter college immediately following graduation from high school. However, the needs of student veterans are distinctly different from the needs of traditional students, perhaps even more so for those who experienced combat while serving in the military (Ackerman, DiRamio, Garza, & Mitchell, 2009). On one hand, the administrative processes associated with academic entry, or re-entry, interruptions to education due to activations and/or deployments, and processing the paper work for veteran financial benefits are challenges solely owned by student veterans (Ackerman et al., 2009). On the other hand, student veterans may also need help beyond navigating the bureaucracy of paperwork, such as academic advising, orientation to college, and personal counseling assistance (Rumann & Hamrick, 2009).

The manner in which institutes of higher education address the specific needs of student veterans may be related to whether or not colleges and universities are even aware of the unique

challenges brought about by the *experiences* of students who have served in the military. Interestingly enough, Knowles (1980) suggests adults in general tend to define themselves by their experiences, often describing themselves, individually and collectively, based on an identity, such as parent, spouse, worker, volunteer, or community activist. Individual experiences along with societal group memberships contribute to identity formation and development. Hammond (2015) suggests for student combat veterans, the identity of veteran is ever-present, shaping who they are and how they view the world around them. Yet, these veterans may also claim membership in multiple groups such as student, civilian, brother, sister, or parent (Burke & Stets, 2009).

While group membership often represents commonly held assumptions of strength, adaptability, team orientation, or opinions, used to describe both the self and the group within social and political structures (Brookfield, 1993; 1994; 1996), the act of taking on a particular identity requires an interaction with others of similar identity and a contextual activation within a particular environment (Burke & Stets, 2009). However, little is known about how experiences, within the context of identity and environment, help to inform an individual's transition into new settings and roles, specifically for military personnel moving into civilian life that now includes the process of *becoming* a college student.

Rumann and Hamrick (2010), along with Hammond (2015) suggest that student veterans must continually renegotiate their own personal identity as they transition from a military environment to a college campus. For student veterans, their change from active duty to college may well be informed by attitudinal experiences produced through the teaching and learning of military doctrine "forcing service members into pre-assigned identities" (Jones, 2013. p. 1) as well as distinct high stress environmental conditions. Initial training for service members ranges

from learning about the history, customs, values, ethics, and justice specific to the military to

military bearing, how to properly wear a military uniform, warrior training, and other relevant

information critical to their individual success in the service and the overall success of the

Armed Forces (Dunivin, 1997). From this training, a cultural norm is developed and reinforced,

emphasizing mental toughness, resiliency, inner strength, and self-reliance (Tanielian & Jaycox,

2008).

Environmental conditions may also affect the ease with which service members'

transition out of the military and into the college classroom. The participants in Jones' (2013)

study of veterans were challenged in adapting to civilian identity, sharing that when they left

behind the military's distinctly hierarchal environment and returned to a civilian world, it was

difficult and they had trouble "obtaining the ability to self-regulate" (p. 11). Furthermore, beyond

the regimented military environment, active duty National Guard and Reserve members, while

deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan, have endured an environment filled with intense guerrilla

warfare, chronic threats of roadside bombs, and improvised explosive devices (Seal, Berthenthal,

Miner, Sen, & Marmar, 2007). It is estimated that individuals who have experienced prolonged

and repeated exposure to combat-related stress have a 40% chance of acquiring a cognitive

injury such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or traumatic brain injury by the time they

complete their service (Milliken, Auchterlonie, & Hoge, 2007; Tanielian & Jaycox, 2008).

While research concerned with student veteran identity and transitions is emerging, little

empirical evidence exists exploring how transitions and experiences pre-during-post military

service inform how student veterans re-negotiate their identity or, for that matter, how their

perception of their own identity may influence their experiences in college (Livingston, Havice,

Cawthon, & Fleming, 2011). With the recent winding down of military deployments in Iraq and

Afghanistan, student veterans are poised to return to higher education in record numbers and, with their return, they bring their "own array of unique and diverse background and life experiences to the college campus" (Hammond, 2015, para. 3). Yet, as DiRamio and Jarvis (2011) point out, "few college administrators, faculty members, campus staff, or traditionally age students can claim for themselves or, perhaps, empathize with or relate to those experiences" (p. 1). Without a better understanding of student veterans within the academy, by which institutes of higher education can better respond to specific needs of this group, veterans will continue to be less likely to persist to degree completion compared to non-veteran students. According to Kelley, Smith, and Fox (2013), the National Center for Education Statistic (NCES) reported veterans are 21.2% less likely than non-veterans to attain a bachelor's degree and 4.1 % more likely to drop out of college.

With a sharpened focus on retention, persistence, and graduation, colleges and universities are looking for more ways in which to support student success as institutes of higher education become increasingly more diverse (Seidman, 2005; Dumbrigue, Moxley, & Najor-Durack, 2013). However, much of their efforts continue to target traditional freshman students and their pre-entry college attributes such as family background, skill, ability, prior schooling, or financial aid, and how these attributes work to form individual goals and commitments as well as how these goals interact over time with the formal and informal academic and social systems of an institution (Tinto, 1975, 1993, 1997). In response, colleges and universities have created retention initiatives to include writing centers, remedial curriculum, academic resource centers, outreach, and engagement programs, hoping that developing interventions create positive experiences and reinforce student intentions and commitments to persist to graduation.

Tinto (1997) explains,

Persistence requires that individuals make the transition to college and become

incorporated into the ongoing social and intellectual life of the college. A sizable

proportion of very early institutional departures mirror the inability of new students to

make the adjustment to the new world of the college. Beyond the transition to college,

persistence entails the incorporation, which is integration, of the individual as a

competent member in the social and intellectual communities of the college. (p. 126)

Yet, while it is anticipated that the presence of student veterans on college and university

campuses will grow, institutions of higher learning continue to struggle to meet their needs and

improve persistence and completion rates for this student population; a group that represents not

only a diverse mix of individuals, but which has different experiences from those of traditional

students. The most common pre-college attributes shared by traditional students and student

veterans include prior schools, skills, ability, and family background.

However, colleges and universities need to also consider student veterans' pre-entry

attributes of health concerns and physical disabilities, as well as psychological and adjustment

difficulties. With nearly one in three veterans suffering from PTSD (Tanielian and Jaycox,

2008), these attributes have garnered quite a bit of attention of late with regard to higher

education. Student veterans with PTSD may benefit from counseling to develop strategies for

reframing problems and threats (Hackney & Cormier, 2005). However, colleges and universities

are not prepared to provide long-term professional help for student veterans with PTSD (Science

Daily, 2010).

Lastly, while financial concerns are an additional pre-entry attribute shared by traditional

students and student veterans, there is a distinct disparity between the two groups regarding this

characteristic. The distinction is that many veterans enlisted to escape bleak employment prospects and economic hardship, with the intent of earning money for college (DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2008).

Taken together, the pre-college attributes of student veterans cut across, or perhaps parallel, Maslow's hierarchy of needs (1954). Only through social and academic integration within this new environment for the student veteran, the college or university campus, will persistence to attain academic goals, and achieve the intellectual and social competence that will then contribute to a sense of purpose and self-awareness.

With the emerging research on student veteran transition to, and retention in, higher education, the depth and breadth of one's adult learning experience most certainly can be used as a resource (Knowles, 1980) for institutes of higher education to consider as they respond to the unique needs of the student veteran. For instance, today's student veteran, having served in Iraq or Afghanistan, may bring "his or her own suppositions about the nature of knowledge and processes for meaning making" (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011, p. 86). One creative approach shared by DiRamio and Jarvis is for colleges and universities to consider offering a course that helps the student veteran with his or her own transition by reflecting, writing, and engaging in discourse surrounding their military experience as it relates to authority and the complex questions of life. Yet, at the same time, these institutions must provide a secure environment that allows for this group of students to "engage with material on war without having to deal with any possible stigmas about having students in the class who weren't veterans" (as reported by Epstein, 2009, p. 1). Ohio State University has done just that. According to Dorothy Noyes (as reported by Epstein), folklore director from Ohio State University, a comparative studies class that used literature, art, and film from multiple time periods was offered with a specific section opened

only to active duty servicemen, veterans, national guard, and reserves. Epstein (2009) goes on to share from Noyes that

> for students who have been through an experience that nobody should have to go through, this should be a good transition into academic work … a way for them to take the things they've learned on the ground and apply those resources to their academic experiences. (p. 1)

Further, considering the change that occurs during the transition from military life to that of a college student, an individual must evaluate, and be willing to change, their frames of reference (Mezirow, 1988, 1991). To do so requires "critically reflecting on their assumptions and beliefs and then consciously making and implementing plans that bring about new ways of defining their worlds" (Benson, Hewitt, Heagney, Devos, & Crosling, 2010, pg. 28).

Background

The scholarly literature concerned with student veterans is cyclic (DiRamio et al., 2008), and appears to be most abundant at the conclusion of a conflict or war. For instance, at the conclusion of the Vietnam War (Joanning, 1975), much was written about the academic achievement and the mental health of veterans (Card, 1983; Horan, 1990; Joanning, 1975). Since the start of conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, there has been a renewed interest in veterans leaving service (DiRamio et al., 2008; Elliott, Gonzalez, & Larson, 2011; Ford, Northrup, & Wiley, 2009; Ostovary & Dapprich, 2011). From that literature, we know the experiences of veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan and transitioning back to civilian life are different from those who returned from Vietnam. For instance, while the environmental conditions for both, the Vietnam jungles versus the Iraqi desert or Afghanistan urban warfare, were high stress situations, the level of support received returning stateside was completely different for each

veteran. Vietnam veterans experienced a negative homecoming compared to the welcome experienced by Iraq and Afghanistan veterans (Chard, Schumm, Owens & Cottingham, 2010). This difference in returning experiences can have an effect on a successful transition after the military.

Furthermore, the literature suggests that many current service members, who enlisted in the wake of September 11, 2001, continue to be deployed around the world to battle the *war on terror*. This ongoing battle against an enemy that was, and continues to be, unknown and sometimes unseen, has followed on the heels of their initial deployment to Iraq and Afghanistan (Bush, 2007). And yet, while enlistment did rise immediately after the 9/11 attacks, it did so only modestly. In truth, it was the stock market crash and housing market collapse of 2008 that fueled a new tide of enlistments (Dao, 2011). Regardless of the triggering mechanism that caused individuals to enlist, more than 2 million have been sent to Iraq or Afghanistan, where more than 6,000 have been killed, and over 44,000 wounded in action. Dao (2011) goes on to report that one in five returning from Iraq and Afghanistan suffer with PTSD, major depression, or traumatic brain injury. These are the men and women, who Livingston (2009) points out, are the ones entering colleges and universities.

Since the Middle East conflicts, over 2.5 million men and women have been activated, deployed, and are now beginning to return to civilian life (Adams, 2013). This increase in the number of veterans returning is important to understand as veterans choose to enter into higher education after considering a number of factors. According to the National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics (2014), between 2000 and 2012 the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs has provided education benefits to more than 900,000 veterans and military service members, with the largest influx of beneficiaries, an increase of 42%, occurring between 2009 and 2010.

Interestingly enough, even though every state has veterans enrolled in colleges and universities, the National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics reports that in 2012, 80% of those receiving educational benefits resided in just 23 states, with California, Texas, Florida, Virginia, and Arizona having the largest number of recipients representing about a third of those receiving benefits.

Cook and Kim (2009) reported that institutions of higher education with less than 1% veteran enrollment were characterized as low-veteran enrollment, and those institutions with 3% or higher were defined as high-veteran enrollment schools. While these percentages may seem low, 3% of the population may, in fact, include a large number of student veterans on campus, depending on the size of the institution. For example, as of 2009 student veterans accounted for 2.7% (N=968) of Texas Tech University's total enrollment of 35,859. At a much smaller institute such as Lynchburg College in Virginia, student veterans account for 4.6% (N=99) of their total student enrollment of 2,161. With over 3% of their student populations being student veterans, Cook and Kim would classify Lynchburg as a high-veteran enrollment institution, whereas Texas Tech falls somewhere in the middle, having more than 1% of the student population identified as student veteran, but less than 3%.

The National Conference of State Legislatures (2014) stated that of those veterans and active duty services members enrolled in undergraduate programs, 84% are 24 years of age or older. Whereas the United States Census Bureau (2016) reports that 34% of students, both undergraduate and graduate, enrolled were over the age of 24. This concentration of an older, non-traditional student as represented by the student veteran, is important because many of the services provided by institutes of higher education may be geared toward traditional college students. Of particular importance to some scholars (Field, Hebel, & Smallwood, 2008;

Livingston, 2009; Rumann, 2010) is understanding why student veterans choose one particular institution or setting over another. Field et al. (2008) suggest that veterans consider cost, convenience, as well as the level of *veteran oriented* services an institute provides to student veterans. Some refer to this orientation as military- or veteran-friendly. Veteran-friendliness is a term loosely used to describe efforts intended to provide a welcoming, or accommodating, environment on campus (Lokken, Pfeffer, McAuley & Strong, 2009). When a university removes barriers for military students and strives to provide personnel with prior military service to assist these veterans with the transition, veterans will often perceive these institutions as military- or veteran-friendly (Ackerman et al., 2009; Elliot et al., 2011; Lokken et al., 2009; Rumann & Hamrick, 2009, 2010; Ryan, Carlstrom, Hughey & Harris, 2011).

Certainly, the college environment, whether welcoming or not, has played an important part in the success of a student veteran's transition. However, the transition process itself does not end nor work in isolation of other changes occurring for the student veteran. Mezirow (1994) claims that frames of reference, the means by which adults see themselves and the world around them, must also change within a successful transition. Current literature has provided insight to the transition processes themselves, especially when considering the cultural environment of a college or university. For most student veterans, leaving the military and arriving at the college or university campus, is an intentional act. But, as Pollock and Van Reken (1999) state in their study of the transitioning of third culture children, settling in to a new place and becoming a part of it may happen consciously or unconsciously. Just because one becomes a student veteran in name, they may still have to figure out how to become a part of the community. While scholars and administrators may have paid particular attention to the actual transition process, little research has focused on the changes a student veteran encounters in their own self-examination

of the transition. Failure to consider a student veteran's conceptions of self and the world, post military, may require him or her to formulate new perspectives as a college student that may in fact create or sustain unnecessary obstacles or challenges within their transition.

Statement of the Problem

The research study is concerned with student veterans in institutes of higher education and how their experiences have influenced their transition from active duty to being enrolled in college and, in turn, how these transitions have informed their learning about self and the world around them. Of particular importance is knowing that higher education professionals are expected to assist the one million veterans already enrolled, and the expectation of an additional one million veterans set to enroll, with the transition into college (Nadeem, 2013). With these numbers of veterans returning and re-enrolling, personnel in institutions of higher education need to understand the uniqueness of the student veterans of this era. Many may be suffering from traumatic experiences due to combat related issues, whereas others may experience post-deployment related issues such as PTSD (Padin-Rivera, Schupp & Buck, 2011). In many cases, the processes in place to assist military personnel in the transition to student veteran are fraught with bureaucratic paperwork. However, the American Council on Education has been vigilant in researching student veterans and identifying what aids them with the transition into higher education as it relates to government funding and student veteran programs needed by the institutions (2008, Cook & Kim, 2009; Cook et al., 2012; Radford, 2009). While colleges and universities have made strides in helping student veterans navigate the system by offering trained counseling staff and governmental support (Cook et al., 2012), there has been little focus from institutes of higher education in helping student veterans adjust to the teaching and learning that occurs within the classroom.

While there is no doubt that there is more to student veterans than the government funding and programs available to them at institutions, there has been little focus on what Branker (2009) asserted, in that "veterans are finding their combat experiences create an undeserving imbalance as they trade ammunition for education" (p. 59) putting away their guns and enrolling in institutions of higher education to better themselves. Studies have indicated that certain transition elements may factor in to a student veteran's persistence and success in postsecondary academic, beyond the administrative processes of transitions. Vacchi & Berger (2014) reported that the college classroom itself plays an important part of a student veteran's successful transition. They suggest that the interactions in-class, between the student veterans and classmates and/or with the professor, may aid or hinder how well a student veteran adjusts. Especially concerning is the persistence and success of the student veteran. Some media report that 88% of student veterans drop out of their postsecondary educational or vocation program within the first year (Briggs, 2012; Wood, 2012)[1].

In order to better support student veteran's persistence and success, officials at institutions of higher education must gain new knowledge of the experiences of veterans as it relates to how those experiences inform the student veteran's own understanding of self as a college student. From the lack of research concerned with act of change from veteran to student veteran, and with previous research focused specifically on transition processes for student veterans (Cook & Kim, 2009; Livingston, 2009; Rumann, 2010), questions arise as to whether institutions of higher education have a good sense of a veteran's prior knowledge and experiences, and what their needs then are as learners.

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[1] this statistic is not fully accepted and contested by Veteran advocates, including Student Veteran Association, The American Legion, and Veterans of Foreign Wars who claim this number to be inaccurate

Taking an in depth look at the overall experiences of student veterans pre-during-post military service will provide a better understanding of the issues that a student veteran may face which a traditional student does not.

Research Purpose

The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand the transitional and transformational experiences of military veterans who are now college students. More specifically, the purpose of this case study was to explore the experiences of five student veterans in three universities in two states (Texas and Ohio) to understand how they created a connection between their experiences pre-during-post military service, the process of change from military personnel to college students, and the act of their transformation.

Research Questions

The following questions guided the study:

1. How do student veterans describe change when moving from active duty military service to being a college student?

2. In what ways do student veterans describe the help received when making the transition?

3. How do student veterans describe their relationship to the world around them?

Methodological Framework

The need for a fuller understanding of the transitional and transformational experiences of student veterans is the reason this study used a qualitative research approach. Qualitative researchers are interested in understanding the constructions and interpretations of reality at a particular point in time and in a particular context (Merriam, 2002). Merriam (2002) stated that "the researcher is interested in understanding how participants make meaning of a situation or

phenomenon, this meaning is mediated through the researcher as an instrument, the strategy is inductive, and the outcome is descriptive" (p. 6). The researcher wanted to understand the experiences and re-present those experiences so that the reader will be able to gain an in-depth understanding of the situations or phenomena experienced by the participants. Applying this understanding of qualitative research aided this study to examine the experiences of student veterans transitioning into the classroom, necessitating the negotiation of formal and informal structural barriers in an institute of higher education and veteran educational benefit programs, as well as exploring, finding, and understanding their own identity as a student veteran.

The study used a constructivism framework as a guide. Constructivism allows the researcher to interpret the participants' experiences and construct an understanding for the reader. In constructivism, there is no objective reality, there are no absolute truths, and knowledge does not come through the senses alone (Bhattacharya, 2010). The world is constructed by the individuals who live in it and a constructivism researcher strives to understand how the participants construct the world they live in.

Information collected in the research portion may be unpredictable in nature of what is perceived as reality; Lincoln and Guba (1985) explain these multiple meanings are difficult to interpret as they depend on other systems for meanings. These systems are ones constructed by the participants. The knowledge generated from this discipline is perceived through socially constructed and subjective interpretations (Carson, Gilmore, Perry, & Gronhaug, 2001; Hudson & Ozanne, 1988). The knowledge collected through the interviews allowed me to construct an understanding of the transitional and transformational experiences of the student veterans.

Theoretical Framework

The overarching theoretical framework for this study was a braiding of Schlossberg's

Transition Theory (Schlossberg, Waters & Goodman, 1995) with Mezirow's Transformative

Learning Theory (1991, 1994, 1995, 1996). These two theories were woven together by showing

how the students' experiences during the transition may impact an individual's perspective

transformation, if not action, in becoming a student veteran. For this study, the notion of

transition embraced changes encountered as military personnel re-entered civilian life and

became college students. It is well documented that some veterans experience a difficult

transition to civilian life (Ackerman et al., 2009; Beatty 2103; DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011;

Livingston 2009; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010). Morin (2011), reports veterans who did not have a

clear mission or purpose while serving may encounter a difficult readjustment. Still others, those

who had an emotionally traumatic experience, are likely to report challenging re-entries. Yet, for

veterans who practice their religion, transitions appear to be easier. While many of the transition

challenges are intuitive, there are some factors that are counter-intuitive, for instance, spousal

support does not guarantee a smooth transition. In fact, Morin further reports that "being married

while serving reduces the chances of an easy re-entry from 63% to 48%" (pg. 5). The problems

veterans encountered in their transitions are connected to the complicated relationships between

their service experiences, personal beliefs and vision for self, and levels of support post-military.

Schlossberg's Transition Theory

Employing Schlossberg's theory of transition in study allowed for "any event or nonevent

that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles" (Anderson, Goodman, &

Schlossberg, 2011, p. 39) to surface that may help to explain person's, in this case student

veterans', ability to move through a transition. More succinctly, this theory opens the door to

better understand the extent of the change and the effects of one or more of Schlossberg's coping resources: situation, self, support, and strategies (Anderson, Goodman, & Schlossberg, 2011), veterans may use as they transition into higher education and a new life.

A concrete approach to the four transition processes (situation, self, support, and strategies) has been used previously to clarify the connections between a student veteran's experience and relationships affected their transitions. Rumann (2010), used the processes to interpret how student service members cope with transition (Livingston & Bauman, 2013), through a number of resources that served to offset challenges for returning student veterans (Rumann & Hamrick, 2010).

Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory

Transition by itself seldom proceeds without a departure from "the social process of construing and appropriating a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of one's experience as a guide to action" (Mezirow, 1994, p. 222-223). As a result, this study included Transformative Learning Theory as a theoretical frame. Transformative learning is a type of learning that can occur gradually or from a sudden, powerful experience that changes the way people see themselves and their world (Clark, 1993a). This change can happen to anyone and can be from something small like a breakup with someone to an experience such as going to war or the death of a friend or family member. To understand these experiences, people use frames as the structures of assumptions. Some of these frames may come from the experiences of transitions in life that they have already made.

<div align="center">

Subjectivity

</div>

Peshkin (1988) wrote, "Whatever the substance of one's persuasions at a given point, one's subjectivity is like a garment that cannot be removed" (p. 17). To understand my passion

for this research, one must understand my military background and my experience transitioning from active duty service to being back in the classroom and the civilian workforce.

My Background

I joined the United States Marine Corps Reserves in October, 2000, fulfilling a childhood dream of joining the military. When I joined, I never thought that I would be deployed or placed on active duty in any way beyond basic training assignments. September 11, 2001, a date in history that no American will forget, including myself, was a day when the United States of America changed forever.

It was a Tuesday, I was an undergraduate in college and was a reservist in the Marine Corp. I overslept and missed my first class, Music Appreciation. However, I made it to my second class, Western English Traditions, and instead of the professor discussing the differences between the Bible and the Koran, which was what was scheduled to be discussed, the class watched the trauma that was taking place in New York City, the field in Pennsylvania, and Washington, D.C. During the class, we continued to watch the news and discuss how this event was going to change our lives forever. After class, I spent the afternoon in my residence hall room preparing for my next Marine Corps reserve drill scheduled for that Saturday and Sunday. This was one of the few drills that I looked forward to each year because it was family weekend, and we usually finished early on both days.

As I prepared for the weekend, many students who lived in the hall stopped by and asked what I was doing or what I thought about the actions that had happened that morning. Like many of them, I did not know what to think. I kept my opinions to myself, as I was trained, but my thoughts kept coming back to all those who died during these perverse acts. They termed them acts of terrorism, and I kept thinking, "What did that even mean?"

Recognizing what this could mean for my military career, I became more aware of what was happening in the military. Listening intently that weekend at drill about what steps we were taking to prepare for the future, I wondered whether the orders that I might get would hinder my academic progress, I wanted to finish my degree. I wanted to get a job, have a family, but all this could change in the blink of an eye. What was I going to do? I continued to go through college and through my life knowing that at any time my status in the Marine Corps could be changed, and I would be on active duty instead of serving as a reservist. I graduated with my Bachelor's degree in 2004, and decided to continue my education in graduate school. While in graduate school, I decided to go on active duty for what is known as Active Duty – Special Work, in Quantico, Virginia working in the ammunition supply point.

While in Quantico, I worked with the ground ammunition for the Marine Corps base. The ammunition was issued to different units on the base for the purpose of training Marine Corps Officers. The ammo was also used for Marines to qualify on rifle and pistol, for the Shooting Sports Team, as well as providing storage for the Explosive Ordinance Disposal team until they were prepared to do an ammo burn. In addition, I worked to unload trucks and keep inventory of all the ammunition that was on the base at any given time. The other part of the job was serving duty where I would be the only person at the ammunition supply point, and was in charge of ensuring the ammo was issued to the proper units at any given time.

Once this six-month tour of duty was completed, I transitioned back into the classroom to finish my graduate degree. My experience in Virginia was high-stress, but since I was not on high alert 24-hours a day, I did not experience a difficult transition. Plus, as a student veteran, I found that I was aided by the support of friends, co-workers, and professors. As I completed my

degree, I moved into my first full time position at the University of West Georgia while continuing my Marine Corps Reserve duty.

Moved to Active Duty

On February 14, 2007, I was attending a divisional meeting when my phone rang and the caller ID showed it was from the Company Gunnery Sergeant of my unit. While my practice was to ignore phone calls in meetings, this time felt different, so I excused myself and answered the call. This call was unforgettable as he told me that my name was on the list of Marines being deployed to Iraq in the coming months. That night, I called my parents to wish them a happy anniversary and give them the news that I was being deployed to Iraq.

I left my position at West Georgia in March and transitioned into the active duty military life in April. I began my time on active duty in Camp Lejeune, North Carolina, where they prepared us for the high stress that we would endure while in Iraq. While in North Carolina, we learned about shooting multiple weapons, the use of gas masks, heat exhaustion, and how to prepare for our time in Iraq. We also prepared physically for the grueling hours that we would have to keep while we were in Iraq. This training lasted almost six months, from April until August of that year, before we boarded buses and headed to Cherry Point Air Base to board our planes and head to the deserts of Iraq.

We landed in Kuwait first, which allowed us to get used to the desert heat. Our daily gear included camouflage utilities, with sleeves rolled down, a 40-pound flak jacket, and our M16A2 service rifle. One of the Marines had a thermometer on his watch and the temperature reported on it was 130 degrees, in the shade. We stayed in Kuwait for approximately ten days before heading to our final destination of Al Taqaddum, Iraq.

While we were in Iraq, we were always on high alert watching and listening for mortar rounds to drop at any time and never leaving our bunk areas without our service weapons. At night, we could hear gunshots from the gates around the base, with their distinctive AK-47 sounds, interrupting the silence. As Marines prepared to go outside the base on convoys, they were taught to look at everything that could be out of place. We looked at how people were acting while they were on convoys and were especially watchful for people who might be digging holes on the side of the roads, because they could be planting improvised explosive devices that could harm or kill them, or the others, in the convoy.

Consequently, being on high alert all the time, some Marines became paranoid while they were on base and were sometimes jumpy about the tiniest noises. My roommate was so stressed out, at one point, that he wrote goodbye letters to his family before he went on a convoy outside the base. One Marine had to fire his rifle while on a convoy because a civilian truck driver was threatening his life. Tales of the things happening around us kept us all up late into the night whether we had early morning duties or not, we were continually stressed out.

Returning Stateside

This heightened alertness that men and women of the military must endure while they are on active duty and in a foreign country is not something that can be cut off as soon as they return to the United States. When I returned to work after active duty, it was hard to transition into the civilian mindset because I had been operating on heightened senses for over seven months. Large crowds and random noises made me jumpy and sometimes paranoid. Hearing the turnstile click as students walked through, or the exit gate slam metal on metal, or a buzzer going off all gave me a jump and brought up thoughts of what I experienced while in Iraq.

Nevertheless, being a professional staff member at a university had its benefits, as I was able to seclude myself in my office when I felt I needed an escape. For me, my transition process took approximately six months, but I had resources available from the university that would not have been available had I not been at the University of West Georgia. Student veterans are expected to transition back into society, and for some back into the classroom, yet they may not always get the support that they need to successfully complete this transition. I have gained a great respect for all those who have experienced the loss of comrades in arms while they were in Iraq. I, fortunately, did not have to experience that. I have an understanding that we need to take care of our student veterans once they are back in the United States and on our college campuses, or we may lose them and not be able to help them become successful. This research is my commitment to people who served in the United States Armed Forces, in order to create better transitional experiences for them.

Significance of the Study

Veterans are the men and women who, knowing the consequences, enlist in the military and fight for the freedoms that Americans enjoy every day. This study will add to a growing field of research related to student veterans in higher education and will help to inform higher education faculty, staff, and administrators about the experiences of veterans transitioning from military service into the college classroom, and the transformative learning processes they encounter with this transition. Given that the centrality of the experiences encountered by the student veteran while on active duty may be intensely emotional, even painful, it is important that college and university educators and administrators be prepared to respond in ways that are ethical, legal, and with efficacious considerations. Based on the findings, suggestions have been

made to improve the current process to aid in a seamless experience for student veterans in higher education.

Limitations and Possibilities

As a qualitative study, interviews are crucial to the success of the study, however due to time limitations and challenges in recruiting participants, the depth of participation was limited. Student veterans make up a small percentage of the student body on a college campus and there was little response to the emails sent out to the Veteran Coordinators at each institution. Five participants were selected for this study. I was able to meet with them three times via in person interviews and utilizing Skype. While five participants were involved in the study, the findings may be useful to help understand how transitional experiences and learning transformations effect a student veteran's overall experience, they are not intended to characterize all student veterans' experiences.

