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Exploring Student Veterans Barriers

Alexandra Brandriff

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by

Alexandra Brandriff

A Dissertation submitted to the Education Faculty of Lindenwood University

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

Degree of

Doctor of Education

School of Education

Exploring Student Veteran Barriers

by

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This dissertation has been approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

degree of

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at Lindenwood University by the School of Education

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Declaration of Originality

I do hereby declare and attest to the fact that this is an original study based solely upon my own scholarly work here at Lindenwood University and that I have not submitted it for any other college or university course or degree here or elsewhere.

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Abstract

The student veteran population in higher education is a unique group of individuals with different skills and life experiences not typically found among traditional students. Through a comprehensive analysis of quantitative and qualitative data, this study explores the complex challenges that student veterans face in higher education. It aims to explore the challenges, barriers, and support programs experienced by student veterans throughout their higher education journey, as well as compare the graduation and retention rates of student veterans and traditional students.

The researcher first gathered and analyzed qualitative data from student veterans' responses to a survey utilized to gain their perspective on what challenges they faced when transitioning out of the military and into higher education. The survey also aims to compile data regarding programs that the university was offering specific to veterans, and if those programs were truly beneficial to the student veteran. Additionally, the researcher gathered student veteran's perspective of what higher education institutions can do better in the future. The data revealed financial insecurity and social isolation as the top challenges that student veterans face in their higher education journey. They noted that the Student Veteran Group and Military Tuition Assistance (GI Bill) are significant factors that contribute to the continuance and success of their higher education roadmap.

The second portion of this study was to analyze student veterans' graduation and retention rates by comparing veterans who use VA programs against those who do not, as well as a comparison of the student veteran population against the traditional student population. The data revealed no significant difference in graduation and retention rates for any hypothesis of this research study.

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Chapter One: Introduction

Background of the Study

With nearly 200,000 service members leaving the military each year, the transition to civilian life, including higher education, is a topic that must be studied and understood to meet the needs of the student veteran population (Bichrest, 2013; Department of Veteran Affairs, 2018). Veterans often face various difficulties when transitioning from military to civilian life. These include high unemployment, homelessness, and health issues (mental and physical) (Andrewartha & Harvey, 2019). In addition to these obstacles, higher education can also cause additional barriers, making the transition even more difficult. By understanding and addressing the concerns at an educational level, institutions can provide veterans with proper educational tools, assisting in better outcomes. If an institution cannot understand the needs of student veterans, it can cause an ineffective experience for both the institution and, more importantly, the student veteran. By creating a transformational and impactful opportunity to support student veterans, institutions can create a better environment for them, their peers, and the institution itself (Grimes et al., 2011; Kuh et al., 2006).

Veterans' rights and education benefits date back to World War I when veterans needed the government's help to transition back into society as civilians after the war (Jolly, 2013). Since World War I, veterans returning from war have been provided financial benefits to create a smoother transition into civilian life after their military service (Department of Veteran Affairs, 2006). The federal government's educational benefits allowed veterans to attend a college that they may not have been able to attend due to the high cost of tuition and educational expenses. Veterans' Educational

Benefits, also known as the Servicemen's Readjustment Act (GI Bill of Rights), is one of the most significant pieces of legislation established after World War II by the United States Government. This legislation impacted the United States politically, socially, and economically (Department of Veteran Affairs, 2006). The GI Bill of Rights is crucial for many veterans enrolling in a university or college. As this may not be the only reason they are enrolling, financial assistance is a great incentive the government offers them for their service to the country. Enrollment numbers continue to rise within the student veteran population because many service members are leaving the military (Department of Veteran Affairs, 2018). With this rise in enrollment, higher education institutions need to understand the student veteran population to create an environment for the greatest success. Student veterans are unlike any other student population. Research has shown that veterans bring a unique skill set into the classroom due to their real-world experience (Bichrest, 2013). However, with their real-world experience comes challenges that they face while transitioning their lives from an active-duty service member to civilian life.