The shared military experience that I have with the participants made it easier to relate to, and build rapport with, them during our interviews, but my subjectivity could affect the interpretation and analysis of findings for the study. Attempts were made to share findings with the participants to ensure their voices were represented correctly.

The participants were located in two very specific regions of the country and this small selection of the country may also be a limitation. While findings are limited to the perspectives of the participants, a larger sample size from other areas of the country would provide richer data and understanding of the transition and transformative learning experiences of veterans.

Finally, all of the participants were degree seeking undergraduate students at 4-year public accredited universities. These experiences may be different from veterans who attend 2-year institutions or private institutions.

Operational Definitions and Glossary of Terms

For the purpose of this study, the following definitions apply:

Experiences – include but are not limited to pre-during-post military service, participation in student support organizations, attendance at student orientation (first year, transfer, graduate), ease of admissions or re-admission process, availability and/or communication with campus Veteran Affairs Offices and participation in ROTC programs.

Transition – defined as a time when a student veteran who is transitioning from active military service into the university environment as a first-year student or a student veteran who is re-enrolling into the institution after a period of military related absence.

Public South Texas University – defined as an institution supported by state funds, an institution with more than 2,000 students and accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS).

Public Midwest University – defined as an institution supported by state funds, an institution with more than 2,000 students and accredited by the Higher Learning Commission (HLC) of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools.

Active Duty Military Status – "full-time duty in the active military service of the United States, which includes members of the Reserve Components serving on active duty or fulltime training duty, but does not include full-time National Guard duty" (Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2008, p. 4). Other definitions to be used to further define Active Duty Military Status: 180 or more days on a military training exercises for members of Reserve Components or on a deployment status either stateside or internationally and veterans coming off of a contract period of four years or more serving in the military.

Student Veterans' Government Programs – programs that assist veterans, or dependents, with

       financial assistance or tuition relief for their time in higher education that they are

       utilizing the educational benefits.

Veteran – a person of long experience, usually in some occupation or skill (Veteran, n.d.).

Wounded Warriors – refers specifically to students enrolled in postsecondary institutions who

       may or may not have self-identified some form of disability or need for disability

       accommodation. (This disability does not have to be officially recognized by the

       Department of Veterans Affairs as a service-related injury.)

       (Note: Participation in the ROTC program does not constitute a veteran status unless

participant has been on active duty prior to participation in program.)

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I introduced the context of the study that includes a brief background concerning student veterans and research on their transition out of the military. Next, the statement of the problem was presented which explained the lack of research concerned with the connectedness between the military personnel's transition and transformation related to becoming a student veteran. Next, the purpose of the study and the research questions were presented. The methodological and theoretical frameworks of the study were outlined, as well as limitations and possibilities for the research design. In chapters two through five a review of literature, methodology, findings, discussion, and conclusion, and implications are presented, respectively.

CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

With the purpose of the study to understand the transition and transformative learning experiences of military veterans who are now college students, this study's literature review involved five topical areas: (a) demographics for both higher education and military personnel, (b) history of student veteran benefits that includes student veterans' government programs, (c) the cultural environments of the military and of higher education, and the (d) braiding of two theoretical lenses. The two lenses, which frame this study, are Schlossberg's Transition Theory and Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory.

Demographics

The demographics for student enrollment in higher education and the demographics of an active duty military force are provided in context of gender, age, race, and educational background. These data are important to consider within the study for two reasons. First, student success in higher education is dependent on the services and support provided by the institution. If a college or university is unprepared for a shift in diversity, this can negatively impact student retention and persistence (Seurkamp, 2007). Second, institutes of higher education may need to offer different or additional academic support services that are particularly relevant to certain populations of students.

The Demographic Landscape of Higher Education

Higher education is defined as education that happens beyond the secondary level, especially at the college or university level. The landscape of higher education has changed with the changing populations nationwide. The changes that are occurring on college campuses have been evident in the changing nationwide racial profile which has become more diverse than in years past. Williams (2014) stated that "the traditional – young, white, male, wealthy – student is

a thing of the past." In addition, the gender gap is widening with women making up 57% of the student population compared to 40% in the 1970s. The tables below provide demographic data showing who is represented in college and university enrollments.

Table 1 presents the number of students who completed high school in 2014 as reported by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). Of the 2,868,000 students who completed high school, only a quarter of them enrolled in a two-year college program, with females leading males in enrollment (28% and 21.2% respectively). Similar data exist in terms of gender distribution when considering high school completers enrolling in a 4-year college program. Together (both 2-year and 4-year institutions), the data indicate 64% of the males and 72.6% of the females who completed high school enrolled in higher education. The other 35% of males, and 27.4% of females chose to not attend college. Information indicating whether they joined the work force, the military, or neither was not available.

Table 1

High School Graduates and College Enrollment

Gender	High School Completers	Enrolled in 2-year College (Percentage)	Enrolled in 4-year College (Percentage)
Male	1,423,000	21.2	42.8
Female	1,445,000	28.0	44.6

Note. Percentage of high school completers enrolled in two- and four-year postsecondary institutions (NCES, 2015)

Table 2 shows fall 2014 enrollment in college for both undergraduates and graduates. Females represent 56% of the undergraduates enrolled and 58% of graduate enrollment. These percentages have not changed much since fall 2009 when women comprised 57% of undergraduate enrollment and 59% of graduate enrollment (Knapp, Kelly-Reid, & Ginder, 2011).

Table 2

College Enrollment

College Enrollment	Male	Female	Total
Undergraduate	7,585,900	9,706,900	17,292,800
Graduate	1,211,200	1,703,400	2,914,600
Total	8,797,100	11,410,300	20,207,400

Note. Total fall enrollment in degree-granting postsecondary institutions by gender (NCES, 2015)

While understanding the enrollment of institutions paints a picture of the numbers of students on college campuses, understanding the age of the students adds depth to our knowledge of the diversity that exists on a campus. About 15 to 20% of students in the postsecondary system are not the traditional college-going age of 18-24 years (2015 Indicators of Higher Education, 2015). Table 3 provides the breakdown of ages starting with students who are 14 years old and moving up in incremental changes. This information includes those students who take dual-credit courses, or courses they are signed up for in high school but are being taken on the college campus. Those students are included in the enrollment of the institution, but in many instances because they are still enrolled in a public high school, they do not pay tuition or fees to the postsecondary institution, thus lessening the financial burden traditional college students may encounter.

Table 3

Higher Education Age Profile

Age	Full-Time Enrollment	Part-Time Enrollment	Total Students
14 to 19	4,928,000	705,000	5,633,000
20 to 21	4,745,000	864,000	5,609,000
22 to 24	3,322,000	979,000	4,301,000
25 to 34	2,932,000	2,155,000	5,087,000
35 or older	1,357,000	1,831,000	3,188,000
Total	17,284,000	6,534,000	23,818,000

Note. Total fall enrollment by status (Census Bureau, 2016)

Table 4 is the final demographic table for higher education and shows the racial profile as of 2014. While the largest race represented in higher education remains White, at 56%, other races have increased in number over the last few years. In fact, according the 2015 NCES data, the number of White students has decreased by 3.3% from 2012 to 2013 and again by 3.1% from 2013 to 2014. In contrast, the number of other races increased by 0.8% and 1.3% in the same time periods. With this increase in minority enrollment NCES (2012), statistics suggest that over 41% of Black freshman will need remedial courses, compared to 37% of Latinos and 31% of Whites. In addition, time to completion for a bachelor's degree will be longer for Black college students with just 42% of them going on to complete this degree (Williams, 2014).

Table 4

Higher Education Race Profile

Race	Male	Female	Total	Percent
White	4,973,700	6,263,700	11,237,400	56%
Black	1,034,700	1,757,200	2,791,900	14.5%
Hispanic	1,347,900	1,843,800	3,191,700	16.5%
Asian/ Pacific Islander	599,200	673,200	1,272,400	6.6%
American Indian/ Alaska Native	61,300	91,600	152,900	0.8%
Multi-Racial	269,700	372,400	642,100	3.3%
Nonresident alien	510,500	408,400	918,900	
Total	8,797,000	11,410,300	20,207,300	

Note. Total fall enrollment in degree-granting postsecondary institutions by race/ethnicity (NCES, 2015)

Historically, access and completion rates for students of color and low-income households lag behind White and Asian students (Swail, Redd, & Perna, 2003). However, as of 2009-2010, it appeared that in terms of bachelor's degrees conferred, the gap has lessened relative to race and ethnicity, although no significant percent has changed between genders. According to the NCES (2012), in the decade spanning 1999-2000 to 2009-2010, the percent of bachelor's degrees awarded to students of color increased more so than for White students. For instance, Black students experienced an increase of 53%, Hispanics 86%, Asian/Pacific Islanders 50%, and Whites 26%. While positive strides have been made in higher education to address inequities for students of color and low-income students, concerns still exist greater length of time it takes students of color to matriculate. In addition, the anticipated boom of continued increases in minority enrollment and first generation students is happening faster than expected. Bransberger, a senior research analyst at Western Interstate Commission on Higher Education (2014), suggested that systemic issues within higher education continue to exist and that needs of these students have yet to be fully addressed.

The data presented above show how it is incumbent upon higher education to address diversity in many ways, from the evolving racial profile of students, to the ages of its students, to the differences in the numbers of males and females enrolled. Freshman success programs geared to help a diverse student population have been, and continue to be, on the forefront of these institutions. However, much work still needs to be done, systemically. Williams (2014) suggested that with the demographic shift, institutes of higher education may, in fact, have to restructure admissions requirements, increase financial aid packages, and provide remediation in core subjects to help bring students from under-performing high schools up to speed with the rigors of college coursework.

The traditional student has typically been defined as a student enrolled in college between the ages of 18 and 24. Whereas nontraditional students have historically been defined as those over the age of 24, typically enrolled part time, and who are financially independent (Hess, 2011). DiRamio and Jarvis (2011) discuss the emerging population of student veterans who, while they are more similar to current nontraditional students, yet possess unique characteristics and experiences. When these men and women, both combat and noncombat veterans, return home from having served in active duty, and enter or re-enter college and university campuses across the nation (Livingston, 2009) institutes of higher education must respond to their needs in ways that differ from either traditional or nontraditional students.

The Demographic Landscape of Active Duty Military

In order to understand the men and women who could be joining higher education in the future, we need to first understand the demographics of active duty military. While, the demographics of higher education institutions provide insight into students who currently attend our institutions, the tables presented within this section will show the overall strength of force for

each branch in the Department of Defense (DoD). Note, these data do not include the U.S. Coast Guard since it is part of the Department of Homeland Security. After first considering the strength of force, including gender, age and race of military personnel are subsequently presented. Finally, a look at the educational breakdown of the current military will be reviewed to provide an understanding of the portion of the military who have attained degrees post high school.

The DoD worked with the Defense Manpower Data Center (DMDC) at the end of fiscal year 2014, which ended on September 30th to compile a demographic profile of the military community. Table 5 provides the strength of force for each branch with the Army making up the largest portion at 38%, and the Marine Corps being the smallest branch at 14%. Gender is also noted on the table with males making up the largest percentage of the force at 85%. Interestingly enough, over the last 14 years from 2000 to 2014, the trend of females in the DoD grew from 14.4% to 16.7%, but only for those listed as officers. Enlisted female personal increased by only 0.1% rising from 14.7% in 2000 to 14.8% in 2014, (DMDC Active Duty Military Personnel Master File, 2000, 2014).

Table 5

Total Active Duty Operating Force

Branch	Male	Female	Total
United States Army (USA)	434,272	70,058	504,330
United States Navy (USN)	264,272	57,327	321,599
United States Marine Corps (USMC)	173,684	14,207	187,891
United States Air Force (USAF)	253,353	57,100	312,453
Total DoD	1,125,581	200,692	1,326,273

Note. According to DMDC, 2014.

This information provides insight into the number of men and women serving in the armed forces, however to improve the picture of the force, Table 6 provides the ages of the personnel within each branch. The largest age group within the military are those 25 or younger, who make up 43% of the total force. The minimum age at which an individual may independently join the military is 18; parental consent is required for those under 18.

There is a significant percentage of women included in the diversity of the veterans leaving the military, with 1 in every 4 student-veterans being a woman (Radford & Wun, 2009). While combat veterans in the past have mainly been men, many of the veterans enrolling in college will be women who have had different military experiences than their female predecessors. While women are prohibited from direct ground combat by the armed forces, the frontlines of battle have been blurred in Iraq and Afghanistan, exposing women to opportunities to encounter combat operations (Baechtold & De Sawal, 2009).

Table 6

Active Duty Military Age Breakdown

Age	USA	USN	USMC	USAF	Total DoD
25 or Younger	200,175	137,308	119,542	115,268	572,293
26 to 30	110,357	74,380	31,290	77,671	293,698
31 to 35	80,811	48,322	17,396	54,608	201,137
36 to 40	56,007	32,973	11,587	37,086	137,653
41 or older	56,980	28,616	8,076	27,820	121,492
Total	504,330	321,599	187,891	312,453	1,326,273

Note. According to DMDC, 2014

Each year more than 150,000 young men and women enlist in the active duty component of the armed forces. Based on historical statistics, about half of these enlistees will separate from the active component within four years and more than 80% will separate within eight years (Loughran, Martorell, Miller & Klerman, 2011).

The military is a diverse population as Table 7 shows with Whites making up the majority of the personnel at 69% and Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islanders being the smallest represented race at 1%. Within the military, Hispanic has not been considered a race designation since 2010, in conformance with the Office of Management and Budget directives, as Hispanic is not determined to be a minority status.

Table 7

Racial Profile of Active Duty Military

Race	USA	USN	USMC	USAF	Total
White	341,370	196,459	149,071	227,267	914,167
Black or African American	108,689	55,105	20,028	44,326	228,148
Asian	20,853	17,166	4,788	10,084	52,891
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	5,155	3,502	1,944	3,421	14,022
American Indian or Alaska Native	3,712	10,481	1,966	1,980	18,139
Multi-Racial	N/A*	29,549	2,017	10,702	42,268
Other Unknown	24,551	9,301	8,077	14,673	56,602

Note. *The Army does not report Multi-racial; according to DMDC, 2014.

The DMDC has provided details on those members of the military who identify as Hispanic within the other race options outlined in Table 9. The majority of active duty members who identify as Hispanic answered their race as other/unknown (53%) while Asian received the smallest number of answers (3%). Overall, 12% of the active duty military personnel identify themselves as Hispanic.

Table 8

Hispanic or Latino Profile by Race and Percentage of Each Race

Race	Hispanic or Latino		Not Hispanic or Latino		Total DoD
American Indian or Alaska Native	3,335	18.4%	14,804	81.6%	18,139
Asian	1,488	2.8%	51,403	97.2%	52,891
Black or African American	8,771	3.8%	219,377	96.2%	228,148
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	858	6.1%	13,164	93.9%	14,022
White	106,201	11.6%	808,002	88.4%	914,203
Multi-racial*	5,664	13.4%	36,604	86.6%	42,268
Other/Unknown	32,410	57.3%	24,192	42.7%	56,502
Total DoD	158,727	12.0%	1,167,546	88.0%	1,326,273

Note. *The Army does not report Multi-racial; according to DMDC, 2014.

While some of the men and women who serve in the military chose to join after high school, others decided to continue their education while in the military. Officers in any branch of service are required to have their bachelor's degree; those individuals are included in the bachelor's or advanced degree rows in Table 8. Providing the educational background of the military members enables readers to understand that some of the military men and women have experience in higher education. Reservists, who are not included in the table, may attend school and then become officers in the military on active duty.

Table 9

Educational Background of Active Duty Military

Highest Degree Attained	USA	USN	USMC	USAF	Total DoD
No High School or GED	1,411	1,462	99	29	3,001
High School/GED or Some College*	385,716	246,032	163,221	225,667	1,020,636
Bachelor's Degree	75,459	31,545	18,065	41,603	166,672
Advanced Degree	39,944	21,129	3,900	41,956	106,929
Unknown	1,800	21,431	2,606	3,198	29,035
Total	504,330	321,599	187,891	312,453	1,326,273

Note. * Includes cases with at least a high school diploma and possibly additional education less than a Bachelor's degree (e.g., Associate's degree); according to DMDC, 2014.

Understanding that over one million military members do not have education beyond a high school diploma or GED certification leads one to ask what their plans may be after their military service. While some of these individuals may have jobs within the military to help them be successful (mechanics, engineers, postal clerks), not all of these individuals will be able to continue their positions without further training, for positions such as medics or infantry (Mangum & Ball, 1987).

This demographic information helps us understand that the military and higher education are very diverse; each provides its members with an opportunity to work with individuals from different backgrounds. What the data show is that both higher education and the military are diverse and, in many instances, becoming even more so with regard to race/ethnicity, age, and prior learning. As colleges and universities work to stay current with changing student demographics within the academy, they must also address very specific populations such as the student veterans, a unique non-traditional student. Shared attributes between the traditional, if not diverse student population found on college and university campuses continue to challenge the system for equity in access and opportunity. Adding to the mix an increasingly diverse

military population means higher education institutions need to project and plan for how best to include them on campuses.

History of Student Veteran Benefits

Student veterans have been a staple on the college campus since World War II. Hoping to avoid a repeat of the Bonus March of 1932, when families flooded Washington, D.C., to protest unemployment rates, President Roosevelt asked Congress to provide benefits to veterans returning from World War II (Veteran Affairs Office, n.d.). These veterans and family members did not receive the bonuses they were promised in the World War Adjusted Act of 1924. In order to avoid a relapse into the Great Depression after the war ended, the need to aid G.I.s with education funding was a high priority for Harry Comery, who was asked to serve on a committee to explore potential benefits for veterans following the war. According to the Department of Veterans' Affairs (n.d.), Comery drew up the first bill and introduced it to Congress on January 10, 1944.

Congress passed the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, and President Roosevelt signed it on June 22, 1944. The bill guaranteed $300 in mustering out pay, financial assistance for higher education and training, a weekly unemployment allowance of $29 for 52 weeks, and federally-guaranteed loans of up to $2,000 at 4% interest (Cook et al., 2012). After WWII, approximately 2,232,000 veterans used the G.I. Bill to attend college during the 1940s and 1950s (Olson, 1973). The Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944 originally had an end date of July 25, 1956. When the bill was scheduled to end, 7.8 million of the 16 million World War II veterans were participating in an education or training program (Veterans' Affairs Office, n.d.)

However, veteran's benefits decreased through the Korean and Vietnam Conflicts while tuition costs increased. In 1984, Mississippi Congressman Sonny Montgomery revamped and

reintroduced the G.I. Bill, which has become known as the "Montgomery G.I. Bill" since that time (Veterans' Affairs Office, n.d.). Although this bill passed, it did not provide sufficient relief to keep up with the rising cost of education. The rising costs of attending institutions of higher education outpaced benefits provided by both the WWII Servicemen's Readjustment Act and the Montgomery G.I. Bill. "The large influx of active duty military personnel following 9/11 served to exacerbate the problem" (Veterans' Affairs Office, n.d.).

Senator Jim Webb of Virginia introduced the Post-9/11 Veteran Education Assistance Act of 2007 in January, 2007 (National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities, n.d.). Senator Webb stated during his address "this bill is designed to give our returning troops educational benefits identical to the benefits provided to veterans after World War II" (National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities, n.d., para 9). The introduction of the Post-9/11 G.I. Bill has had a positive impact on military recruitment, broadening the socio-economic makeup of the military and reducing the direct costs of recruitment. The Post-9/11 G.I. Bill not only had the support of three Senators in addition to Senator Webb, but the Veterans of Foreign Wars and the Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America played a critical role in shepherding the bill to victory (Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America, 2010).

The U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs, as the administrative agency for veterans, provides guidance for all G.I. Bill programs to include Montgomery G.I. bill, Post-9/11 G.I. Bill and other supported programs for veterans. Each program has a specific set of rules for those who can receive the correct benefits. Once a benefit is awarded, the Veterans Administration ensures that each recipient attend a university that utilizes G.I. Bill benefits by having that person log onto a secure website each month to verify attendance (Veterans' Affairs Office, n.d.).

The Montgomery G.I. Bill and the Post-9/11 G.I. Bill provide financial support for men

and women of the military to attend institutions of higher education. These bills not only provide tuition support, but also give funds for books and a basic allowance for housing. These benefits are similar to those offered in the G.I. Bill of 1944, but at increased amounts to keep up the rising costs of education in America.

The rules that have been created by the VA aid in understanding exactly what a veteran is qualified to receive when he applies for educational benefits. The amount of award is based on the amount of time a veteran served in the military. The definitions that are used by the VA Offices are those created by the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Those rules specify the definition of active duty as well as other military terms that are common throughout the written laws concerning G.I. Bills.

Student Veterans' Government Programs

Since the G.I. Bill was established in 1944, programs have been created to help veterans with access into higher education. The following section of the literature review covers the G.I. Bill, the Post 9/11 G.I. Bill, the Yellow Ribbon Program and some programs specifically for veterans who are from Texas and Ohio.

G.I. Bill. The Serviceman's Readjustment Act of 1944, commonly referred to as the G.I. Bill, opened the doors of higher education for soldiers and sailors following World War II (Livingston, 2009). After World War II, some 2,232,000 veterans used the Bill to attend college during the 1940s and 1950s (Olson, 1973). Since 1944, the G.I. Bill has helped 21.3 million veterans, service members, and family members totaling over $72.9 billion in G.I. Bill benefits for education and training. Since 1956, when the dependents program was enacted, more than 700,000 dependents of veterans whose deaths or total disabilities were service-connected have

been helped (Veterans' Affairs Office, n.d.). The number of service members estimated to utilize the G.I. Bill in 2007 was 440,000 individuals at over 6,800 institutions (Marklein, 2007).

Post 9/11 G. I. Bill. In July 2008, a law known as the Post-9/11 G.I. Bill was signed which created a robust education benefits program rivaling the World War II Era G.I. Bill of Rights (military.com, n.d.). With these new benefits, available to veterans as of August 1, 2009, veterans now receive more money to allow them to attend an accredited college or university. Veterans learn of these new benefits during their post-deployment training before being released from active duty. These benefits are based on the number of days that a service-member has served on active duty, according to his or her DD-214, since September 11, 2001 (military.com, n.d.).

These new benefits correlate directly with the number of veterans who are entering institutions of higher education. Colleges and universities need to be prepared for this influx of veterans. Currently, institutions are not prepared for the numbers of students entering the institutions and, although many are working toward becoming a welcoming institution, one that recognizes and caters to the needs of our veterans who have so willingly served in a time of need for our country, few have achieved this lofty goal.

Yellow Ribbon Program

According to military.com (n.d.), the Yellow Ribbon program is designed to help students avoid up to 100% of their out-of-pocket tuition and fees associated with education programs that may exceed the Post 9/11 G.I. Bill tuition benefit. This program is a provision to the Post 9/11 G.I. Bill that helps cover many of the tuition and fees that are not covered by the Post 9/11 G.I. Bill. This program allows students who are not able to afford higher education another way to access a higher education department.

There are currently 99 Texas and 117 Ohio colleges and universities listed as participants in the Yellow Ribbon Program for 2016-2017 (Department of Veterans Affairs, 2016). Like many of the veteran support programs, there are guidelines that both the student and the institution must adhere to. Participating institutions can waive up to 50% of the expenses that exceed the G.I. Bill benefits and the VA will match the same amount as the institution (military.com, n.d.). All of these programs allow veterans access to an education that they may not have been able to afford before they joined the military.

Student Veterans in Texas, Senate Bills 297 and 93

Veterans are a unique demographic on college campus and have unique needs and concerns that traditional students may not have. Texas Governor Rick Perry, with the backing of the Texas Legislature, ceremoniously signed Senate Bills 297 and 93 which strengthen Texas' commitment to Texas veterans and their families (Office of the Governor, 2009). Senate Bill 297 provides in-state tuition for veterans who are eligible for federal education benefits, and to their spouses and children. The bill also provides a tuition exemption for dependent children whose parent is a Texas resident deployed on active duty overseas (Office of the Governor, 2009). The bill also allows out-of-state veterans to take advantage of the great education provided in Texas at in-state tuition prices.

Senate Bill 93 made three changes to the Hazelwood Act which allows veterans and immediate family to be exempt from payment of tuition and fees for up to 150 semester credit hours of state-supported classes at colleges and universities (Office of the Governor, 2009). The three changes (a) added information about service members who were killed in action or became disabled to claim Hazelwood Exemption, (b) allowed a transition of the Hazelwood Exemption to a child for unused portion of benefits, and (c) clarified the eligibility criteria for the

Hazelwood Exemption. These programs are for veterans who listed Texas as their home of record when they entered the U.S. Armed Forces. These benefits are one way Texas makes an effort to accommodate its student veterans.

Ohio GI Promise Option

The GI Promise option for higher education is available for any service member in Ohio on the first day of the term. This option offers in-state tuition to anyone who served on active duty for one year if they are receiving the Montgomery G.I. Bill. However, if a student veteran is receiving Post 9/11 G.I. Bill, the member was only required to serve 90-days on active duty to receive the benefits of the GI Promise. This benefit is also available for a spouse or dependent who may utilize the military educational benefits (Ohio Higher Ed, n.d.).

Ohio Values Veterans, Executive Order 2013-05K and House Bill 488

Ohio Governor John Kasich signed Executive Order 2013-05K in June 2013. This order supports Ohio's veterans by ensuring they receive appropriate credit and credentialing for their military training and experience. The order also called on the Chancellor of the Department of Higher Education to work with the presidents of Ohio's public institutions to conduct a thorough review of current institutional policies and practices.

House Bill 488 came from a mid-biennium review. As a result of interagency collaboration and a strong desire to make Ohio a great place for veterans and service members to live and work, the bill passed both the House and Senate unanimously. Governor Kasich signed the bill into law in June, 2014. The Military Strategic Implementation Team was formed to assist with the implementation of the recommendations in H.B. 488 (Ohio Higher Ed, n.d.)

Socio-Cultural Environments

A socio-cultural environment is best described as a collection of social factors affecting an organization, business, or enterprise. It includes social traditions, values, beliefs, as well as the ethical standards and state of the society. It includes a social stratification, either implicit or explicit, as well as elements of conflict and cohesion. Factors such as relationships, social attitudes and cultural values contribute to defining the environment in very specific ways.

Veteran-Friendly

Already, college and university campuses are frequently referred to as veteran-friendly, however this has been difficult to define. Veteran-friendliness is a term loosely used to describe efforts intended to provide a welcoming or accommodating environment on campus (Lokken et al., 2009). The definitions typically involve a university that removes barriers for military students and strives to provide personnel with prior military service to assist these student veterans with the transition (Ackerman et al., 2009; Elliot et al., 2011; Lokken et al., 2009; Rumann & Hamrick, 2009, 2010; Ryan et al., 2011). In many ways, student veterans entering or re-entering college must navigate the environment in ways that are different from the military environment. For instance, campus environments are unstructured, whereas military environments are highly structured, high-paced, high-stressed, and require extreme situational awareness (Vacchi & Berger, 2014).

The veteran transition process does not end when they arrive on campus, they must constantly adjust to the environment over a long period of time. Ackerman et al. (2009) listed one of the frustrations veterans experience is not having an obvious chain of command structure to get answers to their questions on campus. The time spent in the military has ingrained the

understanding of chains of command and who the veteran should go to for questions, but the unstructured nature of a college campus does not help with the transition process.

While some student veterans indicate that while they bring unique experiences to the classroom, they find themselves drawn towards other veterans because of the similarity in experiences, attitudes, and expectations (Schwartz, 2009). This feeling of being drawn to others with similar backgrounds assists with understanding the university environment. Schwartz (2009) described the influx of student veterans demands adjustment on both sides, for the institutions as well as the individuals. This adjustment shows that while veterans transition and transform, institutions also transform to become more veteran-friendly.

According to the U.S. Department of Education (n.d.), there are eight keys to veterans' success. These keys are ways that higher education institutions can assist veterans through the transition, complete their degrees, and obtain career skills. The eight keys are:

1. Create a culture of trust and connectedness across the campus community to promote well-being and success for veterans.

2. Ensure consistent and sustained support from campus leadership.

3. Implement an early alert system to ensure all veterans receive academic, career, and financial advice before challenges become overwhelming.

4. Coordinate and centralize campus efforts for all veterans, together with the creation of a designated space for them (even if limited in size).

5. Collaborate with local communities and organizations, including government agencies, to align and coordinate various services for veterans.

6. Utilize a uniform set of data tools to collect and track information on veterans, including demographics, retention, and degree completion.

7. Provide comprehensive professional development for faculty and staff on issues and challenges unique to veterans.

8. Develop systems that ensure sustainability of effective practices for veterans.

With becoming veteran-friendly, comes a responsibility for college and university campuses to better understand what Miller (2006) contends are the modes of human relationships: "solidaristic community, instrumental associations, and citizenship" (p. 26). Robinson (n.d.) offers that a solidaristic community exists when people share a common identity as members of a relatively stable group with a common ethos such as family relations or in this case, student veterans. Instrumental associations exist when people relate to one another in a utilitarian manner; each has aims and purposes that can best be realized by collaboration with others such as economic relations. Finally, Robinson explains that "citizenship refers to members of a political society in modern liberal democracies who are related not just through their communities and their instrumental associations but also as fellow citizens" (para. 41). Important to this study, is that notion that veterans fought to ensure the rights and concrete constitutional liberties were upheld, meaning there a basic premise of social justice underlying the relationship of the veteran to the world at large. With South Texas and the Midwest serving as the setting for this study, and given that there is known history of the improper administration of laws that excluded veterans and students of color, exposing them to prejudice, it is important to include literature surrounding how campus environments include "fair equality of opportunity" (Rawls, 2001, pg. 43), both in a formal sense, but also in social positions.

Veteran Services on Campuses

Offices of Veteran and Military Services on college and university campuses "frequently offer and coordinate a wide range of support services" (Abel, Bright & Cooper, 2013, p.168).

These services should serve the purposes of identifying service members and veterans and assist in the retention, progression, and graduation of veterans on campuses. In 2010, the Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education released a set of standards and guidelines for campus-based Offices of Veterans and Military Programs and Services (Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education, 2010). These standards list the requirements that the council feels should be the priority for Offices of Veteran and Military Services. The following are other ways that veterans are supported on campuses.

Student Veterans Organizations

Student veteran organizations are becoming more and more important for our returning student veterans. These organizations provide student veterans a place to connect with others who have had similar experiences while they were in the military (Summerlot, Green & Parker, 2009). Student organizations, as a whole, have always provided students with a way to connect with the university and its resources. Not only have student organizations provided students with leadership opportunities and ways to grow as a person, a student, and a leader, but they provide them with an open forum to express their opinions among other like-minded students. A veterans' student organization's purpose should be to provide students with a way to become integrated into college life and get away from the military mindset.

National Student Veterans' Organization

There is a national student veterans' organization known as the Student Veterans of America (SVA). The SVA is a coalition of student veterans' groups from college campuses across the United States (Student Veterans of America, n.d.). The three primary missions of the SVA are (n.d.):

1. Develop student veteran groups on college and university campuses and coordinate by region between existing groups.

2. Connect student groups with resources.

3. Advocate on behalf of student veterans at the state and national level.

Theoretical Frames

This study is about how student veterans describe their transition and transformational learning experiences as they became college students. The following section discusses Schlossberg's Transition Theory with an introduction to the framework as well as deeper discussion into each facet of the theory. Then Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory is reviewed with an introduction of the three dimensions to the transformation process. Finally, this section will discuss how the two theoretical lenses work together through an interweaving of the main tenets to assist in understanding the experiences that veterans had moving into a college classroom after active duty military service.

Schlossberg's Transition Model

Schlossberg's Transition Model (Schlossberg et al., 1995) stems from the adult learning discipline. The framework provides four coping resources to assist in understanding in the transition process. The four coping resources are situation, self, support, and strategies. Chickering and Schlossberg (1995) discussed three types of transition that a person can experience which are anticipated, unanticipated, or nonevent. Utilizing this understanding of the transition theory, Chickering and Schlossberg went on to explain the process of transitioning college students as moving in, moving through, and moving out. Figure 1 provides a visual representation of the four coping resources.

This figure shows that the process is cyclical; it may start with each change that an individual experiences at any given time. The theory was developed into a framework that discusses the necessary coping mechanisms to make the transition more comprehensible (Evans, Forney, & Guido-DiBrito, 1998). The framework of Schlossberg's Transition Theory was utilized to organize the literature on student veterans.
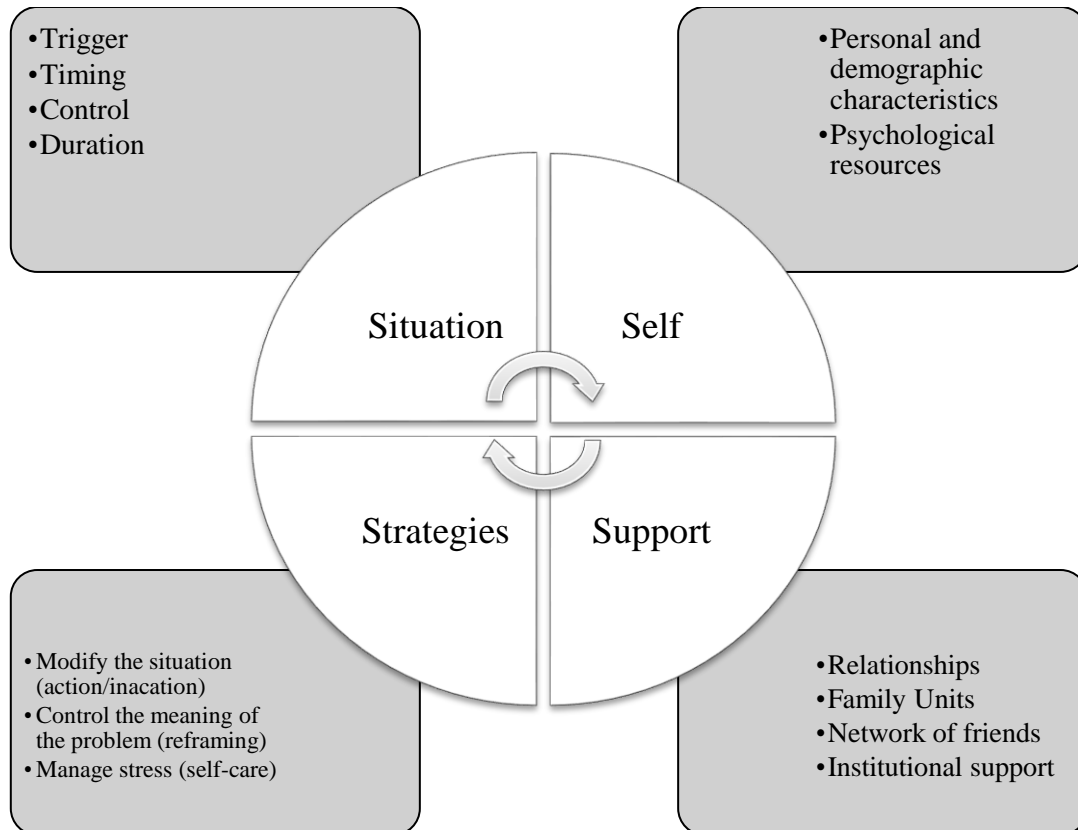
Figure 1. Transitions. Adapted from Schlossberg's (1995) Transition Theory.

Schlossberg's Transitional Model and Student Veterans

The following section discusses Schlossberg's four coping resources, situation, self, support, and strategies in more detail as they relate to veterans transitioning into a higher education classroom. The unequalled experiences veterans have faced, unlike many of their peers, sets them apart as a special population in the college ranks. Whether one served in combat

or not, the responsibilities and experiences acquired while serving remain unparalleled to nonveterans.

Situation. Schlossberg (1995) evaluates situation in terms of the degree of influence from the following factors: (a) the trigger; (b) timing; (c) control; (d) duration; (e) role change; (f) similar experiences; (g) concurrent stress; and (h) assessment. "The source of some transitions is internal, a deliberate decision on the part of the individual, whereas the source of others is completely external, and the transition is forced upon the individual by other people or by circumstance" (Schlossberg et al., 1995, p. 54). The detailed factors are important to consider. For instance, a veteran whose transition is triggered by an early exit from the military due to a medical necessity has different experiences than one who is discharged at the end of active service or who has spent 20 years as active duty and then retired. Also, take for example the implications of the timing of the situation that leads to a transition. If a service member has an early exit due to a medical discharge or if the economic forecast is tepid or worse, then the timing of the situation to transition may negatively factor into the ease in which a service member adjusts to civilian and student life.

Self. Schlossberg (1995) highlights two categories relating to self: (a) personal and demographic characteristics and (b) psychological resources. Many veterans who enter college find themselves unprepared for the academic load (DiRamio et al., 2008).

Military personnel begin their career with basic training which is a process of depersonalizing the individual, where the individual is stripped from his or her former self (Herbert, 1998). This is where a service member's sense of self as a member of the armed forces begins, subsequently forming their identity around that mentality. A service member is taught that he or she is part of an organization, part of the military. However, higher education operates

under different values, and these values are hard to adapt to when a person leaves the military. Baechtold & De Sawal (2009) discussed the idea that veterans are forced to redefine themselves when they leave the structured world to which they have become accustomed. Livingston (2009) concluded that veterans were more focused academically and overall possessed a higher level of maturity because of their military experiences.

Support. Schlossberg (1995) highlights four categories relating to support: (a) relationships with others, (b) strength of family support, (c) network of friends, and (d) institutional support. "The more support veterans receive, the greater the likelihood that they will have a smooth transition to higher education and successfully matriculate" (Ryan, 2010, p. 12). Support structures may be social relationships with family or friends, access to proper medical care, or financial aid. Without transitional support from colleges, veterans may face greater difficulty with the transition which can negatively affect the retention of student veterans.

Summerlot et al. (2009) stated that student veterans' transition can be eased by a student organization on campus geared toward veterans. However, Cook and Kim (2009) stated in their studies that only 32% of institutions provide organizations to supplement services for veterans and military personnel. Some student veterans may not want to be affiliated with such an organization as they may not want to disclose their military connection until they understand the campus climate more. Summerlot et al. (2009) reported the nature of the American culture after the Vietnam War was not welcoming and veterans wanted to blend in. However, in a supportive environment, veterans are less likely to feel the need to hide their affiliation. Nonetheless, even in the most supportive environment, veterans may desire to remain concealed on campus (Ryan, 2010).

Strategies. Schlossberg (1995) highlights three categories relating to strategies to assist in transition: (a) modifying the situation: action or reaction; (b) controlling the meaning of the problem: reframing the transition; and (c) aiding in managing the stress in the transition aftermath: self-care. Each category has an opportunity for the person going through the transition to adjust their strategy regarding the transition. These strategies are plans to help student veterans cope with the transitions. Schlossberg et al. (1995) stated that "If you can identify the level at which a person operates, you may better tailor your interventions" (p. 63).

McBain (2008) suggested that colleges or university may find that additional support for veterans may not be required beyond what is already in place, however faculty and staff may need to develop skills to help support the students. Veterans appreciate when their advisors have knowledge of the military culture, or know how to speak their language. When veterans express concerns, they may only be seeking reassurance of their abilities to be successful in higher education. Anderson et al. (2012) discussed that an individual's ability to cope with transitions depends upon the changing balance of his or her assets and liabilities. It is important to note that having success in the military, does not necessarily mean the veteran will find success in higher education, but they can draw on their gained skills and the student veteran may experience a successful transition.

Mezirow's Transformative Learning

Mezirow (1994) defines transformative learning as "the social process of construing and appropriating a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of one's experience as a guide to action" (p. 222-223). Transformative learning (Mezirow, 1991, 1995, 1996; Cranton, 1994, 1996) is the process of effecting change in a frame of reference. To understand experiences, people use frames as the structures of assumptions. These assumptions set the line of action

which helps move us automatically from one specific activity to another. Transformative learning highlights the ways in which people make sense of their world and "Construct knowledge…as part of the transformative learning experience… [and appreciate] a culturally relevant and spiritually grounded approach" (Taylor, 2008, p. 8-9).

Transformative learning theory is a type of learning that can occur gradually or rapidly through a sudden, powerful experience that changes that way people see themselves and their world (Clark, 1993b). This change can happen to anyone and can result from something small like a breakup with someone to an experience such as going to war or the death of a friend or family member. The frames of reference that define individual's worlds can include associations, concepts, values, feelings, and conditional responses (Mezirow, 1997). This knowledge or understanding is what adults have acquired through their experiences.

Mezirow (1997) explains "we transfer our frames of references through critical reflection on the assumptions upon which our interpretations, beliefs, and habits of mind or points of view are based" (p. 7). Transformative learning theory fits with this study because individual learning changes for each individual as their experiences change. Mezirow (1997) outlined four processes of learning: (a) elaborate on an existing point of view, (b) establish new points of view, (c) transfer our points of view, and (d) "transfer our ethnocentric habit of mind by becoming aware and critically reflective of our generalized bias in the way we view groups other than our own" (p. 7). These four processes of learning coincide with the transition that veterans experience as they separate from military service and become a university student.

Mezirow's Transformative Learning and Student Veterans

There are three dimensions to the perspective transformation process of the theory. These three dimensions are disorienting dilemma, critical reflection, and rational discourse. The first

phase of disorienting dilemma represents the first three key themes of Mezirow's transformational learning theory. The second phase is critical reflection after a disorienting dilemma, when a person begins a self-examination with feelings of guilt or shame as well as a critical assessment of personal assumptions. The final phase of the theory is rational discourse which involves exploring with others the newly discovered misfit between your premises and your environment. The following sections will go into further detail regarding the phases of the transformational learning theory.

Disorienting Dilemma
- Triggered by life crisis or transition
- Experience does not fit pre-existing meaning structure
- Dilemmas can be all at once or incremental

Critical Reflection
- Self examination with feelings of guilt or shame
- Critical assessment of personal assumptions

Rational Discourse
- Recognition of one's discontent and process of transformations are shared
- Exploration of options for new roles, relationships and action

Figure 2. Stages in Transformative Learning. Adapted from Mezirow's (1994) Transformative Learning Theory.

Disorienting Dilemma. Mezirow's early description (1978) of transformational learning included a ten-step process beginning with what he called a disorienting dilemma. A disorienting dilemma is triggered by a life crisis or major life transition. When experiencing a transformation, an accumulation of experiences does not fit a pre-existing meaning structure. The experiences that veterans have from their time in a combat zone may make the transformation more difficult.

Students come to higher education with a meaning structure that has formed how they view education, many of these come from experiences in high school.

The dilemma that individuals may be epochal, or all at once, provides the person with an *ah-ha* moment or a *lights-on* experience. The experience may also happen incrementally providing a gradual recognition over time of a disconnection between our meaning structure and the environment. "One's values, beliefs and assumptions compose the lens through which personal experience is mediated and made sense of" (Merriam, 2004, p. 61). The values that are instilled in military veterans during training affects their lens and the manner in which they view this transformation of leaving the military and moving into civilian life and then that of a student.

Critical Reflection. "Critical reflection transforms the frames of references on the assumptions upon which our interpretations, beliefs, and habits of mind or points of view are based" (Mezirow, 1997, p. 7). During critical reflection, students think about their values and assumptions while considering alternative perspectives (Minnis, Bondi, Rumann, 2013). Reflecting on the experiences that a person has may help with the transformation as it transpires. Reflective judgement is a process of making decisions while considering the epistemic and value origins of various perspectives (Mezirow, 2009). Utilizing critical reflection, a person is able to question the world-view that he or she has formed through life experiences.

According to Burbules and Berk (1999), recognizing faulty arguments, assumptions lacking evidence and obscure concepts is best suited for critical thinking. Mezirow (1997) discusses how being critically reflective may lead to a self-reflection that can lead to significant personal transformations. With perspective transformation as the goal, being critically aware of our personal assumptions as to how and why they have come to constrain the way we perceive, understand and feel about our world. This critical reflection of assumptions then changes "these

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structures of habitual expectation and makes possible a more inclusive, discriminating, and

integrating perspective" and makes learners choose or otherwise act upon these new

understandings (Mezirow, 1991, p. 167). Adult learners do not want to let go of the assumptions

they have formed and will hold on to them with tenacity. "Even if they overcome the initial

personal and social resistance to questioning their assumptions, their critical reflection does not

become any less troubling" (Cranton, 1994, p. 18).

   Rational discourse. "Discourse," writes Mezirow (1996), "is not a war or a debate; it is a

conscientious effort to find agreement, to build a new understanding" (p. 170). Rational

discourse has been identified as a catalyst for transformation, as it induced the various

participants to explore the depth and meaning of the individual's various world-views, and

articulate those ideas to their instructor and class mates (Mezirow, 1991). This discourse could

be in the form of a discussion about the reasons for different opinions within a group as well as

why individuals have their assumptions. This discussion is in contrast to everyday conversations

as it should be used when there is a reason to question the comprehensibility, truth,

appropriateness, or authenticity of what is being asserted or to question the credibility of the

person who may be making the statement.

   Mezirow (1997) states that "critical reflection, awareness of frames of reference, and

participation in discourse become significant elements in defining learning needs" that all

contribute to the personal structures that are ultimately transformed for individuals (p. 11). In this

arena, as experiences are reflected upon, assumptions and beliefs questions, meaning schemes

and structures are created as the individual transforms into a productive person. "Anything that

moves the individual towards a more inclusive, differentiated permeable (open to other points of

view), and integrated meaning perspective, the validity of which has been established through

rational discourse, aids an adult's development" (Mezirow 1991a, p. 7). Student veterans must think about the differences they have from the traditional student, and they must have conversations with others on the reasons for the differences in mindsets. Without these discussions, student veterans may not successfully make the transformation into a productive student whose world-view is more refined, and may be delayed or prevented from adjusting to the environment of a university.

Braiding of Theories

The theories within this study, as covered previously, Schlossberg's theory of transition (Anderson et al., 2011) and Mezirow's transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 1994) provide the framework for the study. Braiding is defined as creating something by interweaving pieces together, typically making something weak stronger, such as pieces of rope that when braided together can make the rope stronger. These two theories work in tandem with each other to assist with a fuller understanding of the experiences that veterans may experience as they enter higher education.

Figure 3 shows a military cord worn by men and women assigned to a specific unit within the Army. However, I believe this represents the braiding of these two theories as it shows the continuation of the rope into a decorative tip. I believe the tip represents the veteran who experiences the transition and the learning transformations that create a stronger individual; the one who has become a successful college student.

Figure 3. Army Aiguillette.

Looking at each piece of the braiding, you can see how the strength of the cord creates more strength as opposed to a single strand of rope. Transition is the process of change from one form, active duty personnel, to another, college student; a change from leaving one environment, a combat zone, to entering another, a collegiate classroom. In this transitional process, peer interactions, expectations, such as those associated with training or classroom settings, and situations, such as physical environments are all new, different, and challenging. Transition represents the physical and emotional manifestations that come with the change that is occurring.

Transformative learning is defined in the Merriam-Webster dictionary as the act of transforming or the state of being transformed. A marked change in appearance or character, especially one for the better, perhaps being ideologically driven, become more apparent. The transformative piece represents the process of acknowledging and coming to terms with one's identity in order to find emotional, spiritual, and relationship wholeness.

Using this theoretical framework allows for a more complete picture of how the student experiences transitioning and how it impacted the individual perspective of the transformative learning as one moved from the position of veteran to student. Looking at the two theories separately, you begin to understand how a person can successfully transition through a major event in their life while also understanding how the veteran's learning has transformed from a member of the military to a member of the college campus. With a base understanding of the

theories, Table 10 compares the two theories side-by-side showing how each step of the transition braids into the three dimensions of the transformative learning process. Reviewing the similarities of the theories, you begin to understand the full picture of the transition a student may experience moving from being an active duty military member to a student in an institution of higher education.

Table 10

Braiding the Theories

Braided Terms	Schlossberg's Transition Theory[1] - Identified 4 major sets of factors that influence ability to cope with transition	Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory[2] - Three dimensions to the perspective transformation process
Personal/Life Change	**Situation** - Triggers - Timing - Control - Role Change - Duration - Previous experience with transition - Concurrent stress - Assessment	**Disorienting Dilemma** - Triggered by a life crisis or major life transition - Experience does not fit a pre-existing meaning structure - Dilemmas can be all at once or incremental
Personal Reflection	**Self** - Personal & Demographic characteristics - Psychological resources	**Critical Reflection** - Self-examination with feelings of guilt or shame - Critical assessment of personal assumptions
	Social Support - Relationships - Family units - Network of friends - Institutional support	
Future Planning	**Strategies (coping resources)** - Modifying the situation - Control the meaning of the problem - Aid in managing the stress in aftermath	**Rational Discourse** - Recognition of one's discontent and process of transformation are shared - Exploration of options for new roles, relationships and actions

[1] Anderson et al., 2011; [2] Mezirow, 1994

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Conclusion

Student veterans are a growing demographic on college and university campuses nationwide. Given the current and projected growth of this demographic plans must be made to accommodate these students to the best of our abilities as administrators. Baechtold and De Sawal (2009) noted suggestions from student veterans they interviewed who believed identifying of other student veterans for support, or offering an orientation session *for* student veterans *by* student veterans would be beneficial. Administrators do not need to tackle this demographic on their own, but need to seek help from student veterans who are already on their campuses. Student veterans admitted to having problems when there was not a functioning program to help with questions about the transition to becoming a college student (Baechtold & De Sawal 2009). Students receive a great deal of assistance when they come to college, now institutions need to work towards taking care of our veterans who have fought so bravely for our freedoms.

CHAPTER III: METHODS

The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand the transitional and transformational experiences of military veterans who are now college students. More specifically, the purpose of this case study was to explore the experiences of five student veterans in three universities and two states (Texas and Ohio) to explore how they created connections between their (a) pre-during-post military experiences, (b) the process of change from military personnel to college students, and (c) the act of their transformation.

The following questions guided the study:

1.   How do student veterans describe change when moving from active duty military service to being a college student?

2.   In what ways do student veterans describe the help received when making the transition?

3.   How do student veterans describe their relationship to the world around them?

Qualitative Research

With the anticipated surge in veterans entering or re-entering higher education and the diversity of these veterans, it is crucial for institutes of higher education to have a full understanding of the transitional and transformational experiences of student veterans. The need for this critical understanding of the human transformational process is why this study is based in qualitative inquiry. Qualitative researchers are interested in understanding the constructions and interpretations of reality at a particular point in time and within a particular context, in this instance, as military service members transition to become student veterans. According to Creswell (2007), qualitative research is a distinct methodological tradition of inquiry used to explore a specified social or human problem looking into the meanings of participant

experiences. The reader of qualitative research is able to understand the experiences of participants at any given time throughout the research.

A qualitative researcher is interested in understanding how participants make meaning which is formed through the experiences they have had and which differs from the perspectives and lenses of others, because of unique individual experiences (Crotty, 2004). Research using qualitative inquiry seeks to understand the experiences and describe those experiences in such a way that the reader will be able to get a full understanding of the situation or phenomenon that has happened (Denzin, 1970). The overall goal of qualitative studies is not to provide one truth, but to provide multiple truths through each participant's account of their experiences, thus the reader begins to see how the individual's values, assumptions, and beliefs are vastly different (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Applying this understanding of qualitative research aided this study to examine the experiences of student veterans transitioning into the classroom from military service and the transformations they encountered within the transition.

As the researcher of qualitative inquiry begins to construct meanings of the participants' experiences, he or she interprets the meaning of those experiences. Creswell's (2007) description of social constructionism is the basis for the initial epistemological orientation for this study. The interpretation of the research is shaped by the experiences that the researcher has had and therefore "the researcher's intent is to make sense (or interpret) the meanings others have about the world" (Creswell, 2007, p. 8). This applies to this study because there is a need to (a) understand the experiences veterans have had transitioning into higher education and transforming to becoming a student, (b) understand the experiences student veterans have had in the classroom, (c) understand the experiences student veterans have had outside of the

classroom, and (d) provide a voice for the veterans through acknowledgement and recognition of their unique experiences pre-during-post military service.

Methodological Framework

The methodological framework of this study is constructivism. Constructivism "posits that a person constructs his/her own reality" (Forster, 2006, p. 1). Researchers conduct interviews and help the reader gain an understanding of the participants' experiences. "Constructivists claim that truth is relative and that it is dependent on one's perspective" (Baxter & Jack, 2008, p. 545). The experiences of the participants allow the reader to understand how they have constructed their reality through their various experiences. These stories enable the participant to describe their views of reality and enables researchers to better understand the actions of the participants (Lather, 1992; Robottom & Hart, 1993). In constructivism, the researchers and participants work together to create knowledge.

According to Christ (2011), in constructivism research, the researcher and participants recognize their biases and negotiate the shared interpretation and their views of the value in the research process. Individuals do not observe things in an objective manner, however they develop unique personal constructs, which they use to interpret what comes to their attention (Forster, 2006). These constructs show how a person is always viewing the world they are in and adjusting his or her self-identity to survive in that particular time, whether it happens to be on the battle field or in a classroom.

Constructivism was chosen for this study because the perspectives of student veterans were used to understand how they transformed their identity during the transition, and the means they used to adjust to a new environment, one that is apart from military service. It may be that veterans constructed an identity while they were in the military, re-constructed their identity

when they transitioned into civilian life, and then yet again as a college student (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Research Framework

The focus of this study was on veterans and their transitional and transformational experiences as they moved from military service into a higher education classroom. Merriam (2002) states that "a central characteristic of qualitative research is that individuals construct reality in interaction with their social worlds…here the researcher is interested in understanding the meaning an experience has for those involved" (p. 37). The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand the transitional and transformational experiences of military veterans who are now college students. More specifically, the purpose of this case study was to explore the experiences of five student veterans and how they created a connection between their (a) pre-during-post military experiences, (b) the process of change from military personnel to college students, and (c) the act of their transformation.

Case Study

The framework for this study was case study which Creswell (2007) defined as research involving the study of an issue explored through one or more cases within a setting or a context (p.73). Yin (1994) defined a case study as an "empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident" (p. 13). A case study explores a single system or multiple systems over a length of time, through detailed collection and reports, further, a case description can be written based on themes. Utilizing a case study approach allowed for an understanding of the experiences veterans had during the transition process and if there were any injustices experienced during the transition. Merriam (2002) noted that a case study provides a vivid and

lifelike experience within a contextual situation; knowledge of the case under the study is developed by the reader's interpretations and insights. Readers of case study research may be able to relate to the veterans' experiences during their transition and how the transition influenced a transformation of self and apply this new knowledge to their own journey involving change.

Stake (1995) used two terms to describe case studies: intrinsic and instrumental. "When the purpose of a case study is to go beyond the case, we call it 'instrumental' case study, yet when the main and enduring interest is in the case itself, we call it 'intrinsic' case study" (Stake, 1995, p.8). The instrumental type of case study was used to seek an understanding of the transitional and transformational phenomenon that veterans experienced. Baxter and Jack (2008), summarized the work of Yin (2003) and Miles and Huberman (1994), noting as a researcher using a case study approach, certain components should be included in designing and implementing a rigorous case study, which "include: (a) propositions (which may or may not be present); (b) the application of a conceptual framework; (c) development of the research questions; (d) the logic linking data to propositions, and (e) the criteria for interpreting findings" (p. 550-551). While case study has been utilized in numerous ways in a single case study design, there are times when a multiple case design may be warranted. Yin (2003) suggested that a multiple case study design should have a sense of replication in which the inquirer replicates the procedures for each case. Yin (2003, p. 57) stated each case should be selected to "either predict similar results (a literal replication) or predicts contrasting results for anticipatable reasons (a theoretical replication)." The evidence from multiple cases is often considered more compelling, and the overall study is therefore regarded as being more robust (Herriott & Firestone, 1983).

Using a multiple case study design fits well with this study as each participant had a different background and military experience and was enrolled at an institution in either in Texas or Ohio.

<div align="center">**Research Design**</div>

A qualitative research design was selected for this study due to the lack of literature and knowledge pertaining to the transition and transformational experiences of student veterans. The research design describes methods and procedures to guide the case study. The research design provides a framework for participant selection, data collection, management and analysis, representation, ethical considerations, and trustworthiness and rigor.

Institutional Profiles

Three universities, in two states (Texas and Ohio), served as sites for the study. Both Texas universities were located in south Texas, one close to the Gulf of Mexico and the other close to the United States-Mexico border. To preserve the confidentiality of the participants, pseudonyms were created for each of the institutions.

Coastal Waters University. With its sights set on becoming an emerging research university, the vision statement from Coastal Waters University includes a commitment to student success, closing achievement gaps, and delivering a campus experience for students that is robust. According to the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board's university online resume for prospective students, parents and the public, 11, 234 students were enrolled in the academic school year 2014. Student demographics showed that of the over 11,000 students enrolled, 39% were White, 45% Hispanic, 6% African American, 2% Asian, 5% international, and 2% listed as other. The portion of the enrollment categorized as military was 11%, which included students enrolled in the ROTC, active duty service members, veterans, or military dependents. This institution has been awarded the Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI) designation

by the Hispanic Association of Colleges & University. This designation is given to institutions, which have a full-time equivalent undergraduate enrollment that is at least 25% Hispanic.

Desert Palms University. Situated along the United States-Mexico border, Desert Palms University was recently merged with another university. Much like Coastal Waters University, Desert Palms University has set its sights on also becoming an emerging research institution. According to the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, university online resume for prospective students, parents, and the public, 8,009 students were enrolled in the academic school year 2014. Student demographics showed that of the over 8,000 students enrolled, 6% were White, 86% Hispanic, 1% African American, 1% Asian, 5% international and less than 1% listed as other. The enrollment at this institution was lower than Coastal Waters University, however its military enrollment was 16% comprising veterans and military dependents utilizing benefits. According to militaryfriendly.com (2016), a website that provides information to help veterans and dependents with institutions that support military personnel, this institution was considered military friendly. This institution has been awarded the Hispanic-Serving Institution designation by the Hispanic Association of Colleges & University. This designation is given to institutions, which have a full-time equivalent undergraduate enrollment that is at least 25% Hispanic.