Purpose of the Study

The lean amount of scholarly literature surrounding student veterans provides inadequate knowledge of what to expect when it comes to their transition after exiting the military and what expectations and experiences they have as college students (Ackerman et al., 2009). This proposed mixed methods research study explored the barriers that student veterans face in higher education due to transitioning from active duty to civilian life and being a student. This study will examine the veteran transition process regarding research already completed on this topic, barriers in higher education, programs offered, the student veterans' perspectives on the support they receive, and their challenges. This

research will investigate if any veteran programs offered are academically beneficial based on the student veterans' opinions. This study will also examine student veterans' retention and graduation rates compared to traditional students. It also examines student veteran retention and graduation rates for veterans using Veterans Administration (VA) programs offered by the university versus those not utilizing VA programs. The student veterans participating in this study will be full-time and part-time students. A private four-year university in the Midwest offers the programs examined. The researcher will review each program the institution provides to understand its purpose. This examination will create an understanding of what each program is utilized for and provide the researcher with more in-depth knowledge when analyzing the participant's survey responses. This research will suggest if the programs are beneficial throughout the four years of school or during the initial admissions and transition process. It is essential to have programs in place so student veterans have available resources during their entire four-year program.

This study aims to continue to gain insight into student veterans and help them succeed academically. Institutions must understand their programs and whether they benefit the student veteran. Through surveys, the researcher will know whether student veterans are satisfied with the program support they received from the institution. This research study is also critical because it will view the programs through the eyes of the student veterans using the provided programs. By analyzing graduation and retention rates, the study will determine if student veterans are graduating and retaining at a lesser rate than traditional students. There are obvious barriers that student veterans face, and looking at graduation and retention data will give a quantitative analysis to answer the

hypotheses. Continued research will shed even more light on this subject, with the hopes

that all higher education institutions can put a practice in place to help student veterans

have the greatest amount of success possible in their journey to obtaining a higher

education.

Research Problem

Although student veterans receive generous benefits from the military service

they completed, higher education does not come without its challenges (Wheeler, 2012).

Most likely, this student population lacks the academic and study skills necessary to help

them succeed due to the length of time from when they were last in an academic setting

to when they started college (Ackerman et al., 2009). Even though the educational

benefits received by student veterans help with tuition and academic-related expenses,

they can still have financial struggles. They move from a steady paying job to looking for

employment that will comfortably support them and their family to lift the burden of their

financial responsibilities (Falkey, 2016). On top of their college education, student

veterans have priorities outside their education, such as families and full-time jobs, before

extracurricular activities or student organizations that could benefit their academic

environment. Another challenge they can face is accessing education benefits. This

process is often very tedious and has a delayed response rate.

Another cause for concern is that students are underprepared for higher education

(Ackerman et al., 2009). DiRamio et al. (2008) suggest that veterans experience

challenges with "relearning study skills, connecting with peers, and dealing with financial

concerns" (p. 97). These issues can have even more of an effect on those with a

disability. Although there is limited research available, it suggests through a cross-

sectional study that 90% of student veterans self-reported disabilities consistent with psychological, mobility, and learning disabilities (Vance & Miller, 2009). Suppose student veterans had more assistance dealing with their student population's challenges than traditional students; Would they have the same success rate as traditional students who are not experiencing the same challenges? Or do these challenges that veterans face even impact their education? Research shows that they struggle in ways others do not, and the institutions they attend can help do something about it (Wheeler, 2012).

Questions and Hypotheses

Null Hypothesis 1: There is no statistically significant difference in graduation rates between traditional students and student veterans.

Null Hypothesis 2: There is no statistically significant difference in retention rates between traditional students and student veterans.

Null Hypothesis 3: There is no statistically significant difference in retention rates between student veterans using VA programs offered by the institution and student veterans not using programs.

Null Hypothesis 4: There is no statistically significant difference in graduation rates between student veterans using the VA programs offered by the institution and student veterans not using those programs.

Research Question 1: How do the current veterans' programs being offered actually help veterans throughout their four-year degree program?

Research Question 2: Are the programs offered to student veterans helping them academically or just during the admissions process?

Research Question 3: What program, based on student veterans' perspectives,

benefits them most and why?

Research Question 4: What can universities do to support veterans' success in

higher education in addition to the veteran programs offered?