Fields of Green University. The final institution utilized in this study was the Fields of Green University, located in Southern Ohio. This university was a public research university, classified as an R2: Doctoral University – higher research activity, according to The Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education. According to the institute's website, 18,788 students were enrolled in the fall of 2015. Student demographics showed that of the over 18,000 students enrolled, 76% were White, 4% Hispanic, 3% African American, 2% Asian, 11%

international and 3% listed as other. The military affiliated enrollment was 2% of the total student enrollment at this institution and includes veterans and military dependents utilizing educational benefits. According to the militaryfriendly.com (2016), this institution was considered military friendly.

Research Sites and Gaining Access to Participants

These three institutions were chosen as research sites in order to provide an opportunity for a large pool of student veterans. The Veteran Affair's Coordinators at each institution was contacted to inform them of the research topic and request their assistance in connecting with the student veterans' population on their respective campuses. Once the connection was made, a short description of the study and contact information was sent to the coordinators to be forwarded to student veterans whom the coordinators felt might be willing to participate. Once contact was established with potential participants, an information sheet and consent form was forwarded to them; their signature was obtained at the initial interview.

Participant Selection

As a qualitative study, purposeful sampling was used to provide a better understanding of the problem being researched. Merriam (1998) defines purposeful sampling as the "assumption that the investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned" (p. 61). Gaining an in-depth understanding of the experiences veterans have with transitioning to student veteran was best served by selecting participants who have experienced the transition process of entering or re-entering college after separating, or soon to be separated, from the military.

Criterion-based selection determines "a list of essential attributes" to the study and then "proceeds to find or locate" participants matching the list (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993, p. 70). In

order to provide quality assurance for the study, participants needed to meet the following criteria: (a) veteran of the armed forces, (b) served on active duty for 180 days or more, and (c) enrolled in courses at the institution. Special effort was made to include both female and male students representing different branches of the Department of Defense. Two student veterans (Specialist Schwartz and Sergeant Blevins) were chosen from Coastal Waters University, one student (Petty Officer Perez) from Desert Palms University, and two students (Corporal Solak and Major James) were chosen from the Fields of Green University.

Participant Profiles

To preserve the confidentiality of the participants, pseudonyms were created for each of the participants to include the rank they earned while in the military. Army Specialist Schwartz spent four years in the Army as a human intelligence collector and was a senior, psychology major at the time of the interviews. Navy Petty Officer Perez spent eight years in the Navy, serving as a Corpsman attached to a Marine Corps unit. He was a junior nursing major at the time of the interviews. Army Sergeant Blevins served for four years in the Army as a Combat Engineer with Army Airborne. He was a junior Marine Biology major at the time of the interviews. Marine Corporal Solak served in the Marine Corps for four years as an Embarkation Specialist. At the time of the interviews she was a freshman pursuing a Theater Arts major with a minor in Comparative Religion. At the time of the interviews, Marine Major James was serving in the Marine Corps for ten years as a Communications Officer and was pursuing a Mathematics degree.

With the exception of Major James, all of the participants of the study had completed their military duty. Major James was still active duty at the time of this study, but was included

in the study because of the number of transitions he encountered as a student over the course of his service.

Membership Role

My role in the qualitative research project was as the primary instrument for data collection, data analysis, and data representation (Grbich, 2007; Merriam, 2009). I did not have a relationship with any of the participants prior to the study, therefore building rapport was important. Due to my subjectivity, I was considered an insider based on my background in the military. According to Merriam (2002), an insider role has the advantages of being able to share similar backgrounds and interests making rapport easier to establish. Seidman (1991) suggested that the focus of the first interview should be getting acquainted, developing rapport and laying out the research topic for the participant.

During interviews, I asked questions to elicit responses from the participants as they considered the changes they encountered when transitioning from active duty service to the classroom setting. While my own experiences may be similar to the participants, I had to listen more than I spoke to ensure the participants' experiences came through. However, the familiarity of the military environment not only helped gain the trust of the participants, but also allowed me to understand the unique terms the participants utilized during the interviews. The shared status of the researcher and the participant creates a level of trust and openness with the participants that would likely not been gained under other circumstances (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009).

<div align="center">

Data Collection Methods

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The primary data collection method used for the study was in-depth interviews, using semi-structured questions (Appendix A), with each of the five participants. According to Qu and Dumay (2011), interviews provide a useful way for researchers to learn about the world of

others, even when the interviewer and interviewee seem to be speaking the same language, their words may have completely different cultural meanings.

Interviews are a common method for obtaining information from an individual. We witness interviews every day in our lives through nightly news, daytime talk shows and sports news outlets. Stories and information can be effectively communicated through interviews. Although interviews can be a common activity in our society, interviewing for the sake of data collection in qualitative research is a structured process (Merriam, 2009). The participant interviews in my study consisted of one face-to-face interview and one Skype interview, each lasting approximately one hour in length. The first interview consisted of questions pertaining to the participant's military background as well as their transition into the college classroom. The second interview focused on the transformative learning that each participant experienced during their transition.

The first interview gave participants an opportunity to ask questions and learn more about the purpose of the study. The process of establishing rapport is an essential component of the interview (Douglas, 1985; Palmer, 1928) and began during the initial meeting of the participants. Skype was utilized to conduct interviews due to the schedules of the participants and the change in work situation of the researcher. Deakin and Wakefield (2013) stated that while telephone interviewing allows for communication over long distances, Skype facilities a better connection between parties by utilizing video.

Maccoby and Maccoby (1954) describe interviews as a verbal exchange, however there is much expression and communication that is not verbal. Actively listening is a fundamental technique for being a good interviewer. Listening is actively attending to the verbal discussion while noticing non-verbal cues as well (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2002). Tone, cadence, and rhythm of

speech, inadvertent movements of the body, eyes, and hands could be non-verbal cues an interviewer needs to observe.

Interviews were scheduled with the participants at their convenience to ensure that they felt as comfortable as possible during the interviews. While some of the interviews were held in my office, as it was the choice of the participant, one was held in the library, while another was held in the office of the participant. Each of the first round of interviews were held face to face while the second round was held on Skype. This round of interviews was unique in that I was not in the same room as the participant. While I went into the office to conduct the interviews, my participants were at home in their living room or dining room during this interview.

Data Collection

During the interviews, I requested the permission of each participant to record the interview so that I would be able to give my full attention to what each participant was saying during their responses. The interviews were recorded utilizing Recordium Pro by Pichak co., an application on my cell phone, which allowed me to place tags at important parts of the interview that would assist me when I went back and listened to the interview again after transcription was done. Figure 4 is a screenshot of one of the interviews where I have highlighted a portion of the recording as well as added a tag telling me to revisit this portion later.
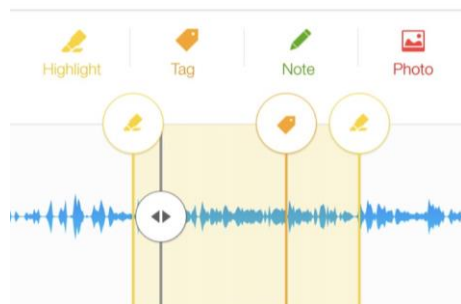

Figure 4. Interview Recording.

Each recording of the interview was transcribed into a Word document to allow for ease of manipulation of the document to assist with coding. An example of one of the transcribed portions with Corporal Solak is below:

Me: So, how do you describe your learning experiences prior to being a college student?

Solak: Prior to being college...as I said, I was homeschooled for a good five years. Before that I was being public schooled. For homeschooling growing up on a dairy farm there was a lot of, it was a lot of one hands, I guess, training, learning. At least [that's what] my mom tried to have us do. So, I was already kind of used to learning on my own basically, because it kind of prepared for that for colleges to where they have large classrooms where sometimes you are going to have to learn on your own or you're going to have to read the book and do it yourself. So, a lot of it, so yeah, it was a lot of learning on your own how, at your own pace, and being able to take time. In a way homeschool kind of helped that way of being able to teach yourself and being able to manage your own time so that you have certain deadlines done which has kind of helped for college.

Me: What was learning like in the military?

Solak: Learning like in the military was just like you see this, all this, you're going to learn all of this in the next two weeks' period. So, that was just jamming everything into your head for eight hours straight every day for what? Five days, maybe six days if they really wanted to push it on the weekends, 'cause I did, I've been certified to, for airfare, transportation of hazardous materials, one for working like three different systems, certification for embarkation, plus also all of these certification to do all of these [BEQ] stuff as well, which was kind of like a lot of the classes are five, six hours straight in one day and you're done. So now it's like, so it's like you learn how to learn fast or you like...

Data Management

As part of the data management process, electronic folders were created for each of the participants which ensured there was no confusion about which data went with each participant. A laptop, cell phone, external hard drive, and cloud storage were all utilized for maintaining and storing the data to reduce the risk of losing the data that were collected. All electronic devices were password protected with only the researcher knowing the password. The external hard drive was encrypted and password protected to prevent being accessed if it was misplaced or lost.

Journal Reflections

Researcher journals, as Merriam (1998) describes, are an introspective record of the researcher's experience in the field which includes "ideas, fears, mistakes, confusion and reactions" (p. 110) during the experiences of research. Keeping a research journal is a step to document trustworthiness in qualitative research. Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggest that researchers keep three journals which include (a) a log of day to day activities, (b) a personal log or diary that includes reflective and introspective notes, and (c) a methodological log to document decisions or changes made in regard to the methodology, research purpose, or questions. The research journal assisted in remaining focused during the long research process and the continued changes in environment. Figure 5 is an excerpt from my journal that I kept, I have changed the names to the pseudonyms used in the study as I did not know them when I was reflecting after the interview.

MET WITH Blevins TODAY AND LEARNED A LOT ABOUT HIS TIME OVERSEAS AND THE REASON HE LEFT THE ARMY. IT WAS EYE-OPENING TO KNOW HE WENT OVERSEAS AND CAME BACK WOUNDED WHERE I SERVED AND CAME BACK HEALTHY. IT MADE ME THINK OF HOW THINGS CAN CHANGE IN THE BLINK OF AN EYE. TO THINK THAT HE DID NOT WANT TO PARTICIPATE AT FIRST IN MY STUDY, BUT THROUGH ENCOURAGEMENT FROM Schwartz AND DISCUSSIONS WITH ME ON MY PURPOSE AND GOAL, HE WAS HAPPY TO PARTICIPATE. LOOKING BACK ON TODAY, I'M GLAD HE DID BECOME A PARTICIPANT. HIS TRANSITION EXPERIENCE IS GOING TO BE GREAT, AS HE DID IT AGAINST HIS WILL, YET SUPPORTED BY HIS WIFE.

Figure 5. Journal Excerpt.

Data Transformation

During the data transformation portion of the study, the raw data were analyzed through inductive analysis and transformed into themes that are discussed in the findings.

Data Analysis

An inductive analysis approach was utilized to analyze the raw data that were gathered through interviews. I utilized a two-cycle coding process outlined by Saldaña (2009). The first cycle of coding used Initial Coding of the data as described by Saldana, which took the large amount of raw data and broke it down into large categories of information. The Initial Coding broke down the data into discrete parts, examining the parts and comparing them for similarities and differences (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 102). This first cycle allowed for an open-ended approach to looking at the data line by line. Along with the Initial Coding of the data,

Descriptive Coding was also employed to help summarize the basic topic of a passage of data (Wolcott, 1994).

The first round of coding was very direct and helped identify common themes between what the participants said regarding the transition and transformation experiences in higher education. The second cycle of coding was more challenging as an analytical review of the data had to be conducted and skills such as "classifying, prioritizing, integrating, synthesizing, abstracting, conceptualization and theory building" (Saldaña, 2009, p.45) had to be utilized and took time to develop. Figure 6 illustrates the stages of data analysis moving from the raw data to the themes that were created.
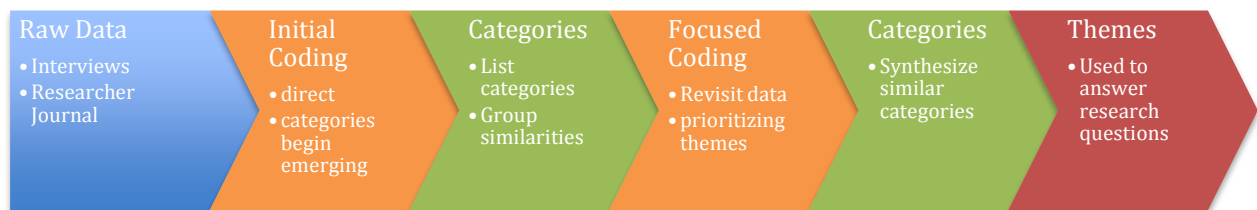
Figure 6. Data Analysis Process.

Table 11 shows what the first cycle of coding looked like with regards to a portion of Specialist Schwartz's experiences.

Table 11

Partial Transcript with Initial Coding

Interview Transcript	Initial Coding: Transition experiences
Me: So, as you were transitioning back into school after you did four years, how did that impact your expectations?	
Schwartz: I felt like I was way more mature, and I appreciated education more, and I think that the military really helped me to be able to do that. I appreciated being able to learn my job on the military side, and kind of like a lot of the psychology principles that I learned in class I've done already in an	Mature Appreciated education

interrogation and stuff. So, having a kind of foundation to being willing to learn helped me transition immensely into college life, because before, when I went to school beforehand I was like, "I'm just here because my mom wants me to be here. I don't want to go to college." Well, I wanted to go to college, but I didn't want to sit in class and stuff. I thought it was going to be a lot easier the first time around. When I realized it wasn't, and I went into the military, and I thought that was hard at first during basic training. Got out of that, and I was like, "Wow, I can actually do this." Like I know I can apply myself in class, but I learned a lot more being more mature and appreciating the education that I'm getting. So, the military greatly impacted my ability to succeed in college.	Foundation Perseverance Success
Me: In your psychology classes, you said you used some of that, some of the theories, some of the practices you're learning in the military. Do you talk about those in class or do you kind of hide a little bit?	
Schwartz: I do. Nope. I am the veteran in the front row. "Pick me!" And I know all of my psych professors. I'm really like, I live on the third floor of [Bay] Hall practically. I'm always up there. And so, they all know me, and last semester I was taking physiological psychology with [a Professor], and she would talk about things, and I would be like, "How does that affect veterans' brains? And how does this?" During my gender issues class, last semester with [a different] Professor, I sat in the front row, and there were probably four or five veterans in the class, and I'm the one with the hand up, "Wait, we're talking about this, and I saw this on CNN about a special forces guy who turns transgender, and y'all should watch this," and I recall my military experience a lot more in the classes than a lot of the other veterans do. I'm very outspoken when it comes to wanting to understand what's happening for veterans.	Confidence Inquisitive Veteran minded

Note. Schwartz Interview – 1st cycle of coding.

After the first cycle of coding was completed and categories began to form, I revisited the data for a second cycle of coding. The second cycle utilized Focus Coding which searched for the most frequent codes from the first cycle coding to "develop the most salient categories" in the collection of the data and "requires decisions about which initial codes make the most analytical sense" (Charmaz, 2006, pp. 46, 57). During this round of coding, I began to prioritize categories and look at the transcripts in a different light. Table 12 shows how these final sets of categories pulled information from the first set of categories and combined them into groups that would be utilized in the participant profiles as themes.

Table 12

Focused and Initial Coding Categories

Initial Coding: Transition Experiences	Focused Coding
College to Military Training	Extent of Transition Experience
PCS to Okinawa	
Deployment	
PCS to Virginia	
Married	
PCS to NC	
Deployment	
PCS to ROTC	
Military Families on base – close knit community	Support Network
Church Family – Spiritual and emotional support	
Command Sponsor – help learn new base	
Command assistance	Team oriented
Network of families	
Operational tempo	
Unit goals	

Note. James Interview - 2nd cycle of coding.

Data Representation

Since the design of this study is a case study, the findings are presented through rich descriptive narratives (Creswell, 2007). Chapter Four presents participant profiles in narrative form with descriptions centered on pre-during-post military service experiences. Embedded within their narratives are examples of changes that underpin their transition as they moved to student veteran status. Interwoven within these changes are the social structures they encountered as well as their cultural understanding and awareness of environment conditions informing the directions and choices within their transition.

Within each participant profile is a set of themes that came to the surface as the narratives were being written. Figure 7 shows the themes that emerged from each profile which will be utilized as Level 3 headings for the narratives.

Figure 7. Participant Themes.

Ethical Considerations and Reciprocity

When working with participants, there are always ethical issues which must be taken into consideration while conducting qualitative research (Creswell, 2007). The five participants in this study were involved on a voluntary basis and signed a consent form prior to beginning the first interview. This consent form required all participants to choose freely whether or not to participate in the study, and there was a complete understanding of the issues that might be encountered as part of their involvement. I made it clear that any information obtained throughout the research process would be fully protected and nothing would be shared with anyone other than when the research was written, and then only by utilizing pseudonyms. After the final interview, each participant was offered a gift certificate however none of the participants accepted. The participants received no payment or gift for their participation in the

study. Further, all of the participants were happy to share their experiences and have kept in touch since the final interview to ensure all the questions were answered.

Rigor and Trustworthiness

Throughout the study, rigor and trustworthiness were ensured by adherence to specific standards prior to conducting research, during data collection procedures, and through the data analysis process. A condition of case study design is the use of multiple types of data for the purposes of triangulation (Yin, 2003). To ensure trustworthiness was maintained, a thorough literature review was conducted to gain a deeper understanding of the scope of the research that already existed on the topic. By utilizing the information that had already been researched on the topic, it was possible to compare experiences and create rival explanations to the phenomenon that occurred with the veterans of this study.

In addition to triangulation, peer debriefing was conducted to ensure the credibility of the research. Peer debriefing is defined as, "the process of exploring oneself to a disinterested peer in a manner paralleling an analytic session and for the purpose of exploring aspects of the inquiry that might otherwise remain only implicit within the inquirers mind" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 308). Having the participants review the narratives helped ensure the representation was correct and there were no false statements within the study to enhance the trustworthiness of the study.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I discussed the purpose of the qualitative study, utilizing constructivism as the methodological framework with Schlossberg's Transition Theory and Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory as lenses to analyze the participants' experiences. Following this, the research design was discussed as well as the data collection and transformation. Finally, I outlined the ethical considerations, rigor, and trustworthiness of the study.

CHAPTER IV: FINDINGS

The purpose of this study was to understand the transition and transformational experiences of military veterans who are now college students. The research questions investigated the ways in which the military training and experiences of the veterans aided in their transition and transformation into a student at an institution of higher education. Semi-structured interviews served as the primary data gathering strategy to address the questions. Five participants were selected from three institutions, in two states, who had active duty military combat experience prior to enrolling in higher education as a full-time student.

All five case studies contained in this chapter have been organized around a narrative description detailing profiles for each participant, an individual case analysis that includes elements of their transition from military personnel to college student, and a timeline of military service for each participant. The narratives are organized first by each participant detailing his or her military background, their self-perception as a student, and learning encounters and engagements. Three key areas of knowledge and understanding of their experiences in the narratives emerged. They can be described as the varied needs of these student veterans adapting and responding to different learning environments requiring less reflexive practice and more reflective practice; the interconnectedness of building and sustaining diverse relationships, extending beyond a military work-life balance, to nourish ongoing personal growth and empowerment; and blurring boundaries as identities changed moving from military personnel to college students,

Participant Profiles

Each case that follows concerns one participant. As mentioned in Chapter 3, in order to preserve the confidentiality of the participants, pseudonyms were created for each of the

participants to include the rank they earned while in the military. The profiles are laid out in a way to show a full picture of each student veteran who participated in this study by weaving in elements of their personal and professional lives underpinned by a cluster of qualities such as informed decision making, related reasons for joining and separating from the military, as well as those decisions made reflexively on a tacit level related to learning in college, adaptability, flexibility, and generic qualities like committed values and attitudes that define who they are as a veteran and then as a student. The military section of the profile outlines the job the veteran held while in the military, their training, as well as the deployments the veteran may have experienced. The student section of the profile lists the year of study, the degree that the veteran is pursuing, previous higher education experience as well as any extra-curricular activities the veteran may have been involved in which paint a portrait of the self-resources of the veteran. Following the student section, the situation, support, and strategies of the transition are narrated. The final section of the profile looks at the three dimensions (disorienting dilemma, critical reflection, and rational discourse) of the transformational learning that each veteran experienced in becoming a college student. The headers that are utilized for each profile are categories that will lead to themes for the profiles and the study.

Specialist Schwartz, U. S. Army

Military training. Specialist Schwartz is an Army veteran who served honorably from 2008-2012, with her home base located in Vilseck, Germany. She spent four years as a human intelligence collector, or interrogator. The human intelligence collector provides Army personnel with information about the enemy force's strengths, weaknesses, and potential battle areas. Part of her duties included screening human intelligence sources and documents, debriefing and interrogating human intelligence sources, participating in human intelligence operations and

analysis, and preparing intelligence reports. Her training included ten weeks of basic combat training and an additional 20 weeks of advanced individual training with on-the-job instruction in order to develop skills in screening, debriefing, and interrogations, preparing maps and charts, and human intelligence analysis.

Eyes and ears open. In 2011, Specialist Schwartz was deployed to Afghanistan as part of a three person all female interrogation team. Her team was responsible for talking to women because the male interrogators were not allowed to talk to them. While she was deployed there it was not unusual for her to work 72 hours straight. While in Afghanistan, Schwartz learned a lot, but the most important was to trust herself and be cautious of individuals she may not know within the base. She told a story regarding a source that the unit she was attached to brought onto base to be interrogated. When this Afghan came onto the base, he began to take pictures of the base which is one of the things a soldier is told to watch for, "We don't know why he was taking pictures, for personal use or as Intel for another group that wanted to know the layout of the base." At first, she did not know what to think as she saw it happening, she started to look around to see how others were reacting. Then her training took over and she approached the individual and took the camera away and contacted the Military Police on the base. She did this thinking more about the safety and security of others on the base and not on the repercussions it may have on a relationship she needed to maintain with the source to have a successful interrogation. Once the Military Police detained the guy who was taking pictures, she was questioned about her actions so they could put it in their report.

The team leader told her to calm down and handle the situation at hand, then conduct the After-Action Report and go through the different steps of the form, to be better prepared for future incidents. An After-Action Report is a structured review, or de-briefing, process to

analyze what happened, why it happened, and how it can be handled better by the participants and those responsible for the project or event. After Action Reports (AAR) are filled out after every incident that occurs out of the ordinary, or after missions off base. As she reflected on this experience, she said that "for me, in my military career, a lot of it has just been testing, then retraining and numerous learning experiences." This story showed a time when her understanding of a way to handle a stressful situation may not always be the easiest decision to make, but if you trust in your abilities, training, and experience, you will make the best decision you can during any given situation.

Not quite ready, the first time. At the time of the interviews Schwartz was a senior in the psychology program at a South Texas institution. However, this was not her first time enrolled in college. Before joining the military, she had attempted college after she graduated high school, but it was more of a means to move out of her parents' house at 18 rather than a way to prepare and position herself for a career. When she reflected on that experience, she now believes that she tried to make too many life changes at once and ended up not doing well that first semester because she misjudged the work it would take in the classes. Her freshman experience was memorable in many regards but the choices she made of getting married at 18, attending college close to him, getting pregnant, and not attending classes were not conducive to her staying in school *and* being successful. After one year, coming to the realization that she was only there "because my mom wanted me to be there," she dropped out of college and enlisted in the Army.

During her last year of active duty, she re-enrolled in college, though at a different institution. According to her, this time around in college, she was determined to be a different student and have a different college experience. One way that she approached college differently

was to engage in the college culture by joining multiple student organizations. One of the organizations she joined was part of the Panhellenic Council. Beyond the sisterhood bonds, this Council governs the affiliated sororities at the university and promotes sorority life by encouraging leadership, high academic achievement, and philanthropic and community service efforts. Even though she was classified as a non-traditional student, and a junior, Schwartz decided to join the Greek community and went through the formal recruitment and pledging process. She decided to join an organization after talking to a VA office assistant who was also in a sorority. She began talking about enjoying the camaraderie and how they're always there for each other and she thought "Huh? That sounds like the military." This was a unique experience for her in that most of the women who attend formal recruitment are of traditional age (18) and are freshmen. Once she was an initiated member of the organization, her leadership skills that she gained in the military helped her as she became the new member coordinator where she helped new girls learn about the organization during their pledging process.

One of the other groups that Schwartz got involved with was the United Student Veterans Organization on campus. She became a member of the group and was soon selected by her peers to be the president of the organization. In this leadership position, she set her sights on bringing more visibility to the organization as well as helping to improve support for veterans on campus. Visibility of the organization is important to help other veterans make connections to other veterans, the group, and the institution. One project she undertook was to create a welcoming space dedicated for veterans within the student union. She and the organization secured a grant from Home Depot to outfit the lounge dedicated solely to veteran-students so that it was a warm, friendly, ad welcoming environment, where veteran-students could gather.

Lastly, recognizing the limited resources targeted at helping veterans transition to the

social, cultural, and educational environment of college, she became a student worker within the

Office of Veteran Services. Here, she worked directly with others, similar to her. She modeled

behaviors for incoming veteran-student to navigate a different environment, or for some a

different battleground, the college campus. Having made the transition from active duty to

student, she knew more about the issues and concerns (bureaucracies, paperwork, shifting

identity, independence, transitioning to civilian life) faced by military affiliated students and

could identify with and connect to the veteran-student with appropriate support and resources. At

the same time, she used this new role to engage veteran-students in the social and cultural ways

of campus life.

New sense of responsibility. For Schwartz, when she exited the Army, she experienced a

sense of separation from one's family (military). Suddenly, she was on-campus, in an

environment that presented challenges for her, such as flying solo. She was also older than most

classmates. She had a perspective of college that was different from the typical 18-year-old

freshman, defined in large part by her military experiences. Yet, from her military training she

had become self-sufficient and goal-driven. In turn she became an insightful leader and worked

tirelessly to help others in similar situations to make meaningful contributions to the veteran-

student community.

Much like other veteran-students (Lighthall, 2012), deciding to go back to school for

Schwartz was something that she knew she wanted to do when her time in the Army was

completed. Yet, how she approached returning to school presented a shift from focusing on the

job-based responsibilities to protect others, especially required of military personnel in combat

environments, to that of responsibility from an individual perspective. While in the Army, there

is a professional and ethical responsibility to protect others in the broadest and narrowest of scopes. Schwartz's decisions related to her job as a Human Intelligence Collector had the potential to impact individuals stemming from a most fundamental concept of *responsibility to others*. For military personnel, similar to underlying humanitarian interventions as reported by Garrigues (2007), who shared an excerpt from the Responsibility to Protect Op, "the 'responsibility to protect' implies above all else a responsibility to react to situations of compelling need for human protection (pg. 10). It is important to understand that in her position, there were multiple actors involved when *she* made decisions based on *her* analysis of human intelligence data that *she* collected–from the squadrons directly affected, to the regional security organizations, to actual individuals, both military and civilian. At no time was she able to assume a passivity toward her duties, lives were at stake, literally. As such little room was left for mistakes. If lessons had to be learned, they had to be exact and lasting. This intensity of learning on-the-job, or boots on the ground so to speak, engendered opportunities for adverse reactions, despite best intentions, especially to the possibility of making the wrong decision, at a critical time.

In college, the sense of responsibility is different, perhaps even liberating for Schwartz. "In college, I feel that if I make a mistake, it's only going to affect me as I don't have a group relying on my every decision as I did in the military. My decisions now will only affect my final grade." Still, her training in the military led her to understand fully the enormity of being held accountable for her actions, even if the end result, in this case a grade, varied drastically from the life or death situation of her prior decisions.

Transitioning: Knowing environmental differences; standing on firm ground. Being able to recognize the differences in the environment helped begin her transition into college

successfully. Having had a semester of college prior to joining Army perhaps provided Schwartz with some inside knowledge of what to expect once she re-enrolled in college. However, with the passage of time and new life experiences gained from being in the Army, she also felt more mature and appreciated education more so than when she was 18 and a freshman.

Interestingly enough, Schwartz utilized a lot of her training as a Human Intelligence Collector to help her with the transition. For instance, a strategy she employed revolved around the basic need for a sense of control, deeply driven by a sense of identity. Her identity as a student who is also a veteran manifested itself in ways in which her values, attitudes, needs, and life styles converged as a place of central importance to her sense of individual self. Though not all student-veterans publicize their veteran identity in college, there was no paradox of identities for Schwartz; she remained steadfast in projecting herself as a veteran who happens to be going to college. In turn, she appeared to be confident, out-going, and carried herself with pride.

One may encounter the particular construct of change, relating to navigating organizational differences between the military and higher education, with anxiety, fear, uncertainty, and discomfort. However, this is not necessarily the case with Schwartz. In fact, she pursued the change from military to civilian to student in a rational manner, first by intentionally seeking out support and guidance, grounded by a willingness to learn. For her, a military background taught her that change and aspirations were interlocked and would require seeking out others who would be able to help her. For instance, with some of the tougher classes in college or asking for help from her fiancé to care for her young daughter when she attended class. She admitted struggling with some of her psychology courses, but did not let those struggles determine her success or failure. Rather, she sought out secondary instruction sessions, or tutorials, so that she could gain a complete understanding of what the professors were trying

to convey. Furthermore, as a fully engaged college student and with her immediate family more than three hours away, she relied heavily on her fiancé to help with childcare, household chores, and just generally personal domestic needs. His level of support allowed her to concentrate on her school work and also become involved in the veteran support groups on campus.