Rationale

Student veterans remain on university campuses nationwide (Green & Hayden,

2013). There are approximately 200,000 service members leaving the military each year

(Department of Veteran Affairs, 2018). These veterans seek opportunities to increase

their skills and education to better qualify for jobs once they return to civilian life. For

veterans transitioning from military life to civilian life, which includes higher education,

there can be many obstacles in front of them. This transition can be very stressful for a

veteran because there is a sudden shift from having an extremely structured life in the

military to a less structured one when they exit the military and enter college (Kirchner,

2015). Some say transitioning from military to civilian life and college life can be just as

stressful as a deployment for some veterans (Kirchner, 2015). Military service can leave

veterans with struggles other than the usual academic obstacles. Some of these struggles

are identified in the existing literature. They include health issues (both mental and

physical), financial aid issues, a sense of belonging, and discomfort around others who do

not understand their experiences (DiRamio et al., 2008; Grimes et al., 2011). While some

veterans have a hard time connecting with their traditional peers, veterans have expressed

the desire to connect with other student veterans on campus who can relate to the similar

life experiences they have gone through (DiRamio et al., 2008). As reiterated by Rumann

and Hamrick (2009), "student veterans frequently seek contacts with other veterans and

military personnel as ways to validate their experiences and aid in successfully making the transition to college" (p. 30).

This study relies heavily on Schlossberg's Transition Theory as it applies to a person's general life transitions (Ryan et al., 2011). Schlossberg et al. (1995) explained that a transition is "any event, or non-event, that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles" (p. 27). This theory can help academic advisors by providing a framework for all their students, veterans, and traditional students. As Schlossberg explained in her approach, a transition is any "event or non-event" that influences changes in relationships, roles, routines, and assumptions (as cited in Ryan et al., 2011). Schlossberg devised the 4S system to identify the potential resources someone possesses to cope with the transition (Guido-DiBrito et al., 1998). The theory also consists of four factors that influence the quality of transition. These are situation, self, support, and strategies – known as the four S's. This study will rely on Schlossberg's transition plan and how to incorporate it into a student veterans' transition.

This theory is essential when exploring barriers to a military member starting post-military life and post-secondary education. Veterans are experiencing a role change in which their relationships and routines will change. Support can be crucial to a veteran's higher education success. Studies have shown that student veterans desire to connect with other veterans on campus as a coping strategy (Ryan et al., 2011). Another study showed that the biggest challenges for student veterans were the inability to fit in with "non-veteran" students, administrative support barriers, and civilian life, which is much less structured than military life (Semer & Harmening, 2015).

This study will examine the barriers of student veterans as well as student veteran retention and graduation rates. For institutions to create new programs and ideas of how to help veterans more effectively, they must first understand the barriers they need to be helping with and if their current programs are academically beneficial. This study will explore the veteran-specific programs offered to help veterans transition into higher education and succeed. While analyzing veterans' programs and gathering data on veterans' perceptions, the researcher will also compare the retention and graduation rates of student veterans and traditional students. If a veteran does not have the support they need from the university to help them overcome their barriers, it can harm their success in obtaining a higher education. If institutions can learn student veterans' strengths, needs, and challenges. In that case, they can better support the transition they are experiencing and help them succeed in their post-secondary education (Ryan et al., 2011). Also, exploring the programs offered and including veterans' perceptions will allow the researcher to see if they genuinely benefit those using them.

Definition of Terms

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) – For the purpose of this study, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a psychiatric disorder that may occur in people who have experienced or witnessed a traumatic event such as a natural disaster, a serious accident, a terrorist act, war/combat, rape, or who have been threatened with death, sexual violence, or serious injury.

Retention Rates – For the purpose of this study, a retention rate measures the students being retained year after year by the same institution until graduation.

Student Support Services – For the purpose of this study, student support services are any services or programs provided by the institution that can be beneficial to student veterans during their academic careers.

Student Veteran – anyone on active duty, Reserve or National Guard status, retired from military service, and enrolled in post-secondary education (Brown & Gross, 2011).

Traumatic Brain Injury – For the purpose of this study, traumatic brain injury (TBI) is a form of acquired brain injury, occurs when a sudden trauma causes damage to the brain. TBI can result when the head suddenly and violently hits an object or when an object pierces the skull and enters brain tissue. Symptoms of TBI can be mild, moderate, or severe, depending on the extent of the damage to the brain.

Veterans Affairs (VA) – an executive branch department of the federal government that administers benefit programs for military veterans, their families, and survivors (Department of Veteran Affairs, n.d.b)

Veteran – an individual who served active duty in the United States Armed Forces and received an honorable discharge (Department of Veteran Affairs, n.d.b)

Veteran-friendly Institution – For the purpose of this study, it is an institution that has a designated veteran's affairs office with personnel that can assist veterans fully with all of their questions regarding enrollment and financial aid, including the GI Bill, and provide additional support for their transition into higher education.

Study Limitations

According to Ross and Bibler Zaidi (2019), every study has limitations. Limitations are "weaknesses in the research design that may influence outcomes and conclusions of the research" (p. 261). Creswell (2005) defined limitations as "potential weaknesses or problems with the study identified by the researcher" (p. 198). The researcher must include the limitations of the study. Conducting a study with a sample size of 28 obtained from a single university's student veteran population brings limitations to the study. For this study, the survey was entirely voluntary with no incentive. Although the researcher obtained more responses than initially expected, the response rate was still shallow compared to the number of students who received the survey. The survey responses could be skewed because the student veterans completing the survey are still enrolled and are not the perceptions of student veterans who have stopped attending. According to Griffin and Gilbert (2015), "individuals who choose to participate and share their experiences and ideas could have stronger positive or negative experiences, which should be noted when interpreting the findings" (p. 80). Due to the limited sample size, a significant concern is the limited generalizability of the findings; the study's results may not be applicable beyond the specific university studied, which could cause a failure to represent a diversity of backgrounds and experiences among student veterans across various higher education institutions. Future research can address this limitation by widening the number of institutions included in the study. Another limitation of this study was the limited response rate. While the veteran's affairs representative sent the surveys to each student veteran's university email, it was entirely voluntary. Since only one institution was used in this study, the results of the surveys

could be skewed. This is because when using one institution, the resources and support

analyzed could differ significantly from one institution to another. If other institutions

had been included in this study, it could have given a greater indication of proper and

beneficial support for student veterans.

Furthermore, the timing of when students received the survey was during summer

break. This timing likely decreased the number of responses that the researcher received.

Because of the summer semester, some students are engaged in off-campus activities and

may not check their email during this time.

Summary

This study explored the challenges within the transition process for student

veterans who had exited the military and were back into civilian life while enrolled in a

four-year private university. The study also explored student veteran retention and

graduation rates for this student population against those of traditional students to see if

the transition impacted student veterans' long-term success. The findings of this study

provide higher education institutions, faculty, and staff with information regarding the

transition that student veterans experience during their reintegration into civilian life. The

review of the literature is displayed in Chapter Two. The methodology, participants, and

data collection are in Chapter Three. Chapter Four displays the results and interpretations

of the quantitative and qualitative portions of the study, while Chapter Five discusses the

findings and recommendations based on the data collected.

Chapter Two: Review of Literature

Introduction

Since World War I, the United States Armed Forces have recognized and supported higher education and training. Higher education institutions continue to see increases in the enrollment of student veterans. As of 2016, there were 4.2 million Post-9/11 veterans, with the Department of Veterans Affairs predicting nearly 5.1 million by 2021, a 22% increase (National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics, 2018). Of those 4.2 million veterans, over 925,000 have used their education benefits (O'Connor et al., 2017). Due to the significant increase in student veterans, institutions must understand their needs and experiences to assist them in their higher education transition.

Joining the Military

The Western norm for joining the military is voluntary recruitment, and little is known about an individual's reason for joining (Krebs & Ralston, 2022). A combination of factors can result in the motivation to join the military. Although economic factors play a role in recruits to the armed forces, a 2018 survey reported that roughly half the sample joined the military due to patriotism (Krebs & Ralston, 2022). Some service members specified they wanted to fulfill their duty after the 9/11 terrorist attacks (Ackerman et al., 2009). A survey completed in 2002 asked two infantry battalions what impacted their decision to join the Army. Nearly 55% said it was for patriotism or to serve their country. That left the other 45% of respondents stating that benefits, including educational benefits, a lack of better options, or a significant life change, such as divorce and political beliefs, are what helped them decide to join (Krebs & Ralston, 2022). Other motivations included generations of military service, decisions to be a soldier in grade

school, and steady pay (Ackerman et al., 2009). When joining the military, 90% of

service members entered the military without a bachelor's degree (Ryan et al., 2011).