Life-changing experiences: The birth of a daughter; the emergence of a different type of leader. As Schwartz reflected on her time in the military, there were many different things that she felt were important to her, but perhaps the most life altering change she encountered was post military; the birth of her daughter. With the birth of her daughter, she had to take a semester off from school and returned to school after that semester. While the military had prepared her to be a leader, she leveraged the skills and experiences of motherhood to further develop her leadership style which was actually a bit different from her leadership training and roles from when she was in the military. For instance, she recalled:

> In the military, you're shoved all of the information to be a leader, do this, take the initiative on everything, where in college I thought you should be involved in something. Show them [graduate programs] that you can not only do school work, but you have this other side they should know.

She was always aware of what graduate schools wanted to see on applications, so any program that she works with, she wanted to ensure it helped her to pursue her graduate degree. Her goal once she earned her B.A. in Psychology was to pursue an M.A. in Clinical Psychology. She was involved in not only the student veteran's organization and her sorority, but she was also a member of Psi Chi, an international honor society in psychology, and the Golden Key Honour Society, an international honor society recognizing academic achievement among

students in all disciplines. All of these organizations, along with high marks in her classes, helped to make her more competitive for the graduate school application process.

Along with her involvement, knowing the difference in the types of leadership is just one perspective that ultimately helped her to change upon her arrival to campus. Through reflections and conversations with others, she shifted her views of leadership that eventually helped her become a well-rounded student and a contributing member to the college community. There were several hard skills that she brought from her military training (e.g. time management, communication, and collaboration skills) that certainly contributed to her transitioning easily to college life as a student. However, Schwartz shared that since leaving the military and becoming a mom) she was able to explore meanings, question authority, expand her own capacity to use metacognitive skills, thus becoming more of an independent thinker. She attributed these changes to:

> In the military, you always have someone providing you guidance, and always telling you this is the next step and here's the step-by-step way to accomplish the task. Now I'm able to come up with my own step-by-step process of how to get things done because that's how my mind works, but I'm able to do it on my own and don't need the support or guidance to keep me on track.

For her, in one sense, the military put in place certain blinders for her view of the world and her engagement as a leader with that world. As a student, "she doesn't have blinders on and continues to look for ways to help others."

Petty Officer 2nd Class Perez, U. S. Navy

Military training. Petty Officer Perez' journey to the Navy began with two interwoven circumstances. First, he began thinking about the military after running short of funds for his

education when he attended college after high school. Second, he began to think of the military as a viable option based on his two brothers serving in the Army. They encouraged him to enlist in any branch other than the Army. A recruiter convinced him to join the Navy. At the time of the interviews, he was a Navy veteran who spent eight years (from 2007 to 2015) as a Hospital Corpsman attached to a Marine Corps unit. The United States Marines rely on the Navy for their field medical personnel, called hospital corpsmen. The Navy corpsmen have a variety of duty options, including attaching to a Marine field unit to offer medical support during operations and battle. As a Corpsman, Perez underwent special training beyond the standard boot camp. The hospital corpsmen attend a 14 week "A" school that teaches advanced first aid, wound care, and other basic medical duties. He also was expected to have the same combat knowledge and skills as Marines and received that training at a seven-week course at the Marine boot campus to qualify to work as Marine Force Fleet corpsmen. The Marine Corps unit that Perez was attached to in South Texas was an infantry unit that deployed regularly to countries such as the Republic of Georgia and Afghanistan. To prepare for each deployment he underwent several intense training sessions that included field combat medical care, interacting with Afghani people, improvised explosive device/unexploded ordnance recognition, and climate training just to name a few. While with this unit, Perez had the opportunity to serve in various positions from the platoon level, assisting 30-40 Marines, to the company level, working with 3-5 platoons. He excelled at each position and received unit commendations for his knowledge and abilities. He also received a Navy Achievement Medal for his service as a Corpsman when he deployed to the Republic of Georgia.

Real life experience. After his initial training where he practiced skills unique to a combat zone, he joined his unit and eventually was deployed to the Republic of Georgia for a

military training operation and then later to Afghanistan. It was during his time in the Republic of Georgia that Perez was first tested with a life and death situation. One of the Georgian nationals had a heart attack during one of the training exercises and Perez had to perform cardiopulmonary resuscitation to try and keep him alive. His quick actions aided in keeping the man alive, though the patient fell into a coma on his way to the hospital. His unit moved on to the next site for training, but the Georgians were pretty happy. "They were like, 'he's still alive.'" While he did not like not knowing what was going on, as long as the Georgians were not mad, then he could be happy with the outcome of the training.

In addition to his time in the Republic of Georgia, Perez was deployed to Afghanistan for seven and a half months. During this deployment, he was responsible to treat not only Marines and Sailors, but also any Afghani people, civilians and military partners, who were injured while the unit was on patrol. This particular deployment required additional specialized training, especially related to being aware of one's surroundings and alert to individuals present who were not in uniform. One such specialized training included the notion of trust. Specifically, Perez and others in his platoon were advised that if you are not careful, civilians, both adults and children, would try and take advantage of you and situation. The training became relevant once Perez was in-country. He shared how Afghani kids would jump and ask for candies or jump in the back of the trucks they were in and steal the Meals, Ready-to-Eat by the case load. When this happened, it that meant a military person might miss a meal unless they could restock at their home base.

Compartmentalize emotions. As a Hospital Corpsman attached to a Marine unit deployed to a volatile environment such as Afghanistan, it is not unexpected that Perez would have traumatic experiences. He shared how he treated a lot of Afghan people for injuries but it

was treating the members of his unit that continue to haunt him, years after. Perez was a private

person and didn't share about his feelings throughout the interview, however he explained,

> Let's see, if I remember correctly, the total number of guys from the company that were
>
> KIA [killed-in-action] was two Marines and one Corpsman. When they told us, I was
>
> going through my mind to try to figure out who it was and then they shared the names
>
> three days later and we all felt shitty.

From his training, and having to apply this training in practice in traumatic deployment-

related events in both Afghanistan and Georgia, he learned how to compartmentalize his

emotions to ensure that he did the job that he was trained to do. He mentally conditioned and

effectively trained to attend to the task at hand, regardless of what happening around him.

Having the coping ability to compartmentalize and deal with a wide array of highly stressful

events simultaneously allowed him to not become overwhelmed. Most importantly, he was able

to help others who were relying on his expertise.

My own path. At the time of the interviews, Perez was a full-time student taking 15 – 18

semester credit hours, was classified as a junior, majoring in nursing, and was a member of the

military reserve force. On top of his school and military obligations he managed to work 20

hours per week at a local hardware store and continues to earn A's with an occasional B in his

coursework.

Much like the military doctrine of *battle rhythm,* which is a deliberate daily cycle of

command, staff, and unit activities intended to synchronize current and future operations (Curtis

Lemay Center, 2014), Perez had established a school-military-work rhythm, setting a schedule of

things he absolutely must accomplish each day. His school-military-work rhythm allows him to

organize his daily and weekly routine to successfully meet deadlines, especially with school

work. However, where his school-military-work rhythm differs from battle rhythm is while at school he keeps to himself for the most part. "I just keep to myself to be honest. I mean most of my friends are regular students, but on campus I just try to go to classes and take care of my responsibilities." It is not necessarily a matter of struggling to fit in or feeling isolated that propels him to keep to himself, rather, it is a choice to put his head down and get his degree completed.

Despite this intentional practice, he is a participant in and uses the Veteran's program that is available on campus. According to university documents, this program provides "a place to gather for veterans, assistance with financial aid, VA Benefits applications, identifying career goals and selecting a major, instructional and tutorial support, free printing, and free scantrons and blue books." The office also provides incentives for participation which may include gift cards to the bookstore or a local grocery store. Some of the other programs he has participated in within the office are the end of the year banquet, laptop lending, refrigerator, microwave, and a trip to a water park. Other than his participation in this program, he is not part of any other organization on campus.

Foot in mouth. Just as he was working to get used to life as a civilian and student, he had to return to his reserve unit for mandatory service. The reservist is a service member who serves in a branch of the military in a part-time capacity (minimum one weekend a month, two full weeks a year). As a reservist, Perez found that it was hard for him to fully integrate back into civilian life. It wasn't so much the challenge of fitting in, but recognizing that old habits learned while on active duty die hard. He shared that "every ten words or so" he cusses. This particular habit, along with *speaking before thinking* almost got him kicked out of his calculus class.

Rather than making an appointment to meet with his professor about a concern regarding a particular teaching method the professor used, Perez, blurted out "God, you piece of shit lady. I don't know why you erase that shit. Nobody can understand your writing," disrespecting the professor in front of the class. What he considered as brutally honest, he also came to realize that he handled the situation wrong. He ended up staying after class, trying to explain his actions. The professor ultimately allowed him to remain in class, but he knew that if he did not rein in his language and opinions he would be kicked out of the class. In one sense, this incident could have risen to a power struggle between his professor and Perez. It is likely that as a combat veteran, Perez had struggled to reconcile how diplomacy works within the classroom versus diplomacy on the battlefield. As a combat veteran, his mannerism and much of what he said may have resonated with fellow combat veterans, but his classmates reacted differently and this caused him to pause. He shared:

> It was my first semester back and the teacher said something and I said "kill babies." I didn't realize the student sitting across from me was pregnant and she just looks at me and I'm like, "Oh shit, I fucked up." I'm like, "Ma'am, it's something that I used to say like almost every day that just became habit. I'm so sorry. It doesn't mean anything." But she looked at me like I was crazy.

> After this incident, Perez is careful how he responds to comments in class and tries to keep his cussing to a minimum when he's not with his unit. He is more aware of his surroundings and how his words can have different meanings to civilians than they do with the comrades in the military and each situation needs to be approached differently.

Dedicated, motivated. Typically, the type of military training Perez experienced was related to his job training, but he also had annual training required by the Navy. These included:

customs and courtesies, ethics, alcohol and drug awareness, continued medical training, and field

operations training. These trainings were particularly different from his college classroom

experiences in that the military training often had no exams, just participation. It was up to him

to pay attention to how to apply the knowledge learned to a practical application. In college, he

had to worry about exams, worry about the information professors discussed, and then scaffold

that knowledge over the sequence of multiple, interconnected classes. Concurrent with the

expansion of him gaining new knowledge in the discipline of nursing, he also had to wrestle with

how to engage in the ongoing assessment of nursing students required by the program. For Perez,

he had to come up with strategies to help him first remember the information presented in class

and then be assessed:

> I'll take great notes, record the professors' lecture, then I'll go to the library, rewrite my
>
> notes to make them more legible. Then as I listen to the professor, I'll pause [the audio
>
> recording], read through that section of the book, make notes then continue the recording.
>
> I feel more dedicated to my studies now than before my military experiences.

According to Ni (2013), an important cornerstone to the college classroom learning is

"the social and communicative interactions between student and teacher, and student and

student" (pg. 201). As noted above, Perez initially struggled in his ability when sharing an

opinion, or disagreeing with a particular point of view, from a veteran perspective. Prevailing

interaction conceptions between veteran-students and traditional students and between veteran-

students and professors underscore the potential value of distinguishing trust and a sense of

community within the classroom environment. Trust and a sense of community were lacking

initially for Perez. He found that he was often having to explain himself to others after an

outburst. In time, he learned to assess the situation at hand and was able to regulate and reduce reactive effects of disagreements by letting go of the directedness of voicing his opinions.

Another important part of college learning is group work. This, too, was an initial challenge for Perez as he transitioned from the military classroom to the college classroom. He made clear that he does not like group work because "not everyone will pull their own weight and will complain about every small detail." Even so, he worked to get past what he felt was the "pettiness" of student complaints to get the project done on time. He felt that his military background actually helped him to handle the different student personalities and mentalities. He attributed his "patience" with others because when he was in the military, his platoon had to function in a certain way to accomplish a particular mission. While each individual must fulfill individual responsibilities, together they had to rely on each other and come prepared to do the work. If not, then the group collectively and quickly addressed behaviors that had the potential to compromise the mission.

Sergeant Blevins, U. S. Army Special Forces

Military Training. Sergeant Blevins is an Army veteran who served honorably from 2007 to 2011 with his home base being Fort Bragg, NC. He decided to join the Army because of the incident that happened on September 11, 2001 and he knew "there was a fight to be had, and I couldn't look at myself knowing I didn't go and fight it." He spent five years as a Combat Engineer with the Army Airborne. A Combat Engineer's main duties include constructing fighting positions, placing and detonating explosives, conducting operations that include route clearance of obstacles, and detecting mines visually or with mine detonators. His training required 14 weeks of One Station Unit Training, which included Basic Combat Training and

Advanced Individual Training with skills training into basic demolitions, basic explosive

hazards, constructing wire obstacles, fixed bridge building, and operating heavy equipment.

After spending time with the Engineering Corps at Ft. Bragg, Blevins wanted to gain

more experience to assist with ongoing deployments. He attended additional trainings that

included: the Sapper Leader Course which is a 28 day course designed to train joint-service

leaders in small unit tactics, leadership skills and tactics required to perform as part of a

combined arms team; the Urban Mobility Breaching course is a ten day course consisting of in-

depth explosive theory, detailed operational planning, urban reconnaissance, and the

employment of urban breaching assets; and the Explosive Ordnance Clearance Agent (EOCA)

course. This four-week course trained engineers to assist Explosive Ordnance Disposal

technicians and give engineers the knowledge base, so they can safely perform the procedures

with the ordnance. Reflecting on this last course, he recalled:

> There was a really high attrition rate, but it was pretty cool to go through, but a pretty
>
> hard school. I tied for honor grad in that sucker, so that was a pretty momentous occasion
>
> for me. I guess I realized that I wasn't as dumb as I thought.

This experience helped Sgt. Blevins to understand that he could do anything that he put

his mind to. Being awarded honor grad in front of his course mates cemented that he would be

able to achieve anything as long as he had the drive to get it done. With this new-found

excitement, he knew that he wanted to continue in the Army and not stop with just his specific

job skills, he knew he wanted more.

Dreams shot. After completing all of his training, Blevins returned to his unit and soon

after was sent to Afghanistan where the unit had two primary missions. The first was to help

construct items to better the military men and women's lives who were deployed by building

structures and protections from the enemies. They also helped the Afghani people who were around the base to protect them from insurgents who may attack the towns. The second mission was to keep the men and women safe while out on patrol. This second mission is where his EOCA training helped him work with explosive ordnance disposal identifying any improvised explosive devices, roadside bombs, or other unexploded ordnance the unit may come across. The deployment was successful in their mission and received a meritorious unit citation for their role in keeping everyone safe.

Unfortunately for Blevins, his deployment ended sooner than that of his unit. He was shot while on patrol with the unit and received a Purple Heart; a medal that is awarded for being wounded or killed in action against an enemy of the United States. He was sent to Germany for surgery and to recover. However, due to the location of the bullet (which was not disclosed), he was informed that he would not be able to serve any longer and was medically discharged. With his Army career coming to an end, it shattered all of the plans that he had made for his career. Blevins was hoping to spend 20 years in the service in various other billets within the Army Special Forces.

I still had dreams, I know I was done, I wanted to go through Ranger School, Sniper School or anything, try to go through [any other training]. I was pretty motivated, and then I got shot and that changed everything, but if I could have just stayed in and kept deploying [and training] then that would have been alright.

After being treated in Germany for his gunshot wound, he was sent back to his unit at Ft. Bragg to wait for his Medical Board hearing which would determine the amount of benefits he would receive and when his discharge would be official. "The waiting was the hardest part, it was a long process, but I was relieved to be done and heading to the next chapter of my life,

wherever that may lead." Receiving a wartime injury and medical separation and retirement from

the Army gave Blevins retirement benefits because he was on orders to an area of operation

outside of the United States when injured. When a military member has a medical condition that

renders them unfit to perform their duties, they may be separated, or retired, from the military for

medical reasons (Powers, 2016).

After the military. The next chapter of his life took time to figure out and that was time

he wanted to spend with his wife figuring out where to move next. He knew that he wanted to go

to school to study Marine Biology, but did not know where he wanted to go, so in counsel with

his wife, they made a decision together on the institution. He had his choice of schools from the

Pacific Northwest, to California, to New England. Instead of choosing the cold of New England,

the rain of the Pacific Northwest, or California, he and his wife chose "sunny, sunny Texas."

Once they chose Texas, they had over 200 institutions to choose from, but knowing the major,

they decided to choose an institution in South Texas to be closer to the water where marine life

thrives.

Dreams reconstructed. At the time of the interview, Blevins was a junior Marine

Biology major at a South Texas institution. A terrible student before college, he did not take

school seriously and did not listen to his teachers. "I did so terrible in the eighth grade, the

teachers were begging my mother to hold me back." He was stubborn and decided not to stay in

the eighth grade and was descriptive as he reflected on this experience.

I was homeschooled until the eighth grade, they wanted to hold me back instead of letting

me go to high school, but I was like "forget that, man, I'm going to high school." I went

to high school, did terribly as a freshman, dropped out that year, decided to go back for

junior year, dropped out, got my GED, and joined the Army. So, my education is like

total crap but it is what it is. I was a terrible student.

Utilizing skills and external motivation. All of the schools that he took while he was in

the Army, helped him become a better student and encouraged him to not stress about stuff.

Blevins listed a number of ways the military assisted with transitioning into the classroom.

I think my time management and stress management is pretty good, not being stressed

out and giving myself the free time that I need to succeed. I'd say motivation for sure,

I'm not fartin' around, I know what I want and I'm going to make it happen. Also, I think

discipline is pretty big too, cause a lot of times you don't want to do school, and

discipline gets you through when the motivation doesn't.

Knowing what drives him and using the tools that he learned from the military has helped

him be successful in college. He has set new goals for himself to ensure that he knew what he

wanted to achieve with is new life. Along with earning his bachelor's degree in Marine Biology,

he wants to earn a master's and a doctorate. He knows what he would like to research for his

doctorate degree, "I really want to get a PhD in Marine Biology so I can do deep sea research on

bioluminescence [marine phenomenon]."

While he decided what he wanted to major in, he had some struggles outside of the

classroom when he sought some help from some doctors in the area. He was struggling with

anxiety and stress, so as he was talking about his plans for his education, the doctor was not

supportive of his plans. In fact, he told him that he should not even try with his disability; he

should set an achievable goal that was easier. "So, when I wrapped up my first semester with a

4.0, I went to his office and I was like, "Huh, maybe I should try for something a little more

easily obtainable, Mr. Fancy Doctor Pants." He thought this was a great start to college and wasn't afraid to prove his doctor wrong and enjoyed using it as motivation.

> I went into his office [after his Sophomore fall semester] and told him about everything I was doing, and all the different groups I'm part of, putting together that and all this other stuff and it was great. It was the best. A few ones and twos are out there telling you can't do it, you just cling onto them [and use them as motivation].

> He used all of this as fuel for his fire and set challenges for himself throughout all of this.

He has become involved with various organizations on campus where he works with other veterans and represents veterans on campus.

> I'm part of the SVO (student-veteran organization), vet rep for student government, student advisor for a veteran's trade program, started a Vets and Vino program at a local wine bar, with an ultimate goal of bringing vets and families together.

He has plans now to get through his last year of school while also assisting veterans who are new to campus, but he knows that the organization can do better. "I work hard to bring people in, because it sucks to know that so many vets drop out and say, 'fuck it.' It's like, man, you know, we're better than that."

Family comes first. Blevin's transition into college was a long process. He took a year and a half off between his medical discharge and his first semester in college. During that time, he recovered and became accustomed to being a civilian so that it was not a complete shock when he arrived campus. "I'd had a lot of time to get over that culture shock outside of the classroom. By the time I'd gotten to campus, I'd figured [out how to live a life outside of the military]." Being able to figure out how to be a civilian before returning to school made his

transition into college easier. To help out with the transition, his wife supported him through the time off.

He married his wife in 2011 while he was still in the Army and waiting on the Medical Board and his retirement to be finalized. During the year and a half off, he and his wife had a rough time adjusting to civilian life and, in many instances, struggled not only with the transition, but also their marriage. He shared, "A lot of stuff happened, and I'm not sure that we were entirely supportive of each other, we were committed to each other even though we weren't really supportive." Despite the turbulence in their marriage, together they decided to move to South Texas, enroll in school, and have weathered the storm. According to Blevins, "Now it's much better, much, much, better."

Working with today's student. Much like he learned in the military, he has succeeded in setting a schedule–giving the appearance of what he considers to be a "normal day" for a student. Every morning he gets up and attacks each day head on and tries "not to think about being in school for the next nine years. Mind blowing."

He shared that he enjoys being at school, but he struggles when it comes to working with other students on campus. For Blevins, moving on from a group of military people, who will always have your back, to students, who walk around with blinders on and only think of themselves, has been difficult to get used to.

> I think just the whole environmental change where you're used to being around, even if you do only make penis jokes all day, it's that they're there to be counted on, that they're mature. Then you get to college life and everybody's on their fuckin' phones 24/7, dudes wearin' skinny jeans, chicks who've never spent an hour in the gym wearing like these

perfectly put together gym outfits, or the hat matches the shoes and the tank top and everything. It's just being around people that don't have it figured it out yet.

Being aware of what you wear seems to be a part of the college life that Blevins has had to get used to as well. While he comes from the school of thought to walk around with his head up and chat with others, you can see the frustration he has when walking around and sees students with their nose in their phone. Blevins understands that it's a different type of person on campus than on a military base, but it still bothers him the amount of differences that he sees on the campus.

Hyperawareness. The environment is always changing with various student organizations and events going on around the campus. As a veteran who has served overseas and with the duties of being vigilant about watching for things that are out of place, not knowing how the campus will be setup could cause some difficulties as he walks through campus. Walking through the campus each day brings with it a change that requires being flexible with your surroundings. One way that he has combatted this difficulty was by finding a group where he feels welcomed and a group that he feels has his back in the difficult times.

In addition to finding a group that helps him feel welcomed and as a part of a family on campus, he also assists the university in achieving an efficient veteran's program. He has been able to ensure his spare time is used as effectively as possible assisting the university with their goal. Achieving his goals and making network connections has helped him build a support network to assist him in his ultimate goal of earning his terminal degree in the field of Marine Biology.

Challenge accepted. Learning was not Blevins' strongest characteristic when he was in high school, however he changed his mind-set and learned new techniques in the military

because he had goals. He wanted to succeed in the Army and attend numerous billet (military job) trainings. The studying and homework techniques he learned in his advanced class for EOCA, he has used to be successful in his college classes. Going from a high school dropout, with a GED, to a successful college student has been a personal transformation that he has enjoyed. By enjoying his subject matter, he has learned to enjoy school and not to look at it as a chore like he did while he was in high school. He has applied the confidence he gained from being successful and excelling in the EOCA training to experiences in his everyday studies and looks at the small victories each day. One thing he has worked hard to do, is to get used to a schedule again, just with some differences from his military time.

> While I was in school in the military, every minute was planned out regarding the time to meet for PT (physical training), when to have meals and when to attend classes. When we are not on the schedule, that was our time to study. Now, I have to balance the class schedule, the organizations I'm involved in, my homework and spending time with my wife. It's tough but I'm looking forward to the end of the path.

While he has worked to find balance between life and school, he continues to reflect on how things are progressing while making necessary changes to achieve his goals. Blevins knows his journey is not over, but is just beginning, he is thankful for his experiences and works to communicate with others to help them. He wants to help other veterans to not only succeed in college, but to make a better life for themselves. "I don't want one of the vets I meet to not succeed and think that suicide is the only answer."

Corporal Solak, U. S. Marine Corps

Military Training. Corporal Solak is a Marine Corps veteran who served honorably from 2011 to 2015, with the Second Marine Logistics Group (2MLG) at Camp Lejeune, North

Carolina. At 17, she arrived at the Fleet Marine Force as an Embarkation Specialist which assists with the preparation, planning, and execution of strategic transportation operations. Her training included 12 weeks of Boot Camp, 21-days of Marine Combat Training, and 30-days of Embarkation Specialist training which included training in the application of Automated Information Systems, as well as the proper ways to prepare, plan, and pack aircraft, trucks, and connex containers.

Perseverance. Solak's journey to the Marine Corps was not a typical one as she was home schooled from the eighth grade and was groomed to graduate early. As she was trying to figure out what she wanted to do, her sister was looking into joining the Navy or the Air Force, but Solak herself never thought about the military. "I never thought about the military before that, because I grew up with M*A*S*H and thought, if I was deployed, I'd be like Klinger, but I'd be the opposite of wearing dresses."

As she looked at her options after graduating high school, she decided she wanted to get away from the dairy farm she grew up on. She began to look at the military as an option and began researching each branch to help her decide. The Marine Corps' history, traditions, and brotherhood pushed her to decide at 16 that she wanted to join the Marines. When she told her mom of her decision, her mom tried to convince her not to do it, however at 17, her mom relented saying, "well you're going to do what you're going to do, I'm not going to be able to stop you." Once she had her mother's support, and permission, since she was underage, she joined the Marines ten days after her 17th birthday.

After her training, she was younger than anyone else in her unit where the average age was 19. A year after joining her unit at Camp Lejeune, she was deployed to Camp Leatherneck, Afghanistan in 2012. The mission her unit was given while overseas was to start cleaning up the

base and sending the equipment back to the US or to foreign military sales. They concentrated on putting the equipment on cargo planes to ship to various areas within the United States or abroad.

After eight months in Afghanistan, she returned to Camp Lejeune for the final 18 months of her contract. After four years, she was released from active duty to the Inactive Ready Reserve for the last four years of her eight-year contract. Once this final four years has passed, she will be officially discharged from the Marine Corps with the final rank of Corporal.

One thing that Solak attributes to her time in the Marine Corps is the ability to work with difficult individuals. She learned this skill because of working with an extremely difficult Gunnery Sergeant who was in her chain of command while at Camp Lejeune. This was someone who Marines of the unit referred to as "the bitch of 2MLG." Working for the Gunnery Sergeant had many effects on Solak's life, some good, some not as good. She went to sick call one day while serving under the Gunnery Sergeant and had this to say, "My docs diagnosed me with depression and the only way to settle me down was triple my anti-depressant meds and they had me on suicide watch three different times."

This incident occurred within the last year before she was released to Inactive Ready Reserve and she had to request mast which provides a member the opportunity to communicate with not only their immediate Commanding Officer (CO), but also with any superior CO in the chain of command up to and including the member's immediate Commanding General. By requesting mast, she was able to give a firsthand account to the CO and request to be transferred away from the Gunnery Sergeant's command after six months and back to the Base Birthing Quarter command where she was transferred from originally.

Reflecting on this experience, she realized that if she can survive this, she can survive anything. "Like, you know what? I still did a good job no matter what she or anyone said." This

sentiment has helped her in knowing that she is able to work with anyone, as long as the environment is not toxic and the command is not bypassing the rules and conducting underhanded tasks. The learning experience she mentioned was "I can probably, now in theater as a stage manager, I can probably work under any director now because of just learning from that bad of a person."

Student. At the time of the interview, Solak was finishing up the second semester of her freshman year of college in Southwest Ohio, majoring in theater and minoring in religion. She chose this particular institution because that is where her mother attended. "When I decided to come to college, [here] was my only choice because my mom is an alumnus from here. I was groomed to come to this school." She is happy with her decision and has enjoyed her time on campus and working with the theater department.

Beyond age, Solak feels more mature than the other students. In fact, even though she was only 21 at the time of the interview she shared, "I feel old, because the military ages or matures you three times more every year longer that you are in." As she became used to the college campus, she realized just how naïve the students can be with regard to the things that have gone on outside of their limited view. She spoke of trying to teach or explain things to them and trying to educate them on things outside of their limited view:

> You can try to teach them, or try to explain to them about some things, for them not to be
> so blindfolded in a way. That's been my hardest part to tell you the truth, is having to
> deal with just how close minded some of [the students] are. Wow, they really in their own
> little bubble.

As she has gotten used to being around the students, she has learned that you have to have patience with the students which is something she uses as a stage manager within the

theater department. While she enjoys the job, she puts in 36 to 40 hours or more when there is a set that is needed for upcoming performances. She enjoys her time in the theater as it gives her a sense of belonging with the group where she can utilize her teamwork skills in a civilian setting as well as taking the leadership role and using one tool the Marines gave her to scare the students from time to time, although not always meaning to. When asked how she's perceived, she said, "Weird. Eclectic. I get called animated a lot. Tough. Whenever I do get tough, I've scared theater students when [I use my] Marine voice [and yell across the theater]."

As a theater major, she spends most of her time in the performing arts center (PAC) so that she doesn't have to leave campus when she has breaks within her schedule. In addition to her class schedule, there are other workshops for the theater department that she may be required to attend to help her in her position as a stage manager. There are also production meetings that she may be required to attend for upcoming plays within the PAC that provide more reason not to leave campus to go home in the short breaks. Solak discussed how she spends her time when she does not leave campus:

> So it's in our green room, kind of like a break room for actors, I'm doing homework or eating. Go to another class, then back to the green room whenever for four or five hours. Then I walk home at the end of my days. That's when I don't have meetings, rehearsals, workshops or for the performances.

The majority of her time is spent in the PAC working with the theater department. She is not involved in any student organizations. Knowing that she spends her time each day in the PAC preparing for the next performance, she schedules her time accordingly. She enjoys being in the theater department where she is able to share her leadership skills with the students who she may supervise in her role as stage manager. She attends the student veteran organization

meetings when time allows, but is not a regular attendee, but will attend special events when time allows and she is invited.

A return to school: Organized chaos. Solak's decision to go to college happened about six months before the end of her contract. She went to the military to get way from the dairy farm that she grew up on. Her reason for leaving the military was to get away from being told what to do all the time. "It's just kind of wanting to be more of me…now I would be more prepared for [college] than where I was when being pushed right out of high school." She decided to go to college to be able to think for herself and outside of the box, whereas her experience in the military was regimented and scheduled.

For Solak, moving away from the military was the easy part; dealing with the paperwork was the hardest. Once she decided to attend college, she had to contend with all the paperwork. First, she had to ensure she went through the right channels to ensure her education benefits were approved for her first semester. Not everyone she dealt with knew what the G.I. Bill was and she struggled to explain it to everyone. She shared a time of her struggles to get everything in so she would be ready for the fall semester.

> So I heard, [the paperwork] was all sent in, but not knowing who to go to, to make sure
> that paperwork went through so when I started school it would be all right. Then they put
> in the paperwork wrong, so I didn't have orientation until like August and then just some
> other things where I almost didn't get my transfer credits in, the credits from the military.
> Finally, that went in, but a lot of it was just kind of paperwork, and because it's a lot of
> people in that department, they didn't know what was wrong.

With all the struggles she faced, her biggest concern was not knowing who to go to for anything as she could not find good contact information online. She spent two to three months

trying to figure out how the university worked to just be able to attend her first semester. Even though she had planned carefully to ensure her G.I Bill benefits would apply her first semester she kept getting email notifications from the university finance office that her tuition was due and she needed to pay it. Solak felt frustrated because "The first time through [first semester], the administration doesn't tell you that you have to call the government to confirm you're taking classes."

The one area of transition that Solak did not feel was helpful was the support offered by the institution. While not being told about confirming enrollment for the G.I. Bill, the person she worked with was not someone who knew the complicated aspects of being a student veteran. "The advisor I was in contact with wasn't affiliated with the veterans. They were someone who dealt with transfer students for the college." While they helped get her enrolled, they couldn't answer specific veteran questions.

Learning redefined. Learning has been like night and day comparing the military and college, according to Solak. "Learning in the military was jamming everything into your head for eight hours straight, every day, sometimes including weekends." The goal of training in the military is to prepare a Marine to get back to the fleet as quick as possible, so when the personnel are on training assignments, that is all that they concentrate on.

When she arrived on campus, she felt prepared for the learning on your own aspect that some classes may bring. "In a way, being homeschooled kind of helped that way of being able to teach yourself and being able to manage your own time so that you have certain deadlines done which has kind of helped for college." While this experience has helped her, she still feels that college can sometimes be fast-paced.

The most disorienting thing that she has dealt with has been getting used to taking work home after class. "In the military, you usually didn't have homework, it was all done in class." While it may be different, she feels it's easier "since you have 15 weeks for a class versus four or five days" to remember everything for that course.

While she has worked to get used to her role as a student, she has used her leadership role from the military as a stage manager within the theater department. This role has been one that has been the most valuable to her as she utilizes the leadership skills she learned in the Marines. It has been one of the greatest challenges as she has had to deal with students who do not always understand the end goal and do not always listen when instructions are given. Being a stage manager has helped her develop patience and communication skills with the students because she is the one in charge of all aspects of the stage.

Another challenge she has had to deal with is being thrown into the role of theater stage manager. She was given this role because of her military background where she was earned the job due to her leadership experiences from the Marine Corps. Her experiences helped her "be a little bit more organized and administrative." The leadership she had in the military has been transferred to the stage in that she sets the tone for all of the different aspects of the stage. She is the person who is responsible for ensuring that all sets are completed before the dress rehearsal of the play she is working on. Keeping actors and technicians on task, and remaining calm and level-headed throughout the performance process are all key aspects to her role as a stage manager. Her experiences in organizing shipments as an Embarkation Specialist have helped her organize her thoughts and duties as a stage manager to ensure that all the tasks are done in an orderly manner. Being able to keep calm while she was in Afghanistan has helped her stay calm during the nonstop movements of a stage performance at the PAC.

Major James, U. S. Marine Corps

      Military. James joined the Marines after college in 2006 and was selected to be a Communications Officer after his basic training. James route to being a Marine Corps Officer started while he was in college by going through the Platoon Leaders Class which consists of two, six-week training sessions taken between consecutive school years (freshman and junior summers). Once he graduated with his bachelor's degree in communication and Christian studies, James traveled to Quantico, Virginia and attended The Basic School for six months of learning how to be a provisional rifle platoon commander. As this training was concluding, he was selected to be a communications officer as his Military Occupational Specialty. This six months long school is the longest occupational school for officers.

      Pathway of experience. After his training, he was stationed in Okinawa, Japan, with the Marine Wing Communication Squadron 18 where he was the main communications officer. He was deployed on special assignment to Korea, the Philippines, and Thailand conducting different exercises as the Officer in Charge of 35 Marines. Once he returned to Okinawa, he received orders and made a permanent change of station move to Norfolk, Virginia, to be with the Marine Forces Command where he worked in amphibious operations. His unit was responsible for "facilitating the installation and maintenance of Marine communications aboard the ships."

      After two years in Virginia, James made a permanent change of station move to Camp Lejeune, NC where he became a member of the division staff as part of the communications section before being deployed to Afghanistan for seven months in 2011. He returned to NC to be the battalion communications officer for the 2nd Light Armor Reconnaissance Battalion. He served in this role for two full years before putting in his application package to become a Marine Officer Instructor, which requires a review board and selection. Once he was selected, he

made a permanent change of station move to his current institution where he is now the training officer for the Navy Reserve Officer Training Corps (NROTC) where he works to instruct students who have committed to the Marine Corps.

As an officer, his role with enlisted men is different than others in this study. His role in meetings was to discuss upcoming field operations the enlisted personnel would be participating in, who is going, and what equipment will be needed in support of the operations among other items. He would also oversee the training for the enlisted Marines like data networking as well as maintenance classes, while also supervising the section chief, radio chief, and maintenance chief. There are also times when the officers must prepare for command exercises where vehicles have to be prepared and gear lists must be distributed to the troops in preparation. While the others in this study worked on the front line and did the work, James was one of the decision makers who issued orders to the men and women on the next mission.

One for the memory banks. James has been in the Marines for ten years as of the interview with 18 months left at his current assignment. When his duty as an NROTC Marine Instructor is completed, he will go back into the Fleet Marine Force for the last ten years to be able to retire from the military. During his first ten years, he has had a number of memorable experiences, the most memorable of which happened while he was stationed at Okinawa, Japan, when his squadron was to send a detachment to support an exercise. This exercise took place in a number of areas of operation including Korea, the Philippines, and Thailand. He was the Officer-in-Charge of this detachment and recounted the following regarding that experience:

> We had to execute our mission of providing command and control in two different air fields, one in the middle of Korea and one near the coast, and I was the senior guy in

charge, which I was only a First Lieutenant, but I was a senior ranking Marine for my detachment, so I go to make all of the decisions and say what was good and not good.

This experience of being the Officer-in-Charge, and having to make all of the decisions has stuck with him eight years later. He is glad he was able to experience the Marine Corps leadership role that he was trained on during his basic training, and being able to do it early in his career meant more. "That was a personally defining moment for me and my leadership style."

Tale of two academic experiences. James' student experience is different as well since he attended college after graduating from high school. He visited many schools before making his final decision and ultimately chose his college because it was a couple of hours from his hometown and would allow him to play football, if only for one year. He had thought about enlisting in the military before attending college but decided that getting a degree was more important at the time than joining the military.

I hadn't had any prior experience with the Marine Corps or the military. So it was when I got to [college] that I learned that there was a difference between enlisting and getting commissioned as an officer, and getting commissioned required a four-year degree anyway. So I was like, "Wow. Okay. I could still be a Marine like I wanted to do, but also complete my college education."

With this new-found enlightenment, he worked hard to finish his degree and become a Marine Corps Officer. Now that he has returned to a college setting as part of the NROTC staff, he is taking advantage of the benefits that he receives as a staff member of the college and attends college at minimal cost. When he decided to enroll, he thought he would pursue a master's degree but saw that the class schedule was going to be too difficult to maintain while working full time as an instructor in the Naval Science department. Instead of pursuing an

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advanced degree, he decided to pursue a bachelor's degree in mathematics which will allow him to complete the degree before his next permanent change of station move. This degree will also help him with his Marine Corps career as well as provide some options for him once his Marine Corps career has ended.

With James' unique perspective on being a student in the college classroom, he compared his experience from his degree ten years before with his current experiences in the classroom. His perspective is different now because he does not get stressed over things that he may not have picked up on during the class. In addition to not getting stressed, he is more willing to ask for help from classmates and the professor. Compared to his previous experience where was doing just enough to get through with the degree, now he tries to enjoy it. "I try to bring students together a little bit even if it's not assigned group work, just to help understand we're going through this together like a kind of community experience."

The other experience that James brings to the presentation is that of an instructor in the classroom. One of the tasks that is required of him as part of the NROTC staff is to teach at least one leadership class within the Naval Sciences department. This experience as an instructor helps James understand how students today experience instruction in a classroom setting as well as what works to bring students together to achieve the best outcome on the work for the classes that he is enrolled in. Being an instructor, he feels, will help him when he returns to the fleet. "I will be able to understand how they think and communicate, it will help me be a better officer when communicating with them on a daily basis."

A welcomed change. James' experience with transition is extensive as he has transitioned roughly every two years since becoming a Marine officer in 2006. The moves he has experienced have never been unwelcomed and he is preparing for the next move that will come

in the next 18 months as he transitions back into the fleet. His wife comes from a Marine Corps family as well, so she grew up moving every two to four years, which helps each time that he receives orders that move him to his next duty station. "So I guess the easiest part is that myself and my wife look forward to changes in location for the most part, so that helps."

The difficult part of the transition is leaving the people you have made friends with. They make friends in their various duty stations through their church and through the unit. Sometimes the friends they make last longer than just the duty station they are assigned to. "At Norfolk, we met a couple who we're still in touch with and will be visiting soon in Nashville." Transitioning in and out of a military community is easier on the families because it is understood that people will come and go, it's part of the military experience. This ecosystem of understanding assists with families who get used to the changes that occur, and helps new families get used to the nature of the base and how things work once they arrive at the new command.

A helping hand. The support system that he has created with his wife is one that will continue to help as he moves from duty station to duty station. She is the constant that is always by his side no matter the changes that occur or the new areas that he is transferred to. In addition to this support from his wife, he receives support from the command in a person assigned to help him get everything setup on his new base. This person helps him get his parking figured out, where to drop off his personnel records, medical and dental records, as well as gets him checked into the Defense Enrollment Eligibility Reporting System. This system to ensures the military member is able to manage their personal data and benefits.

Once he has arrived and settled onto the base, the first step that he and his wife take is searching for a new church home. He feels that his church family helps support his family in more ways that just friends. When he arrived at his current duty station, the church helped his

family unpack even though they did not know anything about him, they just wanted to offer a friendly welcome to the new community. In addition to providing a warm welcome to the community, the church also provides a place for his sons to meet others their own age and learn how to begin forming friendships.

The strategies that James has used when moving from command to command in the fleet were different than those he utilized when he joined the NROTC staff. When he arrived at the campus, the person who helped him learn his way around campus was the officer who was leaving for her next duty station.

> I got to turn over with the previous MOI, and so we had some time where she was actually the one taking me around [the institution] showing me where everything was at, got my I.D., got my parking pass, met all the people that she worked with so that we could do a warm hand-off, you know, the people that were important for us like the people at rec sports that help us with reservations.

By having sound strategies for transition, he has been able to keep the operational tempo up for his commands. Keeping up the operational tempo helps ensure that the men and women in his command gain a new Officer-in-Charge, but the job duties and mission do not change. This also allows him the ability to keep troops on the same schedule from the previous officer which helps the operational effectiveness of the unit.

Appreciating experiences and looking towards the future. James is able to make observations about the type of learning that happens in a college classroom versus a military class that show the differences and similarities others may not recognize. He has observed that the biggest difference is that professors do not always clearly define the end state of the class. In

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the military, with the government picking up the bill, the courses are direct and outlined with what the final outcome of the course will be.

His experience in college this time compared to his previous experience is that he appreciates it more now.

I mean it makes me appreciate two things. It makes me appreciate my military experience. I am proud that I've served in the Marine Corps now for almost ten years, and I've recently attained the rank of major and I have a lot of life experiences to go along with that and I really value that, and so to come back to college, it makes me appreciate that even more. It also makes me appreciate being able to be in this environment more, because in the same way that I have that unique experience, I also know enough people who do enough things to realize that people in general have very different and unique experiences. It shouldn't be taken for granted.

While attending classes has helped him develop new skills, working with the ROTC members has helped him develop his leadership and mentoring skills. While he feels his current position offers a safety net with training, he also understands that he needs to continue progressing in his skills and continual development of leadership skills. "They'll be something that comes in hand or that is valuable that I will take with me to the next duty station."

While he enjoys the freedoms of the college classroom, he knows that his next duty station will take him back to a communications officer position. His next transition and transformation will come at Command and Staff College in Quantico, Virginia for a year before being assigned back to the fleet.

I'll be going to the resident school in Quantico. So, I'll be with a bunch of other Marine Majors. It will kind of help me get back in the flow, and then I'll go out to the operating

forces with this leadership [experiences], now also been trained at Command and Staff College at the correct level PME (professional military education) school to go be a Major in the operating forces.

He looks forward to the next step in his career and the transformation that may come from continuing his career in the Marine Corps.

Emerging Themes

By breaking down the categorical headings from the participant narratives in the previous section, themes began to emerge. The themes that emerged were further defined into two categories, which are the similarities and the differences as seen in Figure 8.
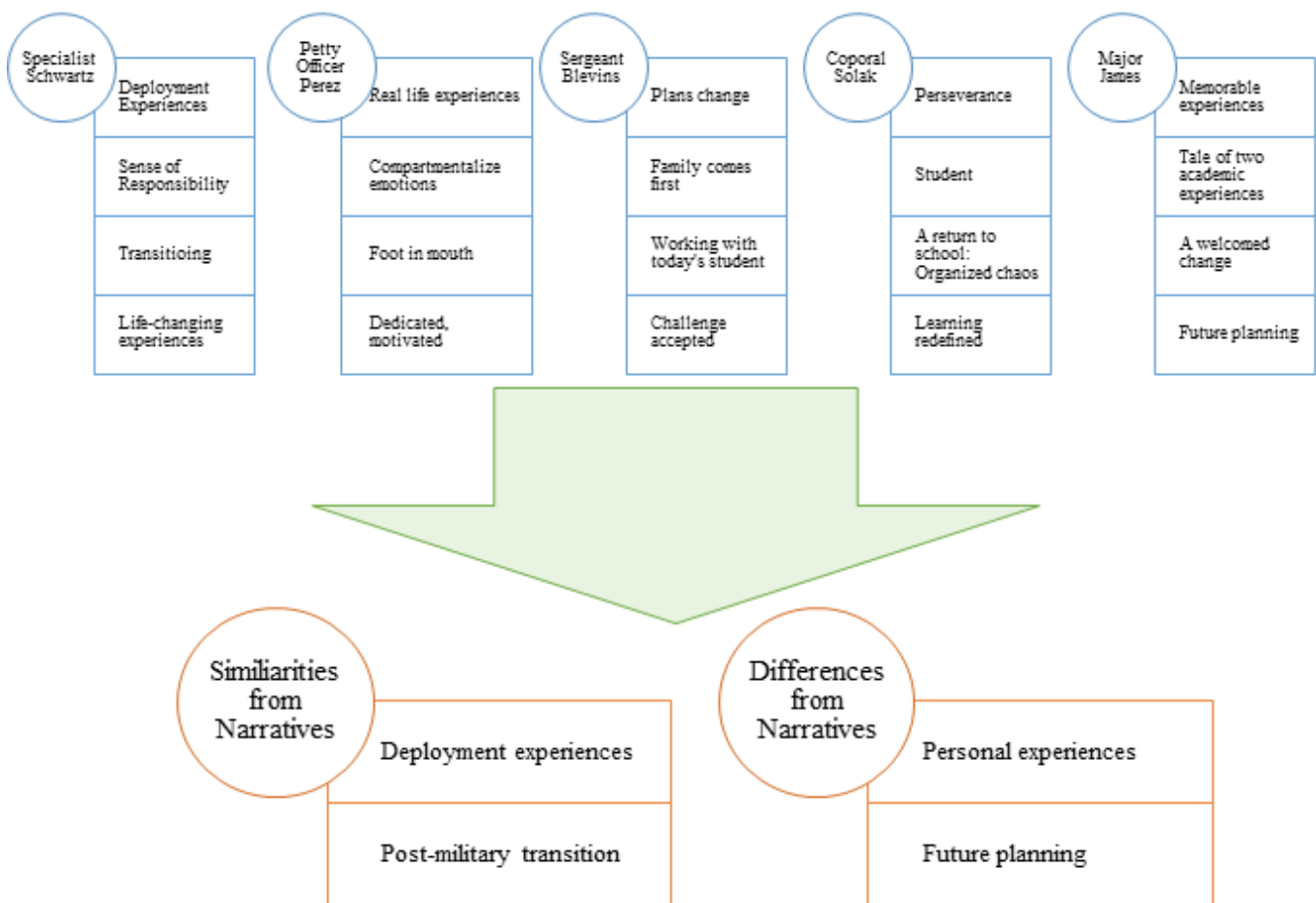

Figure 8. Narrowing Themes from Narratives.

The similarities include the deployment experiences that the participants experienced. These experiences shaped each person's time in the military and gave them skills that they were able to utilize as they left the military. These experiences included interrogating persons of interest by Specialist Schwartz, saving a foreign national who had a heart attack by Petty Officer Perez or kick starting Major James' officer career with a leadership opportunity that he has carried through his entire career.

This post-military transition was experienced by each of the participants as they left their military service and began enrolling into higher education. Each veteran that participated in my study had these same experiences, even though each experience may have been different. Figuring out who they are in the classroom and how to interact with the students and whether their military experience would play into the classroom experiences. Schwartz was excited to share her knowledge in her Psychology classes, where Blevins described his interactions as more difficult due to the environment change from the military to the college campus.

The differences experienced by the participants included their personal experiences. Each participant had personal experiences that helped them with their transition from the military to civilian. Specialist Schwartz's experience with school prior to the military as well as becoming a mother gave her personal experiences that Sergeant Blevins didn't experience. His world was turned upside down when he was shot on deployment and had to completely change the plans for his life with his military career being over.

In addition to these experiences, each participant had differences in their way of looking towards the future. Some had long-term goals, where one or two were only looking towards the upcoming year. Major James had planned how he was going to reintegrate into the military when he left his current post and Petty Officer Perez was looking forward to becoming a nurse to help

others as he had in the military. While they were looking towards the future, Corporal Solak, was just looking towards the next play that she was working on as well as what the next year may hold, not knowing what the future may hold.

Figure 9 below shows how the final themes focused on the themes that emerged from the narratives in the previous section after a case analysis was completed and their similarities and differences. The themes from these two groups flow into the final themes that will be discussed in the next section.

Participant Themes

Specialist Schwartz:
Deployment Experiences
Sense of Responsibility
Transitioning
Life-changing

Corporal Solak:
Perseverance
Student
A return to school: Organized
chaos

Sergeant Blevins:
Plans change
Family comes first
Working with today's
student

Petty Officer Perez:
Real Life Experiences
Compartmentalize
Emotions
Foot in Mouth

Major James:
Memorable experiences
Tale of two academic
experiences
A welcomed change

Similarities and Differences in Themes from Participant's Narratives

Deployment experiences

Post-military transition

Personal experiences

Future planning

The Path is Not Straight

Environments of Learning

Disorienting Dilemma

A Part of the Whole

Themes

Uncompromising Mindset
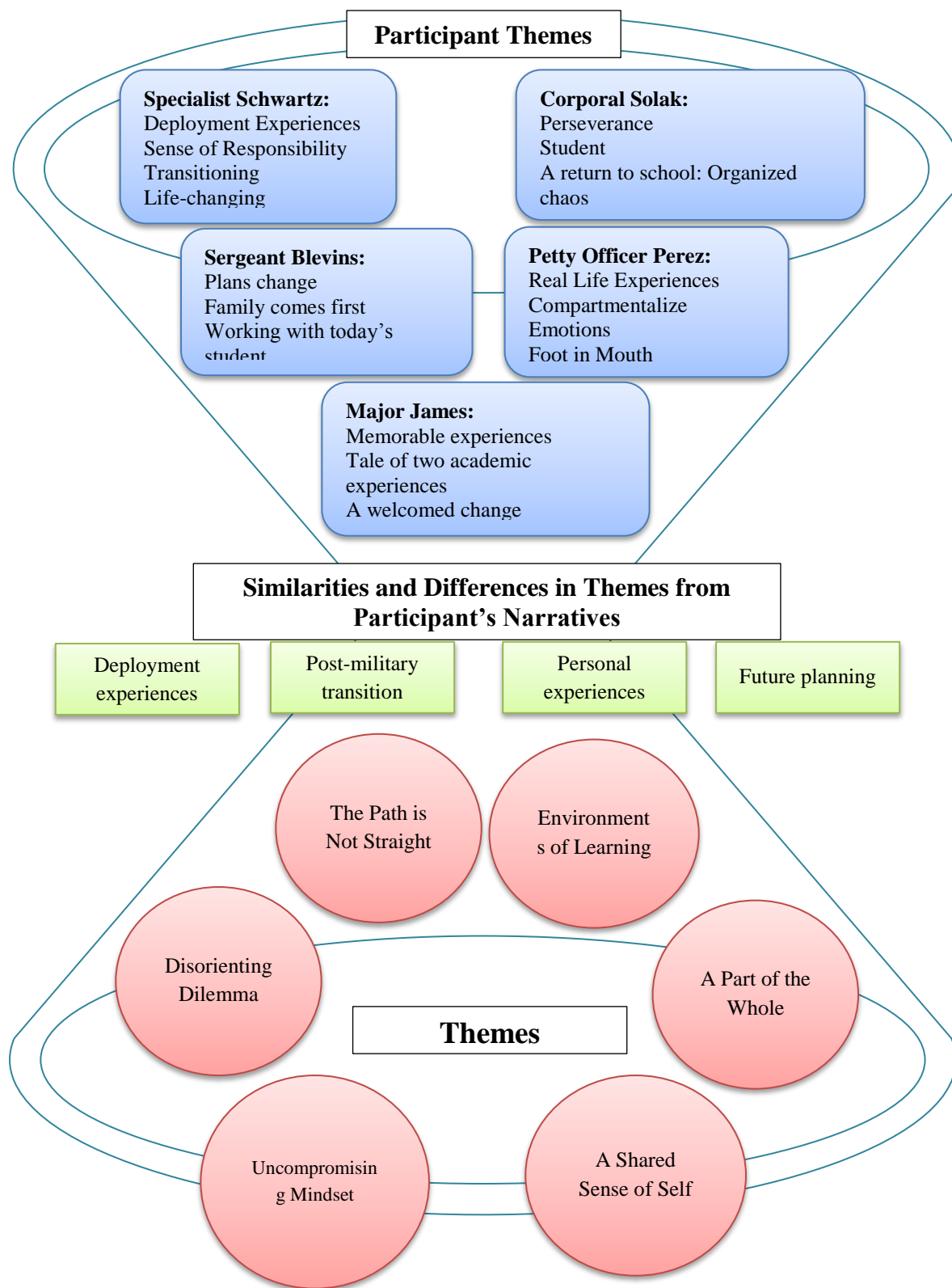
A Shared Sense of Self

Figure 9. Hourglass of Themes.

Themes

After the interviews were completed and the analysis of individual cases conducted, a case analysis was conducted (Yin, 2003) resulting in six themes: (a) The Path is Not Straight, (b) Environments of Learning, (c) Disorienting Dilemma, (d) Uncompromising Mindset, (e) A Part of the Whole, and (f) A Shared Sense of Self.

Each of the six themes appears below in its own section. These findings begin with a theme related to an understanding of the process that each participant experienced moving from the military into the classroom: the path is not straight. The second theme to develop from the data takes into account the environments of learning in the military versus higher education. The third theme presents a critical event or disorienting dilemma that each veteran had to overcome or work through, some that happened in combat, others as the individual transitioned from military to civilian life. The fourth theme explains purposeful persistence as each participant plans to complete his or her degree and to be successful as a civilian. The fifth theme supports the notion that each participant experienced coming to know themselves better as an individual, moving from being a *part* of a team in the military to being a *whole* person as a civilian and student. Finally, the sixth theme shows how each participant was intentional in helping others, both in the military, and in college, albeit in different contexts and purposes.

The Path Is Not Always Straight

The data showed that while the participants all ended up in higher education, the path each took to get there was unique, starting with their high school experiences, as indicated in figure 10. For instance, Schwartz, Perez and James all graduated high school in the traditional sense, but Blevins and Solak were homeschooled up to the eighth grade before entering the public high school in their respective community. While Solak's home school experience

prepared her to accelerate high school, graduating at age of 17, Blevins tried high school but eventually dropped out to earn a GED (general educational development) before opting to join the military.

Interestingly enough, three of the participants enrolled in college, with only James earning his bachelor's degree, prior to enlisting. Schwartz reported she was not successful in college the first time around because she did not take things seriously. Perez cited not having enough money to stay in school as the reason he left college after the first semester.

Re-entry to college life, or for Solak and Blevins their first foray into college life, happened while they still were in the military. Schwartz and Solak enrolled in college when they moved into reservist status. Perez, always a reservist, enrolled in college a few times. The first time after entering the military, again after he deployed to the Republic of Georgia, and then again after he deployed to Afghanistan. Blevins did not enroll in college until after he was medically discharged from the military. James re-enrolled in college, seeking a second bachelor's degree after transferring to ROTC status and before rejoining the fleet.
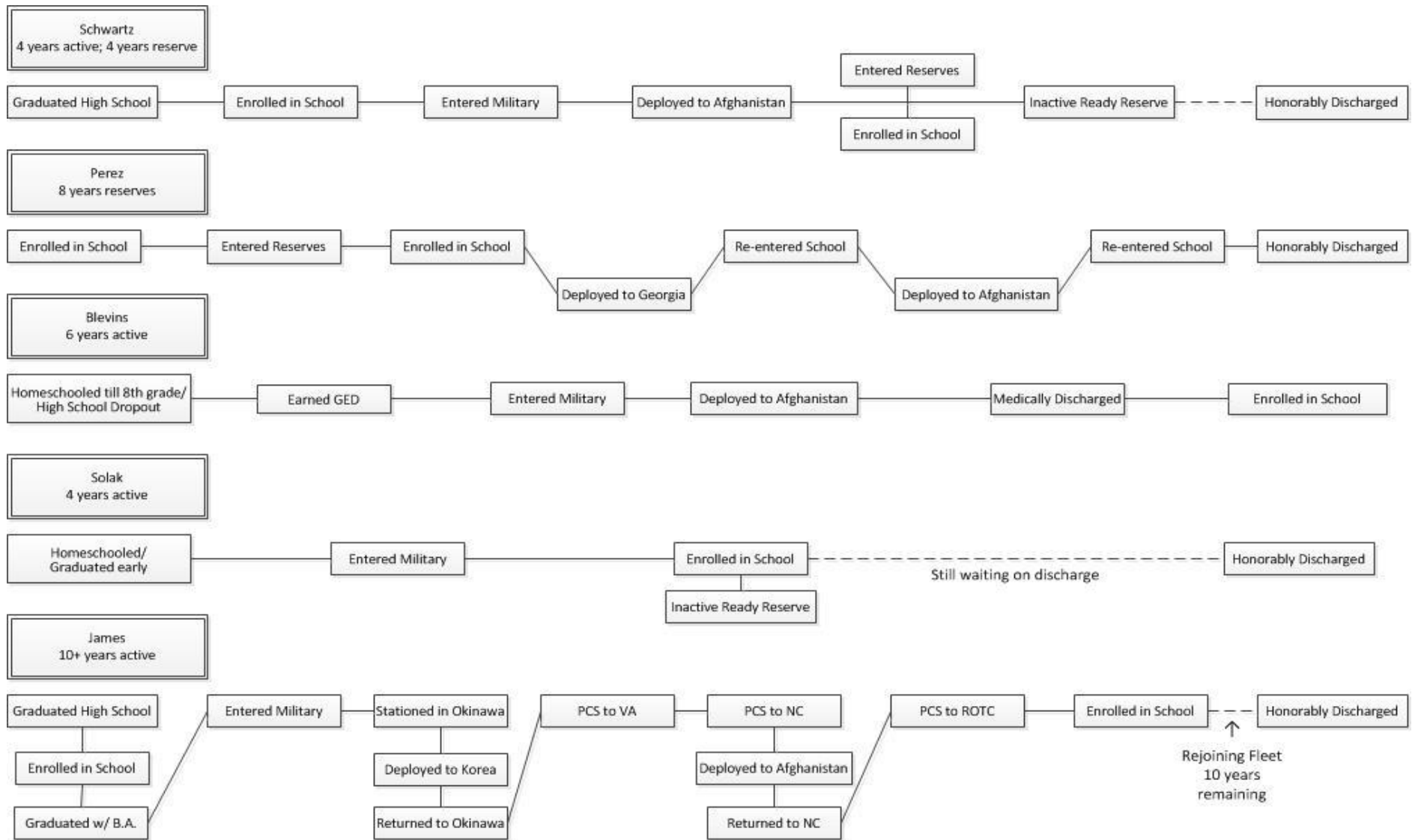
Figure 10. Timeline of Military Service.