History and Background of Veterans' Educational Benefits

Historically, veterans returning from war have been provided a form of tuition

reimbursement as a way to re-enter the workforce with some form of trade or traditional

education. As early as 1636, the English colonies in North America provided pensions for

disabled veterans. By 1818, a pension was granted to all veterans, not just the disabled

(Department of Veteran Affairs, n.d.b). Veterans' rights and educational benefits date

back to World War I when the government needed to help veterans transition back into

society as civilians (Jolly, 2013). The academic benefits offered to veterans allowed them

to attend a college they otherwise would not have due to the high tuition and educational

expenses. Veterans Educational Benefits, also known as the GI Bill of Rights, is one of

the most significant pieces of legislation established by the United States Government. It

impacted the United States politically, socially, and economically (Department of

Veteran Affairs, n.d.b).

Creation of Veterans' Bureau

As the United States entered World War I in 1917, Congress established a new

system of veterans' benefits. These benefits included programs for disability

compensation, insurance for service personnel and veterans, and vocational rehabilitation

for people with disabilities (Department of Veteran Affairs, n.d.b). Shortly after World

War I, the American Legion was founded in 1919 and became a driving force behind the

GI Bill (American Legion, n.d.). It was created to advocate for veterans' services and

rights and was influential in developing the Veterans Administration (VA). By 1920,

there were three agencies administering veterans' benefits. They comprised the

independent Veterans Bureau, the Bureau of Pensions of the Interior Department, and the

National Home for Disabled Volunteer Soldiers. In 1921, Congress consolidated all

veterans programs these three agencies managed into the Veterans Bureau. The first

director of the Veterans Bureau was Col. Charles R. Forbes. He later served a prison

sentence after being relieved of his duties for conspiracy to defraud the government

(Department of Veteran Affairs, n.d.b). The second director appointed to the Veterans

Bureau was Brigadier General Frank T. Hines, who was appointed in March of 1923. He

worked closely with Congress to reform the laws governing the Veterans Bureau. In

1924, Hines was able to reorganize the Veterans Bureau into six services. These included

medical and rehabilitation, claims and insurance, finance, supply, planning, and control.

As a result of the reorganization, the Veterans Bureau had 73 subdistrict offices

responsible for different aspects of the Veterans Bureau services. The support services

include beneficiaries and claimants, supervising vocational training, administering

outpatient medical care, and giving physical exams (Department of Veteran Affairs,

n.d.b).

Creation of Veterans' Affairs

President Hoover's 1929 State of the Union address proposed the consolidation of

the agencies administering veterans' benefits. The following year, Congress united three

bureaus – the previously independent Veterans' Bureau, the Bureau of Pensions of the

Interior Department, and the National Homes for Disabled Volunteer Soldiers. President

Hoover established the Veterans Administration (VA) when he signed the executive

order on July 21, 1930 (Department of Veteran Affairs, n.d.b). This new agency was

responsible for all veteran services, including medical services, disability compensation,

life insurance, bonus certificates, and retirement payments. The VA grew over the next

decade, including the increase of hospitals from 64 to 91, nearly doubling the number of

beds (Department of Veteran Affairs, n.d.b).

World War I and the Bonus Marchers

The origins of the G.I. Bill lie with World War I. Veterans of World War I did not

have a smooth transition back into civilian life once the war was over (Jolly, 2013).

Despite government programs' help, the labor market became flooded with an influx of

men looking for employment, and many veterans struggled financially (Department of

Veteran Affairs, n.d.b). The World War Adjustment Compensation Act, more commonly

known as the Bonus Act of 1924, was passed into legislation by Congress, which pledged

a bonus to veterans based on the number of days served. Veterans would receive a dollar

for every day they served and a dollar and twenty-five cents for every day they served

overseas. Unfortunately for the veterans, this bonus would not pay out for another 20

years until 1945 (Department of Veteran Affairs, n.d.b). This timeframe was far too late

to help many veterans struggling financially after the war. The Great Depression caused

an economic crisis that triggered veterans to protest, demanding the money be paid

immediately.

With the Depression worsening, veterans became increasingly impatient waiting

for their bonuses, and the Bonus March resulted. In March 1932, a small group of

veterans from Oregon began marching to Washington, D.C., to demand payment

(Department of Veteran Affairs, n.d.b). As word spread, others began marching, and by

mid-1932, it resulted in at least 20,000 veterans marching on the capital in Washington

D.C., demanding their bonuses (Department of Veteran Affairs, n.d.b). Health officials

grew very concerned about the spread of disease because the marchers took shelter

wherever they could. There were also no sanitation facilities, so the living conditions

deteriorated quickly (Department of Veteran Affairs, n.d.b).