The GI Bill of 1944 helped to ease the re-assimilation of military personnel to civilians by providing education benefits. On the heels of World War II, roughly 2.2 million veterans entered college upon release from military duty. However, veterans today are not necessarily exiting the military before enrolling in college. In fact, in this study four participants enrolled in college *before* leaving military service and one was medically discharged before enrolling in college. "I'm still in the military, but I'm taking advantage of the benefits that the university provides while I'm here, ROTC personnel don't always get that benefit," stated Major James. Solak recalled starting her paperwork before leaving the military, "I worked hard to try and get my paperwork done and all my questions answered regarding educational benefits before I left base, I knew it was going to be more difficult to get answers once being discharged."

Specialist Schwartz shared her experience with staying in the military and enrolling into higher education.

> I started my application process while on active duty before joining the reserves. I am currently in the reserves, then I will re-enlist for another four years and drop into the Individual Ready Reserve. I'm kind of baby stepping my way out of the military, trying to keep my foot in the door as a backup plan if graduate school doesn't work for me.

Petty Officer Perez experienced a similar path as Schwartz. After being attached to his reserve unit as a Navy Corpsman, he enrolled in school to begin the path to his bachelor's degree in nursing. Staying attached to the military while enrolled in college actually helped him to stay focused both mentally and physically. He shared,

> As a member of the reserves, the Navy was always at the forefront of my mind. I continued to run and train for the physical requirements of my job. While I started classes and started getting into a routine, and attending drills was part of that routine. Spending

one weekend a month in a uniform, kept me motivated to keep up my physical strength as well as to keep my studies up.

Trying to manage both responsibilities, though, was not easy, especially when he was deployed. As a member of the reserves, Perez knew there was the chance he would be deployed away from home to be part of a mission which would take him away from his studies where he would have to leave school. This first happened when he was deployed to the Republic of Georgia for a year to support the mission to train some of the nationals. After this tour was over, he went back home and had to re-enroll in school and re-establish a routine again. After another year of being at school, he was deployed to Afghanistan for a year.

After this last deployment, Perez re-enrolled in school once again to continue his degree in nursing. He worked to get back into his routine and continue his reserve duty. Once he arrived back at his university, and getting into his major classes, he was offered an opportunity to transfer to a more prestigious degree program. "I was accepted into this program and I believe it is a much better program than the one back home is, so I decided to transfer." As he has worked towards graduating with his nursing degree and getting used to another institution, he is coming to the end of his reservist contract and has recently been honorably discharged from the military and is excited to start his career as a nurse.

Sergeant Blevins' experience enrolling in college is one where the route to college did not happen as he would have liked it to. After his injury, he returned to his home base and went through the last part of his military service finalizing the paperwork to be medically discharged from the Army. He was not happy about this, but knew he needed to move on, and he decided during that year, along with his wife, that he would attend school. He began school once he was officially discharged, moved south, and attended college orientation.

Corporal Solak knew she wanted to get a degree and attend college *after* her time in the military. She dropped to Inactive Ready Reserve where she checks in once a year, but has no other responsibilities with the military, and enrolled in college. She will be a part of this unit till the end of her contact when she expects to be Honorably Discharged from the Marine Corps.

Once Major James graduated with a bachelor's degree, he joined the Marine Corps as a Second Lieutenant. He enrolled in college pursuing another bachelor's degree when he received the role of ROTC instructor staff. Once he is finished with his ROTC Instructor assignment, he will go back to the fleet and resume his communications officer role for another ten years before he retires and is discharged from the Marines.

Environments of Learning

Our veterans are entering an environment that is unfamiliar to them although the classroom is similar to what they already know. They have experienced a classroom in high school, boot camp, and their specialty job training, however the college classroom is a different experience. With more discussion happening in the classroom, the veteran may feel out of place. The goal in the military is to get men and women trained in the skills needed to do their military job. The participants described the differences of the learning situation in the military as a fast-paced training working to get you ready for your duties as quickly as possible. As they were discussing college life, they described it as laid-back chaos that takes some time to fully understand the uniqueness of the campus.

Table 13

Comparison of Learning Environments

	Military	*College*
Learning in literature	- Training is team Oriented (Salas, Bowers, & Cannon-Bowers, 1995) - Train with chaos in mind (Hohl & Karinch, 2003) - Training is done for a purpose (Halff, Hollan, &Hutchins, 1986) - No homework, all in class work (Gagné, 1962)	- Classes are taken across range of subjects - Homework given, students have a part of learning (Kitsantas & Zimmerman, 2008) - Classes taken with little distraction other than technology (McCoy, 2013; Fox, Rosen & Crawford, 2009) - Classes are taken online for flexibility (Sullivan, 2001) - Students learn from group projects (Colbeck, Campbell, & Bjorklund, 2000)
Learning as a student	- Quick, Fast paced - Defined end of course objectives - Practical application included in training - Attend training with the same people beginning to end, all in the same occupation - Government paying for training - Unit may be short staffed while member is training	- Class stretched over 15 weeks (Henebry, 1997) - Some subjects may require more than 1 semester - Class objective is not always stated - Classes are part of overall degree which could take 3-5 years - Student/Famiy is paying to attend college/has to repay loans - Extra-curricular activities may help utilize skills

Under the theme environments of learning, two categories formed to help further describe time spent in the military as well as the college environment. The following sections discuss further the fast-paced training of the military and the laid-back chaos that is the college campus environment.

Fast-paced training. Training in the military has a specific purpose and length of time. Once the scheduled training is completed, the student then moves on to the next training station or on to their permanent duty station. Solak noted that:

> The training is fast paced and purposeful. Every minute of the day is scheduled to ensure that we were able to maximize the short amount of time we had during training. We had physical training three times a week, three meals a day and were in class the rest of the day. We did have our evenings and weekends free to allow us to get to know our course mates better.

While this was a big part of the experience, there are other areas that came up during conversations regarding military training. Being comfortable with course mates played into the trust of helping each other out when needed. Blevins discussed the importance of forming a team when you are at training, to help you form a team while you are part of a unit.

> As a combat engineer, our calculations have to be exact and you have to trust those who you work next to. Though training was fast, it helped us all understand that we must do things quickly and efficiently so that we ensure the safety of the men and women who may utilize our structures during our deployments.

The one thing that we talked about was the feeling of failure. No one likes failing and Solak was unsure what would happen during her training, so like any Marine, she asked an instructor. This not only helped her out but it also helped answer fears that her other course mates may have had.

> So I was curious and asked the Staff Sergeant in charge of our class what would happen if we failed, his response was in the typical Marine way. "What do you think will happen?" Many of us didn't know how to respond, so we just waited. He finally

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continued, "It will depend on which part you fail. You will get second chances until the final evaluation at the end of the course. If you fail this evaluation twice, you will be recycled back to the next class wherever they are and complete the school with them. If you fail the final evaluation the next time, you may be assigned another specialty and transferred to that school."

While members of the military have the opportunity for failure, they understand that they will not have this opportunity when they arrive at their permanent duty station. The decisions they could make once arriving at their duty station could mean life or death. Perez discussed this:

As a Corpsman, all of my decisions could cost a man or woman his life. I may have made a mistake in training, but when I was treated men on the battlefield, I was responsible for their survival. It was stressful, but it was a reason I thrived in my position and why I wanted to become a nurse.

The fast-paced training prepared the men and women for the quickness that the military members would need to make decisions when they are part of the active duty force. They may not have fully understood it while they experienced it, but they understood it once they were able to reflect on their time in training.

The training was difficult and quick. They gave us a lot of information quick, and expected us to remember it. It sucked during training, but when I was interrogating a person of interest overseas, it helped me to remember details quickly. Time moves quick overseas and our decisions had to be made in a split second and training helped my team and I be confident in our decisions.

Training has a purpose and while the military members may not understand the purpose during their training, they begin to understand it as they get into the job.

Laid-back chaos. Attending college is not always in the plans, but when a veteran attends college the environment is one that takes some getting used to. The military is regimented and can be high stress, but college life is not as regimented. The veterans were glad that they found their own way and made their own schedule. Schwartz discussed this:

> Being able to come up with my own routine and do my own thing was appreciated. I was able to learn my way around the school and the quickest way to get from point A to point B. I could do my workouts when I wanted to and didn't have to get up at the crack of dawn just to exercise. And if I didn't want to work out, I didn't have to do anything.

Being in control of their own schedule is always a plus for college students. This was the laid-back atmosphere that veterans enjoyed being on campus. Perez discussed this when he talked about working off campus:

> Being in charge of my own schedule allowed me to work a job off campus and know when I was available to work and when I had class. Being able to make some money while also attending school full time has helped my family out with ensuring all of our bills are paid.

While this laid-back atmosphere and ability to make their own schedules was something veterans enjoyed, the chaos of the institution is something that has taken some getting used to. Blevins spoke about this during his interview:

> I enjoy all aspects of my day, but when it's a huge class change and lunch time at the same time, it is crazy. When it's time for lunch and class change, going anywhere on campus can be crazy and when you have been in a combat zone, your senses are heightened. There are people sitting all over campus, information tables everywhere and skateboarders are trying to get through a large group of people and don't understand why

people aren't moving. It's organized in the sense that everyone knows where they are going, but chaotic in everyone is going all over the place.

College is a place for students to find themselves and reinvent themselves as Solak did after her time in the military. Classes are a place for exchanging ideas and information with other students. In addition, each class has different students in it, so attending class also gives every student an opportunity to work with different personalities.

I enjoyed getting to know the students in my class. While it was sometimes a struggle during group work, the students were smart and had a lot of great ideas. I've most enjoyed being with the different students within the theater department. Being able to, as a freshman, work with upperclassmen gave me perspective as I'm just starting out in my college career.

The biggest difference between the military and college was the thought of failure. While the military gave some chances for failure, college was not as friendly. Some professors were willing to work with students, however not all would help. If Solak failed a class, that meant she would need to take the course over again.

I worry about failing, but by failing a course, or even earning lower than a C, I would have to pay the G.I. Bill back for the class. So, it's not just failing that stresses me out, but it's keeping my grades up so I don't have to pay back the government for the class.

All of the veterans are excited to be in college and James was even excited by the prospect of being back in classes. "I enjoy being with the students and working with them to ensure we do the best we can in our classes. There is so much for the veterans to experience and many of them take the time to experience all the various opportunities that are offered."

Disorienting Dilemma

Part of the transformation veterans go through is getting used to a new environment. This can happen multiple times in anyone's life and veterans may have experienced this on more than one occasion. Figure 11 outlines a flowchart of the disorienting dilemma that veterans experience as they transition from civilian to military and from military to student. The participants in the study talked about this happening a few times although they may not have used the specific word "disorienting."
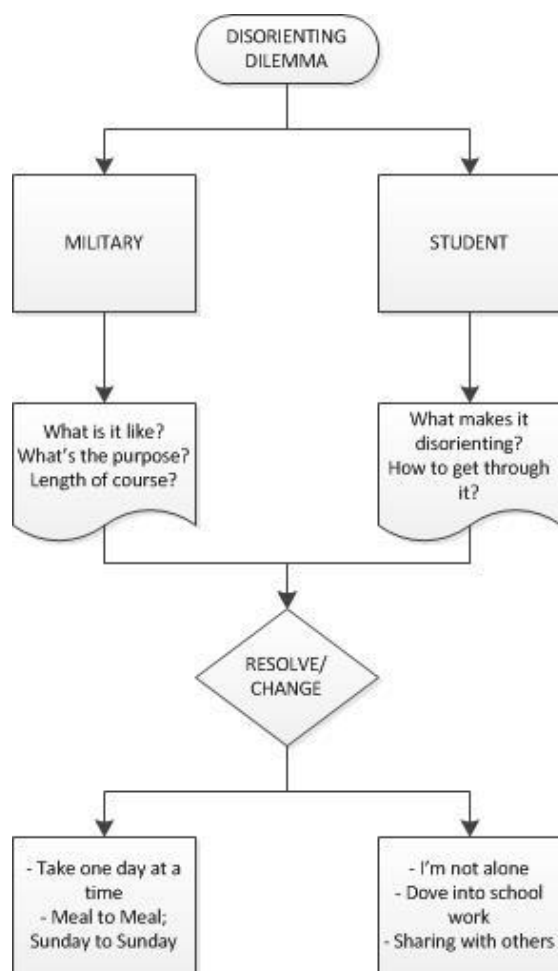

Figure 11. Disorienting Dilemma Flowchart.

Where it all began. Basic training, or boot campus, is the first step for individuals joining the military. The length of training is between seven and 13 weeks and everyone's

reaction to that shock is different. "The yelling and hurriedness of the movements made me dizzy," said Perez. "While I was warned, I was in no way prepared for the initial physicality," shared Schwartz.

This initial reaction differs from person to person and everyone reacts to something different. For Perez, it was the yelling; for Schwartz, it was the physicality; Blevins hated the forced knowledge; for Solak, it was marching and rifle movements; and James mentioned the high expectations and remembers the instructors' ranks. Each experienced something different with where everything started for their military careers.

The experiences of these veterans involved frankness and understanding after they had left training, but chaos did not let them see the purpose when it became disorienting upon arrival. Schwartz remembered the following about boot camp, "Boot camp sucked, I hated it, but when I was done and at my unit, I understood the purpose. We had to lose ourselves and who we were in order to become the soldiers we needed to be."

Being able to reflect on the experience seems to have helped the veterans understand why basic training uses the disorienting feeling to its advantage. Encouraging men and women to forget the life they left helped them be the best soldier, sailor, airman, coastie or marine they could be. James discussed this when I was talking to him about Officer Candidate School.

Me –What was OCS like? I know what Marine Corps boot camp was like, any similarities?

James – From what I know about enlisted boot, very similar except we call our instructors by their rank. They also treat us with a little more respect than recruits get.

Me – We had a lot of drill work, is that done at OCS?

James – Yes, but as we were doing it, they would ensure we were doing it correctly, then as we debriefed, they would explain to us the exercise purpose and how it would teach us how to treat Marines with respect and to be the best Marine leaders we could be.

While James' experience was in Officer Candidate School, it was still basic training and caused a disorienting experience. The best way that each person got through it was taking one day at a time. "There's a saying in the Marines regarding boot camp; take it meal to meal and Sunday to Sunday," stated Solak. The goal is to get to the end of basic training and get started with their military career.

A new beginning. While the military was disorienting for the veterans when they arrived at training, arriving at college can be just as disorienting. After the regimented schedule of the military, the free-flowing atmosphere is disorienting for veterans. The participants described their first experience on campus as overwhelming and chaotic. "No one could tell me where I needed to go on campus during my first hour on campus," lamented Schwartz.

Being on campus could be disorienting because of the amount of people and the lack of schedule unity of the students. With the heightened awareness of everything, this can be disorienting to veterans. Schwartz talked about his nervousness around campus:

Our campus is not big, but there are a lot of students taking classes during the day. When class change happens, I get nervous walking through large groups and around bags that are left around the study. The other areas of concern are when there are information tables lining the pathway towards my classes.

While training teaches military members to be alert when they are deployed, those skills are not something that can be unlearned. Blevins talked about this where he discussed his time in Afghanistan and on campus.

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We were taught to be on the lookout for any unattended bags, packages or trash as we moved through the streets of Afghanistan. That thinking is hard to break and I still get antsy when I see unattended items around campus. While it has gotten easier, it is sometimes still a struggle walking through campus.

So, how do veterans get through this while they get used to the environment? "Take each day one at a time and keep moving forward," Perez said. Knowing that each day can get easier helps veterans get through the day. "Making friends makes it easier dealing with some of the uncomfortableness of campus," Schwartz commented about getting through the craziness. Getting through the disorientation seems to be similar for both the military and college, just taking one day at a time.

Uncompromising Mindset

Persistence is defined by the Merriam-Webster dictionary as the quality that allows someone to continue doing something or trying to do something even though it is difficult or opposed by other people. This is something that the men and women of the military deal with on a daily basis and something they are trained for. And they do not let anything stand in their way when they are given a mission, they seek to complete the mission no matter the cost. Not only did this apply in the military it applied to their experiences in higher education as well. This experience was apparent during my conversations with the participants regarding their education.

"I'm not going to stop, I want to get my doctorate and I use every naysayer's opinion as motivation to get me to my ultimate destination," stated Sgt. Blevins. He was excited for school and wanted to be sure that he shared that enthusiasm with others through his work with the student veterans' organization. "I enjoy helping other veterans get through the tough part, help explaining the new mission is graduation," recalled Blevins.

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Petty Officer Perez used his experiences in the Navy to help him with his nursing classes using that knowledge to help him in being a better student. "I tried to do things by the book when I first started classes, but then I let my instincts take over and excelled." Using the training that he received while in the Navy helped him in being a better nursing student. Even though he was not always thrilled to work with other students, he knew that he had the skills he needed and would excel at the job no matter what the degree threw his way.

Specialist Schwartz went through a lot while she was in college and things became harder when her daughter was born. "The proudest moment of my life happened when my daughter was born, but it was also one of the hardest times." She went on during our conversation to explain that she was so happy with her new life, but returning to school was difficult for her.

I would not have been able to survive without my fiancé, I was able to attend classes and other events with his support to take care of my daughter. Knowing that she was taken care of and in good hands gave me a peace of mind while I was in class.

All of the participants made a successful transition to higher education after their service in the military yet they each had a difficulty that was unique to themselves. Joining the military is a difficult decision to make yet each of these individuals made that decision. Deciding to enroll in college is not always an easy decision and making it to graduation takes dedication, and each participant made that decision. Briggs (2012 and Wood (2012) said that 88% of veterans drop out of post-secondary education within the first year, however each of these veterans made it past the first year. Since the interviews, Specialist Schwartz has graduated and moved on to graduate school, Petty Officer Perez moved on to another school with a better nursing program and is in his last year of nursing school. Sergeant Blevins is still successful and enjoying his major. Corporal Solak is in her sophomore year and has taken on a leadership role within the

student veterans' group, and Major James is working toward finishing his degree before he makes his transition to Fleet Marine Force in the summer of 2017.

A Part of the Whole

A veteran has spent the last portion of his or her life as part of an organization where they became a team. This leads to one of the most difficult parts of the transition process for any veteran, learning who they are as an individual instead of a larger group member. Veterans identify themselves easily in the military using the rank structure and chain of command and know where they fit within the environment, yet they can lose themselves as they become civilians. They know who to go to within their unit when an issue comes up or if they need support, but once they are a civilian, the feeling of solitude may come into focus. Solak talked about being a manager for the on-campus housing and taking care of the Marines:

> As Corporal, I was assigned to be the BQ [base quarters] manager where I was responsible for ensuring that the Marines had a place to live and ensure that emergencies or other issues were taken care of. Once the Marines got used to me, I was called at all time of the day or night. It became overwhelming being called 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. I was glad to have the experience, but helping Marines was challenging.

While she had to take care of the Marines' requests, she learned skills that would help her as she continued her military service. Being a part of this team meant a lot to the veterans I spoke to, knowing that they were a member of America's military and could be a part of the mission that was being fought overseas if need be. Schwartz talked about this when she talked about her interrogation team:

> Interrogation is a lonely job at times. When you're talking with a person of interest, it's just you and the other person, no one else is in there with you. Having a team to debrief

with after an interrogation helps keep your wits about you when you're having to do intense interviews. Being a part of this team, we were able to help each other out with our weaknesses.

Being a part of the team is a way for the weakest member of the unit to get better and each person can utilize his or her strengths to help that weaker person get better. Once the military members become veterans, they want to find that type of supportive atmosphere once they have left the military. There are a number of ways this can be done, whether it is an organization on campus or one off campus, the veteran wants to have that feeling again.

In addition to this, they search for who they are as an individual. They knew their role within the military, but figuring out that role after the military can be difficult. They have been part of a team, but now they are searching for what makes them whole, who they are as an individual. Blevins discussed this:

Moving down south with my wife was great, but just enrolling into school was not enough. Her support was awesome as I got used to the new schedule, but I was starting to get depressed and needed to find the comradery with others. I met Schwartz and she told me about the SVA and it was a way to connect to people who are going through this too. Talking to them helped me to figure out who I am and allow me to find myself.

Being able to find themselves in groups helps the veterans figure out what their identity is after the military. While the military will always be a part of their identity, it is not their sole identity any longer, so figuring out who they are is a key priority for them when they leave the military. "I will always be a Marine, but I'm also a stage manager for the theater department and that is who I've become. Helping the actors block the performance and ensure everyone knows what their role is," Solak discussed as part of her identity.

Being part of a community organization is a way for the veteran to be a part of an organization and contribute to the community they are involved in, and sometimes feel a part of a team again. By getting involved in the community and seeking support within this group as well as veteran services on the campus, a student can begin to find themselves and who they are outside of the military. James talked about the church that he has become a part of because of his move:

> When my family and I moved to the university, one phone call to a local church helped us out in a way that we never imagined. The church came out in force and helped us unload our truck and start unpacking, as well as brought us some food for our first week in the area. It was a blessing to have their help and now my family attends the church and my sons have some friends at the church.

Joining a church is a way to join a group of support as James found out. His family has enjoyed being at the church and not only enjoys the support, but it has helped him continue to form his identity as a Christian man. They have started the transition from being a part of something and that defining who they are, to being an individual and becoming a whole individual. The veteran will not lose the lessons learned in the military, but it becomes part of their identity and not the whole identity. Once they have transitioned into civilian life, they have to find their own identity as a civilian and the military becomes one part of the whole identity.

Shared Sense of Self

As the veterans were getting used to the transition into college and comfortable with who they were as a person, many of them decided to give back to other veterans who are beginning the transition. Assisting with creating a lounge for veterans, being a member of a veterans group, or meeting with other veterans individually are all ways that the participants discussed helping

veterans with their transition. Schwartz discussed being elected as the President for the Student Veterans of America organization:

I didn't want to be President for the SVA, but I couldn't stand by and watch [the previous one] run the organization into the ground. I wanted it to be utilized for good and as a way for veterans to get involved. Having the support of the registrar's office has helped ensuring that we connect with all the veterans, but getting individuals involved is not always as easy. We try to do a couple of events a semester for veterans and their families to ensure that they all feel welcomed to the campus.

Making veterans feel welcomed to campus is only one aspect of a successful transition, understanding that there is a family involved is important for the veterans' success. Many veterans are non-traditional and have families; having people who recognize that is important to ensure that the all are comfortable in the new surroundings. Blevins talked about his wife being supported by those who he met in the SVA.

Moving down with my wife was great, but having a place for my wife to meet others who have experienced the transition helped. She met Schwartz and her daughter and has babysat for her a time or two so that her and her fiancé could go on a date. Our families have become close and it's been great to have that friendship. We've shared in our struggles and celebrated our successes.

As part of the SVA, it gave a place for all veterans to gather and share their struggles, but it also helped others in asking questions in a safe environment. Veterans enjoy having a lounge where they can go without having to worry about other people bothering them or looking at them when they say things that most will find offensive. As mentioned before, Perez sometimes uses

vulgar language as part of his everyday vocabulary and having a place to go to talk to others is a comfort to him.

> My mouth gets me in trouble sometimes, but when I'm in the veterans lounge with others, it's awesome. I can say what I want and no one blinks an eye. We are able to be ourselves without worrying about offending anyone. We also talk about the campus and getting used to the area and where to go for resources. We share our trials and tribulations with the campus and we are able to get through the issues together.

Shared sense of self for these veterans means that they do not just look after themselves, but they want to ensure others are prepared for the transition they will experience, and how to cope with the change in their learning environment. Sharing the perspective they have learned helps them with the motto that many military men and women use when they are in combat: "Leave no man behind."

> Working with the ROTC allows me to prepare the men and women who will be Marine Officers and how they will transition into the Fleet Marine Force and be effective leaders. These students will have to get used to making a transition every three to four years, so taking my experiences and sharing it with them only encourages them to be better officers when they leave the university.

James wants to ensure that his students graduate with the transition in the front of their mind, they will be successful at each of their duty stations. Sharing experiences is a way to share one's self with others to keep the knowledge moving forward.

Chapter Summary

This chapter provided a profile for each of the participants. Emerging themes were discussed based on the participants and how they assisted with the transformation and

transformational experiences of higher education. Chapter five includes a summary of the study,

answers to the research questions, as well as the study conclusions, limitations, implications,

recommendations, and reflections. The conclusion section addresses the researcher's

recommendations and reflections on the study.

CHAPTER V: DISCUSSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

This chapter reiterates the purpose of this study and discusses each research question in turn. The theoretical frames are reviewed regarding how the theories weave together to form a single understanding. Next, the conclusions of the study cover the implications this study has for key stakeholders as well as limitations of the study. Lastly, suggestions for future research are reviewed.

Recall that the purpose of this qualitative study was to understand the transitional and transformational experiences of military veterans who are now college students. More specifically, the purpose of this case study was to explore the experiences of five student veterans and how they created a connection between their pre-during-post military experiences, the process of change from military personnel to college students, and the act of their transformation. Each of these five participants were purposefully selected based on the following criteria: (a) veteran of the armed forces, (b) served on active duty for 180 days or more, and (c) enrolled in courses at the institution. The following research questions guided the study:

1. How do student veterans describe change when moving from active duty military service to being a college student?

2. In what ways do student veterans describe the help received when making the transition?

3. How do student veterans describe their relationship to the world around them?

The theoretical frameworks that informed this study were Schlossberg's Transition Theory and Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory. As previously discussed in Chapter II, Schlossberg's Transition Theory was developed into a framework that discussed the necessary coping mechanisms to make the transition more comprehensible (Evans et al., 1998). Mezirow's

Transformative Learning is a process of effecting change in a frame of references using those frames as structures of assumptions (Cranton, 1996; Mezirow, 1996). Furthermore, constructivism was utilized as the methodological framework to allow for an in depth understanding of how each participant constructed their reality through the transition and transformation experiences. With a more in-depth understanding of the constructs created by the participants, strategies can be developed and, with proper planning, support structures may be put into place to assist student veterans going through this transition from active duty in the future.

Discussion

Research Question 1

Research question 1 sought to answer, "How do student veterans describe change when moving from active duty military service to being a college student? Gall et al. (2000) discussed how entering university may be a source of strain and an acute stressor for students because they may be uncertain of their abilities to meet the demands of higher education (Dwyer & Cummings, 2001). Baker and Siryk (1989) discussed how the academic adjustment includes motivation to complete academic work, success in meeting academic requirements, academic effort, and satisfaction with the environment. The participants primarily discussed the change they experienced as an adjustment period of getting used to the new schedule and being able to express themselves more freely. The other type of change was the type of motivation they experienced using their graduation with a degree as the primary motivation to be successful in college.

Adjustment. The participants spoke to two types of adjustments they experienced while they transitioned into higher education, those were adjusting to a new daily routine and schedule,

and the idea of self-expression. As the veterans started their academic journey, they realized they would have to get used to a daily schedule that was not as regimented as the military schedule.

There are similarities among the comments from each of the participants regarding the adjustment but each had a unique perspective. "It was an adjustment in getting used to the change of schedule from always having to be somewhere, but getting into a routine with the class schedule helped," stated Schwartz. "Starting school was a godsend. It gave me an opportunity to get into a routine and get past the year I took off. Classes also helped me get past the mild depression I was feeling," remembered Blevins.

This adjustment to their daily routine allowed the veterans to create new healthy habits. Perez expressed this when he discussed his daily routine:

> I wake up around 0530 and go for a run, then shower and get my lunch ready which is typically a salad or something a little healthier than the fried food served in most of the on-campus dining locations. Once I head to campus, I don't leave till the end of the day. I arrive to campus around 0730 every day, and depending on the day I may grab a nap in my truck before class or I'll head to the class building and study if we're having a quiz or a test. Typically, I leave campus around 1700 on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays and head home to help the family prepare dinner or on Tuesdays and Thursdays, I'll leave around 1400 and head to my job for a few hours before heading home.

Perez still lived at home while he was attending school, to save some money on housing as well as to help support his family.

The other type of adjustment discussed by a couple of participants was that of self-expression freedom. "I enjoy taking class in civilian clothes instead of the uniform I have worn each day the last ten plus years. It also helps other students not to realize that I'm still a member

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of the military," commented James. "I have blue hair and get to cut it like I want. Being able to be me has been a welcomed adjustment after being in the Marines the last four years," Solak stated excitedly.

While in the military, men and women wear the same uniform and have very strict uniform guidelines they must follow in regard to the styling, cut, and color of hair. Being able to express themselves in a different way allows the veterans some freedom in their clothes, but makes them feel uncomfortable at times. "While I enjoy wearing what I want, I hate walking around and seeing guys in jeans that girls should be wearing, what's up with that?" recalled Blevins during our discussion.

Motivation. Another change the participants discussed was earning an undergraduate degree and the motivation to achieve that goal. Setting a goal of graduating was a way for the participants to keep working toward achieving the degree before looking toward the next goal. Working to be a successful student and contributing community member helped provide motivation for them to get involved and keep their grades up throughout their academic journey.

Each participant used this personal motivation in a different way as they moved from military service to college student. Becoming part of the veteran community on campus was a large part of the attraction to the university for Schwartz and Blevins. Schwartz recalled, "I was looking for a strong veteran's population on campus and one that had the support of the university. I feel that at [my university]." Blevins remembered, "I was not looking for a community when I got to campus, but when I heard about the SVA I went to see what it was like. I enjoyed attending and getting to know the members of the group."

Perez talked about using the skills he received from the military as motivation for his degree and his chosen career path. "I have a lot of skills that I learned as a Corpsman that will be

useful as a nurse. I'm using those skills as motivation to be the best nurse I can be when I graduate."

"I have been able to do things that I could have never done in the Marines, while I received leadership training, being a stage manager has given me more skills and has been a good outlet for me," Solak recalled. She is a theater and religion major and her unique perspective from the Marine Corps has helped her become a strong leader in her field. James has continued to use his leadership skills as motivation to be successful in and out of the classroom. "I make it a point to talk to other students and encourage them to get together as a study group." He will always be a leader of Marines, but he has changed the mindset to be a leader in the class.

Research Question 2

The second research question asked, "In what ways do student veterans describe the help received when making the transition?" In my review of the literature I looked at a number of studies to gain a broader understanding that included traditional students. These studies included studying achievement motivation and college satisfaction (Donohue & Wong, 1997), the effects of residential learning communities (Pike, 1999), first-generation college students (Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, & Nora, 1996), and distinguishing a sense of community and motivation (Wighting, Liu, & Rovai, 2008). Non-traditional students have been studied on topics such as the differences of career decisions between traditional and non-traditional students (Luzzo, 1993), the university life of a non-traditional student (Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2011), and experiencing barriers entering into higher education (Bowl, 2001).

Research has increased on student veterans in recent years through studies such as those on the transition experiences (Rumann, 2010), studies on services provided (Cook & Kim, 2009), and administration's lack of understanding (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011). The number of resources

for student veterans has been limited, although growing in recent years (Abel et al. 2013). Universities are starting to understand this new demographic on campuses, but services are not growing at the same rate as the student veteran population. The participants discussed the benefit of knowing who to talk to and coordination of resources for veterans. They were stressed about the lack of assistance with ensuring that communication was forthcoming with all the details they needed.

Coordination of Resources. Military service members receive special assistance when they arrive at a new duty station. When a service member gets to base, there is an individual who walks them around the base to help them get checked in to each location. These individuals are assigned to the service member throughout the first couple of weeks to ensure they settle into their new unit successfully. While veterans are used to this type of support at new bases, they understand the civilian world is different. Nonetheless, they expected some sort of support when they arrived on campus.

Specialist Schwartz discussed the support she experienced on campus, "We had a dedicated VA official who we could call with questions. While it helped to know who to call, it was a struggle with so many veterans on campus at times." Having only one dedicated person for a veteran population of over 1,000 hindered the amount of support a veteran could receive. Sergeant Blevins recalled the easiness of getting admitted to the school, but wished there were some other resources to provide guidance and proper orientation.

Having one contact was helpful, but not having a place to gather with other veterans wasn't helpful. I was glad when the SVA was awarded a grant to create a lounge for the veterans and it was good to see it all come together.

Perez praised the support of his university working to get veterans involved when they stopped by the veterans' office. "When I went by, they had opportunities to use the lounge and the free printing as well as other workshops that were offered." Having a place to be supported was an encouragement for Perez.

The Enrollment Management Office at Field of Greens University provided support for veterans to ensure they received all the educational benefits they earned through their service in the military. Having the support of the Enrollment Management office along with a new and growing student organization has helped Solak and James. Solak recounted her experience:

I had someone to call and get enrolled, but meeting other veterans wasn't as easy. Meeting the guys of the SVA helped, except they were just growing and I was the only female. It was fun to be one of the guys.

"Being staff has helped me in some ways, but the Enrollment Management staff helped ensure the right benefits were applied to my account," James said. Knowing which office to go to for support is always a good thing and the participants all discussed the benefits of knowing who to contact which helped with their transition to campus.

Lack of Assistance. While the veterans received some help from the institution, they all mentioned there was a lack of assistance in some areas within the institution. While some of these seem small in the eyes of traditional students, the veterans recognize the larger issues they may pose. One issue Schwartz brought up was the Veteran's Office having only one staff member. "There are over 1,000 students using benefits on our campus, the only thing the staff member could do was certify paperwork. No programs were done by the office because of the small amount of time."

The office only having one staff member proved to be an issue for Blevins in a different way.

> My paperwork was signed off on, or that's what I was told. I showed up on the first day
>
> of class only to learn my schedule had been dropped. The VA rep hadn't sent my
>
> paperwork in and so my benefits didn't' start. They had to expedite my paperwork.

While having one staff member caused some issues for Schwartz and Blevins, Perez discussed the lack of a student organization. "Other than the lounge and services they provide, there is no organization for the student veterans. So there has not been anywhere for us to meet and support each other."

Problems with paperwork were reported by participants at Fields of Green University and Coastal Waters University. Solak had an issue with her educational benefits as well. "I wasn't told to call [the government] so my schedule was dropped. When I asked about it, they said it was a miscommunication and they emailed me which they never did." Along with this miscommunication, James was surprised with the lack of a dedicated staff for veterans.

> While there is support from the Enrollment Management office, there wasn't one person
>
> to contact for assistance. The university seems to be working towards it, however they are
>
> just beginning but seem to have support from the upper administration to create a place
>
> for veterans.

The veterans received help from the universities but not every university is perfect and some still struggle with irregularities in their procedures. Veterans recognize the support they receive but also see the holes in the support system.

Research Question 3

How do student veterans describe their relationship to the world around them? Adults have acquired a coherent body of experience they use as references that define their life world (Mezirow, 1997). Through reflection on individual priorities, people can gain a new appreciation for their world, understand what really matters to them, and their worldview may become transformed (Courtenay et al., 1998). The participants described the relationship they have formed with the world in three ways: being an active member in the community, having a shared sense of self, and becoming whole.

Active in the Community. A resonating concept from the participants was being active in the community. Whether the participant was involved with a student organization on campus, contacted individuals in the local community to create programs, or worked in an on campus job, the participants attributed being an active member as a vital part of the relationship they formed with the world around them.

The veterans have been supported through their time in the military by family and friends, and recognize the need for this support. So when they leave the military, they work to identify ways to assist veterans, or dependents, by creating a welcoming atmosphere for them to be a member. Sergeant Blevins recalled his time in the student veteran's organization in regard to helping others who are coming after them.

> Schwartz and I are members of the USVO (veteran's organization) and this has been a great opportunity for both of us to share our knowledge of our environment with others. In addition, being part of this group has helped explore the community and understand that I am able to plan events for veterans to help with getting them used to the area.

While being involved in a veteran's organization worked for a couple of the participants, Corporal Solak's world revolved around theater since making the transition to college.

> I joined the theater department as soon as I arrived on campus and I was able to get placed in a leadership role. I felt a little lost when I arrived on campus, but being part of the theater has given me purpose and I'm looking forward to moving on in the theatrical world after I graduate. Giving back to the theater has helped me to ensure productions are well done for the entire [college] community.

Giving back to the community seemed to be how the participants in this study ensured the relationship they have with the world was one shared by others. They wanted to be a part of the world around them, and looked at the larger picture.

Shared sense of self. The veterans wanted to give back to other veterans who joined the campus after them. The participants talked about leaving things better for those who followed than when they arrived on campus. Specialist Schwartz talked about this when she referenced the veteran's lounge that was created on campus,

> We were able to get the Home Depot grant and with the help of the Vice President for Student Affairs, create a safe space in the student center for veterans to interact with others as well as have some comforts that are not available to them elsewhere on campus.

Being able to share the knowledge they have learned with others is attributed to the experience they received in the military, modeled by senior service members who share the knowledge of the shop they work in. This sharing of knowledge can be personal as they may be sharing the skills they acquired since they started their academic journey. Perez discussed this when he talked about other members of his reserve unit attending the same institution as him.

The Marines were coming to me to ask about the best way to get the paperwork

completed and turned in to ensure they were able to start on time. I utilized the patience I

have learned through being a Corpsman with talking with each one and helping them get

settled into the university and finding the veteran's office, passing that knowledge on as it

had been passed to me when I was first starting out.

This continued sense of sharing helps the veterans continue to hone in on the how their

actions affect the world around them. Major James discussed his faith as always being the core

he relies on.

Church has and will continue to be a place where I can center myself, get involved and

know my family is safe. No matter what the struggles of the world, I know that attending

church and praying about everything that is going on in the world and my family and I

are able to have some peace. Being active in the church helps with each transition that my

family makes.

Becoming whole. As a veteran leaves the military, they can sometimes lose part of their

identity. While this can lead to the hardest part of the transition, the veteran has to take it upon

himself or herself to relate to the environment and learn about themselves and how they can

become successful in the new environment. They understand how their military identity was

defined within the context of the world, but how had that changed and how were they defined as

a civilian. The veterans described the world of academics through the success they had in the

classroom which formed their student identity and added to their whole identity.

"I strive to be successful in class, I want to participate and be able to earn the internships

that I deserve that will help me achieve my ultimate academic goal," stated Blevins.

Understanding that how one performs in the classroom may affect the internships they are able to

participate in, helps drive the veteran. "I sit in the front of the class, I raise my hand whenever I can, I want to share my experiences with others and I think the professors understand that," commented Schwartz. Realizing that the professors may reward someone for participating, veterans may take a chance and participate more.

Once the veteran has fully committed to the academic rigors, they begin to form their whole identity in this stage of their transition and transformation. While the military was a part of their life before becoming a civilian, it is not the only thing that defines them and they understand this. "I am forever a Marine, the tattoos prove it, but I am also a student and a stage manager for the theater. Each day, I change and become a stronger person," stated Solak.

The veteran has worked hard to become a member of the military and they now work hard to become a member of the college they attend. To become a whole person, the individual must take the military aspects and combine that with the civilian and student aspects to create a whole identity.

Theory Braiding

As mentioned in Chapter II, Schlossberg's Theory of Transition (Anderson et al., 2011) and Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory (Mezirow, 1994) provided the framework for the study. As part of the study, these theories worked in tandem to assist in a fuller understanding of the experiences veterans had entering higher education. This section works through Table 10 which was introduced in Chapter II utilizing the terms that were created from a weaving of the two themes of personal and life change, personal reflection, and future planning. By moving through each section, you can see how they each work together to create a stronger sense of self, as demonstrated in Figure 12 below.

As can be seen in this image, each process builds on the other where all three come together to provide the individual with a stronger sense of self as they progress through the transition and transformational experiences. This section will take each piece of the image to show how they build on each other to create this strong sense of self for the individual.
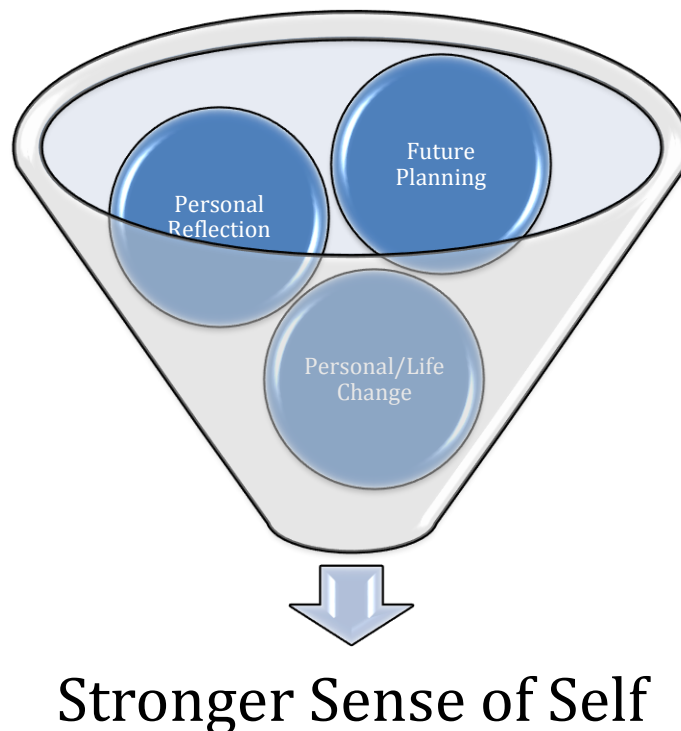

Figure 12. Three Processes to Create a Stronger Sense of Self.

Personal/Life Change

The start of a transition and/or transformation process is a personal or life change. This can be something like a family member passing away, or for the veterans in this study, leaving the military and becoming first civilians, then students moving from the rigors of military life and its everyday schedule to the free flow of student life. This term encompasses the situation variable outlined in Schlossberg's (1995) transition theory, and the disorienting dilemma dimension from Mezirow's (1994) transformative learning theory. Each theory notes the change begins by some sort of trigger such as a role change or a major life transition. This personal/life

change is something that a student veteran must work through as they become a member of the college classroom. Corporal Solak said the following regarding the differences in a typical day in the military and in school:

Some of the transitioning is that there's a lot more mental and emotional stress in college than there [was] in the Marine Corps…but then I work in theater to where I have to work an extra thirty-six to forty hours on a play or a stage, where I've [been] chosen as a stage manager [where] I have to put in extra hours which has similarities to the time in the Marine Corps.

As a veteran begins to make sense of the disorientation associated with moving to the higher education campus, they begin to revert back to their training in dealing with these types of situations or dilemmas. Many veterans will step back, review the surroundings, and plan out a scheduled that will help them each day. Working on a daily schedule may help them fully gain the most out of their time as a student. By doing this, they retain some familiarity with their days in the military.

Once the individual has begun to experience a life change, they must work through this portion of the transition and transformation and have a grasp on the new normal for them before they move on to the next step in the process which is a personal reflection on the transition and transformation that is being experienced.

Personal Reflection

Everyone has a support system, however, with a major life change, veterans' support systems have sometimes taken a large hit and have been completely changed. As a veteran, many of their friends may still be in the military, so they look for similar support on campus. Many

look for likeminded students and somewhere safe to gather. They want somewhere where they can be themselves without hiding the fact that they are veterans of the military.

The personal reflection piece of the braid encompasses the self and social support variable outlined in Schlossberg's (1995) transition theory which discusses personal and demographic characteristics as well as the psychological resources the person has available and the support they may receive from relationships with family, friends, and, if there is any, institutional support. The dimension of Mezirow's (1994) transformational learning theory that is encompassed in personal reflection is that of critical reflection in which the individual self-examines themselves with the feelings of guilt or shame they may have about the change and how it affects others as well as looking critically at the personal assumptions they may have formed prior to the transition.

As many veterans arrive on campus and experience the different culture of higher education they may sometimes feel guilty or shameful because they may not feel prepared for college and may have spouses or kids that they are putting through this period of transition as well. Sergeant Blevins discussed how his wife's considerations were taken into account when he decided on the institution to attend:

> I had to take my wife's thoughts into consideration and she didn't want to be around the rain anymore, so we went down to south. I had my choice of school, but neither of us wanted to live on the west coast, and New England would have been too cold, so we were left with the south.

Many institutions have a Veterans department on campus, but veterans do not feel as though the offices provide the services they feel will help them with the transition. Veterans feel the offices only help with certifying their paperwork for military educational benefits. Petty Officer Perez

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discussed some issues that he had with the veteran's office not getting the educational benefit paperwork in on time:

> The veteran's office on campus helped when I needed help with certifying my paperwork, however there was no one who was able to help when the institution dropped all of my classes due to non-payment. I had other contacts at the institution to help with my rehab, so I contacted her to try and get re-enrolled in classes and we were able to figure everything out.

Having a support system not only helps the veterans' transition successfully, but it allows them to go through the transition and transformation process successfully and with few road blocks. Providing a safe place for veterans to gather helps offer student veterans an opportunity to create a new network of friends on campus that could help with the transition and their reflection about the transition and transformation to higher education.

Future Planning

Future planning is something that veterans do not just conduct once, but they may do it each year of their tenure at the institution. Many veterans start looking toward the future before they arrive on campus. This thought process may concern their major and making decisions based on their job prospects after college, as well as reflecting on the alignment of the degree with their military experience. Future planning combines Schlossberg's (1995) strategies, or coping resources, with Mezirow's (1995) rational discourse. Both of these discuss how the individual must modify the situation they find themselves in, and recognize their discontent, before they begin exploring options for new roles, relationships, and actions that aid in managing the stress.

By using the coping resources that are available and communicating rationally with others, they begin to have a successful transition and transformation into a student. Specialist Schwartz discussed choosing her major based on experiences:

My job in the military was a human intelligence collector, or interrogator and I became good at listening to the individuals I encountered and was named assistant chief of my deployment. So when I enrolled in school and I'm majoring in psychology since it goes hand-in-hand with my job in the military.

Once the veteran knows what they want to do while in college, veterans may look at different student organizations to be involved in, or explore job options. While having military education benefits helps pay for the veteran's education and living expenses, many still work, when possible, to help themselves remain busy as they have come from a culture of having something planned for each workday throughout the week.

Stronger Sense of Self

By using the terms of personal/life change, personal reflection, and future planning, you begin to understand how they build onto themselves. The first part of Figure 12, above, shows that the personal/life change is the first thing that goes into the funnel, and this is the first part of the process that the veteran must comprehend about the change that they are entering into. The transition and transformation all begin because of a change that is being experienced by the individual.

The second piece to go into the funnel is personal reflection which the individual must experience to begin understanding the reason for the change. At times this may be the most difficult portion of the transition as they must move through various feelings to ensure they

continue moving toward the ultimate goal which, in this case, was graduation. Major James summed it up best when he discussed some of his transitions.

> I feel guilty when my move is in the middle of the school term and I may have to leave my wife alone with our two young kids for a period of time before she will be able to join me, but when we are back together, all is well again.

He understands that transition is inevitable in his job, but he also sees the bigger picture and understands that when all is said and done, they will be stronger in the future due to the challenges they may endure during the short term. This leads to the third and final piece that helps create a stronger sense of self and that is future planning. Future planning is where the individual begins to make plans for the next steps in their life with the skills that they have gained from this new experience.

When an individual moves through each of these three steps, their sense of self is stronger as they have new skills that will help them in the future. Each time a person makes a change, there may be pieces of this process that may need to be repeated, but the more that it is experienced, the easier it may be for the individual to process the transition and transformation that he or she may experience in the future.

Conclusions

In this study, I wanted to gain a deeper understanding of the transition and transformational experiences of five student veterans and how they created a connection between their pre-during-post military experiences, the process of change from military personnel to college students, and the act of their transformation. All five participants brought specific exercises into college that assisted them with their latest transition. Specialist Schwartz, Petty Officer Perez and Major James each had higher education experience before joining the military

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so they had an understanding of what to expect from a college classroom. However, Sergeant Blevins and Corporal Solak did not have a traditional path through high school, joining the military instead, so their first experience with the college classroom experience occurred during the latest transition they experienced.

While each participant's experience was different, all had courses throughout their military time that may have assisted in their preparedness for classes. Bean (1980) suggested that even a student's prior instruction and preparedness for college work impacts a college student's success and retention. While it is too early to know if Blevins, Perez, Solak, and James will graduate, Schwartz has graduated and started a graduate assistantship and a psychology graduate program. Over the course of the interviews and in follow-up conversations, the participants have become more confident in their environments and with their studies.

As someone who has experienced being deployed to a war zone, I am aware of the transition issues that many veterans may deal with. It is important, as administrators, that we are equipped with an understanding of the challenges our students face. Gaining an understanding of these challenges eases the decisions that are made regarding how our students may need support during this transition and transformation experience.

In addition, we need to help faculty understand the uniqueness of this student demographic and how topics in class may affect these men and women who may have seen the worst of the worst. Yet these same experiences may help give a topic more depth as they may have knowledge of areas that textbooks do not cover. While veterans do not want to necessarily be singled out in class, an open dialog should be kept to ensure the veteran is aware of the topics that will be discussed in class to prepare themselves mentally for the subject matter.

Implications

The study has implications for various stakeholders connected to the transition and transformation of student veterans. The implications apply to higher education administrators as they prepare for the increased number of veterans who will be entering into higher education in the future and higher education faculty as they prepare for the unique instruction that these veterans expect. The sections that follow explore the implications in greater detail.

Higher education administrators. Recall that according to DMDC (2014), there are over one million military members who do not have an education above the high school or GED level. With more than 150,000 men and women enlisting each year (Loughran et al., 2011), the age breakdown for the military continues to get younger, according to DMDC (2014), with the largest percentage (65%) being 30 years or younger. As mentioned earlier, a practical question is how institutions are preparing to support the increase in the student veteran population.

The admissions office staff are typically the first individuals the veterans may contact. These staff members should be knowledgeable about all the ways the institution is prepared to support veterans as they transition. A discovery that occurred during the course of this study is that a couple of the participants attended freshman orientation and felt out of place with traditional aged students while others attended transfer orientation. Admissions offices need to ensure there is an understanding of how to work with the student veteran demographic as some may enter the university as a true freshman while others enter as transfer students. Understanding that these students are non-traditional students, an institute should understand the best way to serve the demographic as a whole. This may involve implementing an orientation geared toward just student veterans who are enrolling into the institution.

Offices of Veteran and Military Service have been created to help support veterans on campus (Abel et al., 2013) with the Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education releasing guidelines for campuses to follow to effectively provide these services (Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education, 2010). While many institutions are creating offices to support the veterans on campus, they do not necessarily have a dedicated staff for the office. Two of the campuses, Coastal Waters University and Fields of Green University, have one person assigned to help veterans but it is only one piece of their job. This lack of dedicated staff may impact the number of services and/or programs that an office may be able to provide. The participants discussed how they struggled at times to get in contact with the representative due to the position having other duties outside of helping the veterans.

Next, providing a safe space for veterans to gather with others of like minds and attitudes is desired by veterans. Coastal Waters University and Desert Palms University are the two institutions in this study which created lounges for their veterans. Knowing there is somewhere to go and relax when things get tough or overwhelming is a support that veterans in this study appreciated. This space also provides a veteran with a space to be themselves and know others will not be offended and can interact with others who may be going through a similar transition. The participants at these institutions were thankful for the spaces that were created, knowing they had a place to visit in between classes where there would be others who they could talk to or just to study.

Finally, providing training to help groups understand what having veterans on campus could possibly mean for everyone is important. As part of the Department of Education's Eight Keys to Veteran Success Sites, providing professional development to faculty and staff on the issues is important (DoE, n.d.). This training, done at Coastal Waters University and Fields of

Green University, has been called Green Zone and helps give a background of the veterans as well as the cycles they experience when being deployed. The training also has covered some of the services the veterans seek out and what the best ways to talk to veterans are, including questions that should not be asked. Each institution has a unique presentation and it is encouraged that all institutions look at this type of presentation to inform faculty and staff of the veteran's demographic on campus. This training is also a good way to identify individuals on campus who are open to helping veterans with any concerns they may have throughout their time on campus. A couple of the participants in this study talked about how helping with the creation and presentation of this program provided an opportunity for faculty and staff to ask questions of the veteran students which allowed a fuller understanding of the demographic.

Higher education faculty. Institutions are set up to serve the traditional age student, however the needs of the student veteran differ uniquely from those of traditional age students (Ackerman et al., 2009). Student veterans may need assistance with interruptions to their education due to activations and/or deployments as well as what it may mean for their classes. Faculty need to understand the proper protocol for assisting a student if there is an instance of a military withdraw from classes.

Another area that faculty should be aware of is the attitudes that student veterans bring to the classroom. Many are used to knowing the reason for training (Halff et al., 1986), and are not used to having homework (Gagné, 1962) and, they train with chaos in mind so that they are prepared for any situation (Hohl & Karinch, 2003). The environment of the college classroom is a stark difference from the military with the biggest distraction in classes being the technology (Fox et al., 2009; McCoy, 2013) and homework (Kitsantas, 2008).

Faculty need to understand how student veterans approach class and provide them with guidance as they begin their classes. Participants said the greatest benefit would be having an understanding of the end goal for the course. The veterans in this study mentioned that many times they did not know what the final expectation of the course was and that is completely against what they were used to when they were in the military. In the military they had a mission with a defined end goal and they knew what they were striving to achieve; not knowing that can create anxiety. They like having a syllabus with assignments on it, however they want to know how the course contributes to the overall academic process.

The other portion of attending classes that the participants discussed was the feeling of failure. While in the military, they knew that if they failed, they would have another opportunity at a new job. However, in school, they understand that failure in one class may require them retake the class. Faculty should work to recognize if a student veteran is struggling in class to assist them to not fail at their goal of graduating.

Limitations

There are a number of limitations that need clarification for this study. The number of participants and locations of the study sites is of importance. The experiences of the student veterans in this study may be similar to others, but will not mirror the experiences of other veterans who are attending higher education institutes. The findings of this study are broad and may assist some institutes of higher education but they are not intended to be applied to every institution across the nation. The intent of the study was to provide thick and rich descriptions to bring awareness to this unique and growing population on our campuses. This allows the reader to make their own decisions regarding the implantation of the conclusions regarding student veterans' transition and transformational experiences.

Recruiting participants became more of a challenge than anticipated and the primary reason a third site was chosen. Even though recruitment proved to be a challenge, those participants who volunteered were eager to share their experiences to assist institutions of higher education learn more about the student veteran and hopefully make it easier for veterans in the future. Another limitation that can be viewed regarding this study is that not all the branches are represented, however the participant selection criteria did not limit the military branches that would be studied.

Utilizing the qualitative methodology allowed a relationship to develop between myself and the participants that was built on trust and interest in their personal experiences. Lincoln and Guba (1985) discuss the advantage of spending substantial time with participants to reach deep levels of engagement, due to time limitations and challenges with recruiting participants, this emerged as an additional limitation. The data that was gathered was done utilizing three interviews with each participant where other data gathering methods were limited.

Future Research Recommendations

The majority of studies conducted on the subject of student veterans have been qualitative studies (Livingston, 2009; Rumann, 2010; Shea, 2010), and I believe that further investigation is needed with a diversity of studies to fully understand the student veteran demographic and the uniqueness that it brings to the higher education environment. The following are recommendations for types of studies as well as reasons for these studies.

A quantitative study is recommended as it may be able to cover a broader number of participants at more institutions. This study could have two purposes, one would be to study the retention rate of student veterans who begin at the institution, with the understanding that some of the veterans may be classified as transfer students instead of freshman students. Another

aspect of the study could be the persistence level of student veterans and what the graduation rates are for those veterans attending higher education. The research that has been conducted regarding this topic is widely contested by veteran groups as it states that 88% of student veterans drop out of postsecondary education (Briggs, 2012; Wood, 2012). This study would assist higher education personnel in understanding the reasons veterans stay at the institution as well as give a better understanding of the reasons veterans leave the institution for another one or drop out of school all together.

As a mixed-methods study, a researcher would gain a fuller understanding of the impact of transition on the learning a participant may have as well as what resources on campus assisted or hindered their successful transition into a student. The quantitative portion could determine the specific resources that are available on a select number of campuses. The qualitative portion could be focus groups from those campuses to understand how the resources identified in the quantitative portion may have been utilized by the participants and if there were any resources they thought should be available.

A comparative study between traditional students, non-traditional students, and student veterans should also be conducted. This study would assist understanding the differences between the groups in regard to the transition into higher education and the transformation learning undergoes. This study's purpose could assist higher education administrators and faculty in understanding how each demographic describes their experiences as college students and how they view the time they have spent in the classroom.

Chapter Summary

Chapter V is the culminating chapter of this dissertation. I reminded the reader of the purpose of the study and offered a discussion of the findings relative to the three research

questions. Additionally, I discussed how the two theories worked together to build a stronger student as they become a college student. The findings suggest that there are implications for various stakeholders connected to student veterans. The stakeholders included higher education administrators who work directly with veterans in creating military friendly environments to assist with a successful transition and transformation into higher education. Higher education faculty need to understand how the experiences of the students may add to the instruction of the subject matter that is being covered. Furthermore, veterans who make the transition into higher education should be aware of the difficulties that these participants had as that may help them with their transition process. Last, I offered recommendations for future research based on the limitations and assumptions of the study.

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Appendix A: Interview Questions

Tell me about your self.

Questions relating to transition: Situation, Self, Support, Strategies

In thinking about your transition from active duty to the college classroom, what stands out as being the easiest aspect of the transition?

What has been the most difficult with the transition?

In what ways do you consider the military environment and college environment similar, dissimilar? (situation)

How do you describe your learning experiences prior to being a college student? Since being a college student? (self)

How do you describe the supports available to you as you transitioned from active duty to college student? (support)

What strategies did/do you use to make the transition to the college environment? (strategies)

Questions relating to transformative learning experiences:

What experiences has been the most valuable to you and why?

What has been your greatest challenge?

In what ways has your military experience prepared you for the role of college student?

How do you think you have changed since you left the military and re/started college?

What is the most important lesson you have learned in or out of school?