    The government would still not compromise; President Hoover sent the military

to suppress the protests and disruption. This decision would cause bitter clashes between

soldiers and veterans. No one fired shots, but bayonets, bricks, and clubs injured several.

The veterans dispersed, and the bonus march ended (Department of Veteran Affairs,

n.d.b). This confrontation would be marked as one of the most significant times of unrest

at the United States Capitol in U.S. history and was a vital turning point in the movement

for veteran's rights (Department of Veteran Affairs, n.d.b).

    When President Franklin D. Roosevelt came into office in March of 1933, he

persuaded Congress to pass the Economy Act of 1933 in response to the Great

Depression. This Act aimed to reduce the federal deficit of the United States. It cut

government employees' salaries and reduced veterans' benefits by 50% (Department of

Veteran Affairs, n.d.b). Also created in 1933, the Board of Veterans' Appeals had the

authority to hear appeals on benefits decisions. The Secretary of Veterans Affairs

appoints members of the Board of Appeals with final approval from the President of the

United States (Department of Veteran Affairs, n.d.b). By 1935, the President's executive

order to establish benefits expired and Congress reenacted most of the laws that had been

in effect before the order (Department of Veteran Affairs, n.d.b).

Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944

With the return of millions of veterans from World War II, the United States government had a chance to redeem itself by ensuring veterans would benefit from the service to their country. The first draft of the GI Bill is credited to be the work of Harry W. Colmery, the former Republican National Chairman and the former national commander of the American Legion (Department of Veteran Affairs, n.d.b). The Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, better known as the G.I. Bill of Rights, was passed into legislation during President Franklin D. Roosevelt's term during World War II (Jolly, 2013). This Act dramatically changed veterans' benefits for the better. The primary purpose of this bill was to provide unemployment compensation, home loans, training, and education to veterans returning from World War II (Jolly, 2013). The education benefits portion of the bill was to enhance job skills, achieve career goals, and facilitate a successful transition back into civilian life (López et al., 2016). However, this bill was very controversial and barely made it into legislation, due to members of the House and Senate deliberating provisions of the bill, primarily the unemployment provision (Department of Veteran Affairs, n.d.b). Despite the differences, all members agreed that the veterans deserve benefits in exchange for their service to the country. President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed the bill into law on June 22, 1944 (Department of Veteran Affairs, n.d.b). The VA was now responsible for education and training, loans for farms, businesses, homes, and unemployment pay (Department of Veteran Affairs, n.d.b). Medical care was provided as part of the GI Bill.

When the Act was signed into legislation by President Franklin D. Roosevelt, no one knew what type of effect it would have on the higher education industry. The G.I.

Bill had a massive impact on millions of veterans and their families within the first year

of its signing into law (Jolly, 2013). It dramatically increased enrollment at colleges and

universities across the United States. By 1947, veterans accounted for nearly half of the

students enrolled in college. By 1956, almost 10 million veterans received G.I. Bill

benefits (Department of Veteran Affairs, n.d.b). Although different revisions have passed

through legislation, nearly 75 years later, the GI Bill is still helping veterans with

education benefits.

Montgomery GI Bill

In 1984, Mississippi Representative Gillespie V. "Sonny" Montgomery proposed

to make the GI Bill permanent (Department of Veteran Affairs, 2011). This bill would

ensure that the veterans of the Vietnam War would also receive benefits to obtain post-

secondary education. It was a revamped version of the GI Bill known as the Montgomery

GI Bill (MGIB; Department of Veteran Affairs, 2011). The Montgomery GI Bill

continued offering education benefits to military service members. It was still for service

members only; spouses and dependents did not receive this benefit (Department of

Veteran Affairs, 2011). A few years after the Montgomery GI Bill, the Department of

Veterans Affairs Act of 1988 changed to the Veterans Administration, an independent

government agency, into a Cabinet-level department. It was signed into law by President

Ronald Reagan on October 25, 1988, and enacted during George H. W. Bush's first term

in office (Department of Veteran Affairs, 2011).

Post 9/11 GI Bill

In 2009, the Post 9/11 GI Bill was passed into law. It dramatically increased the

veterans' benefits by covering 100% of "in-state tuition" at the most expensive public

institution in the veteran's state of residency. It also included a monthly housing stipend

based on the geographical region of the college and $1,000 annually for books

(Schiavone & Gentry, 2014). The new bill nearly doubled student enrollment (López et

al., 2016). With the new legislation, President Obama gave a speech on August 3, 2009,

at the launch of the Post 9/11 GI Bill, where he stated in his speech:

> The contributions that our servicemen and women can make to this nation do not
>
> end when they take off that uniform. We owe a debt to all who serve. And when
>
> we repay that debt to those bravest Americans among us, then we are investing in
>
> our future – not just their future, but also the future of our own country (Obama,
>
> 2009).

The GI Bill had several beneficial changes for veterans. Although the eligibility

term stayed the same at 36 months, the benefits would now match 100% of tuition instead

of a specific monthly benefit amount. The expiration of benefits also increased by five

years. A housing stipend and book allowance were also included in the Post 9/11 GI Bill

(Department of Veteran Affairs, 2012). Other additions to the Post-9/11 GI Bill were

tutoring allowances, relocation (if a student had to move from a highly rural area to

attend school), and on-the-job and apprenticeship training (Department of Veterans

Affairs, 2012). Veterans could also transfer the benefits to a dependent (spouse or child)

if they will not use them, generally under the agreement to serve four more years

(Department of Veterans Affairs, 2012).

Forever GI Bill

On August 16, 2017, President Trump signed the Harry W. Colmery Veterans

Education Assistance Act of 2017 into law. This legislation is also known as the Forever

GI Bill. The Department of Veterans Affairs has indicated that the Forever GI Bill

expands and enhances education benefits for veterans and their families (Department of

Veteran Affairs, n.d.b). A few of the changes to the bill included school closure eligibility

restoration, priority enrollment, Reserve Education Assistance Program (REAP), work-

study expansion, use of GI Bill at technical school and non-Institutions of Higher

Learning, DOD-VA housing allowance, increases in the amount of survivor and

dependents educational assistance, and a nine-month extension of benefits if enrolled in a

STEM program (Department of Veteran Affairs, n.d.b).

Theoretical Framework

Schlossberg's first record of her transition theory was seen in 1965. She presented

a paper to The Training Counselor of Adults, outlining her theory's framework. She

initially wanted to understand adult men's experiences when wishing to change careers.

She later extended her ideas regarding her transition theory, which she defined as a time

"of disequilibrium in which a person has to work out new ways of handling problems"

(Killam & Degges-White, 2017, p.29). Transition either has a positive or negative effect

on the individuals experiencing the transition, and the effects can differ for the same

person in different transitions. Among other researchers, Schlossberg began testing her

transition model, and the results assisted Dr. Schlossberg in fine-tuning her theory. As

she continued fine-tuning her model, she gave attention to other elements that would be

important for those to understand when helping veterans with their transitions. These

elements included types of transitions, which will be discussed later in this paper, as well

as the effect the transition would have on an individual's role, relationships, assumptions,

and routines.

Schlossberg's (1984) Transition Theory and Tinto's (1993) Interactionalist

Theory provided a framework for this study. Since student veterans have different

experiences before attending a university, it is essential to understand this experience for

student veterans to have a successful transition. Schlossberg et al. (1995) define transition

as "any event, or nonevent, that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions,

and roles" (p. 27). The Transition Theory has provided a "framework that would facilitate

an understanding of adults in transition" (Guido-DiBrito et al., 1998, p. 108). It is

categorized as a psychosocial theory of adult development that focuses on significant

transitional disruptions adults face while recognizing that not all of life's issues are

equally important. The transition theory identifies three types of transitions: anticipated,

non-anticipated, and nonevents (Akerman et al., 2009). Sargent and Schlossberg (1988)

also asserted that "people in transition are often preoccupied and a little confused" (p.

59). This assertion is understandable because when the transition is regarding a life-

altering change, the anticipated transition is expected to occur. This transition is often

planned and said to be a part of life's natural cycle, entirely predictable. Examples of the

anticipated transitions can range from various life events, such as graduating college,

gaining employment, getting married, and starting a family. The timing of anticipated

transitions can impact the learning potential. If the transition arises close to the expected

time, more support may be available to the individual to help them work through it

(Schlossberg et al., 1995).

For example, suppose an individual gets married and has children simultaneously

as others in their social circle. In that case, they are provided more support through

common understandings than if they were the only ones in their social group experiencing that transition.

A second type of transition an individual can experience is an unanticipated transition. These transitions are events that are not expected and do not follow any particular timeline in the individual's life cycle. Examples of an unanticipated transition can include an illness, job loss, loss of a loved one, or dissolution of marriage. Unanticipated transitions can be much more stressful than anticipated transitions. Still, the potential for growth, development and learning may be much greater while experiencing than having an anticipated transition (Schlossberg et al., 1995).

Nonevent transitions are transitions that an individual expects to occur but does not. Examples of non-event transitions include not having children when the individual always anticipated becoming a parent. Another example is not being able to retire at the age an individual wanted due to finances. There are also four types of non-events transitions: personal, ripple, resultant, and delayed. A personal nonevent is an event one expects to occur but does not. As stated previously, not becoming a parent like planned is an example of a personal nonevent. The second type is a ripple nonevent, felt when an event of someone close happens in that individual's life (Schlossberg et al., 1995).

An example of this is a spouse not getting a job promotion. The resultant nonevent is the third type caused by a separate event. For example, if an individual's child moves back into their home due to financial difficulties. Delayed nonevents are the last type of nonevent and are events that did not occur when expected but will occur later. Having a child later in life is considered a delayed nonevent (Schlossberg et al., 1995).

As Patton et al. (2016) stated, "Only when an event is likely to occur but fails to do so does it qualify as a nonevent" (p. 215).

Context and impact are essential definitions when learning about Schlossberg's transition theory. Context is defined by an individual's relationship to a transition, which could be their transition or someone else's. It also applies to the transition setting: work or a personal relationship. Impact refers to the rate at which the transition changes an individual's daily life. Both positive and negative transitions produce stress for an individual. When multiple transitions are involved, this can compound more stress, which can also depend on the ratio of assets to liabilities the individual has at the time of the transitions (Schlossberg et al., 1995). According to Schlossberg et al. (1995), "the ratio of assets to liabilities helps to explain why different individuals react differently to the same type of transition and why the same person reacts differently at different times" (p. 57).

Nancy Schlossberg developed the "Four S's" of transition within her transition theory. The theory begins with evaluating the situation that is causing the transition. These result within the four significant factors influencing an individual's ability to cope with the occurring transitions. These are situation, self, support, and strategies. The effectiveness of the individual is dependent on the resources they have in the four areas. An individual's assessment of the transition will be an essential factor in their coping process. During a transition, the individual will perform a primary and secondary assessment, which, in turn, will determine their coping ability. The immediate assessment is the individual's perspective on the transition as positive, negative, or irrelevant. Then, the secondary assessment is the individual's self-assessment of the availability of resources that will allow them to cope with the transition. Both of these assessments are

expected to change as the transition process continues, but the four S's provide a more

precise context for the assessment process (Schlossberg et al., 1995)

Institutions can help students through the transition by a) allowing the student

veterans to achieve a greater sense of control regarding their academic transition

(situation); b) developing intellectual drive, skills, and identity (self); c) building,

identifying, maintaining, and utilizing support networks (support); and d) develop and

employ practical coping skills (strategies). Schlossberg's transition theory suggests that

having access to these four types of resources can create better and easier transitions.

These four resources (the four S's of Schlossberg's transition model) include support,

strategies, self, and situation (Griffin & Gilbert, 2015). The strengths and weaknesses in

each of these categories can either facilitate or hinder the successful transition of a

student veteran (Ryan et al., 2011). These factors are vital to understanding how student

veterans manage the transition, which can be more significant than the actual stages of

the transition (Wheeler, 2012). The goal of an institution using Schlossberg's Transition

Theory is to facilitate a student veteran's academic success.

The first "S" is situation. Situation has several essential factors. According to

Patton et al. (2016), these factors include:

"Trigger – What precipitated the transition?

Timing – Is the transition considered "on-time" or "off-time" in terms of one's

social clock, and is the transition viewed as happening at a "good" time or

a "bad" time?

Control – What does the individual perceive as being within their control? (for

example, the transition itself; one's reaction to it)?

Role Change – Is a role change involved, and if so, is it viewed as a gain or a

loss?

Duration – Is the transition seen as permanent, temporary, or uncertain?

Previous Experience with a similar transition – How effectively did one cope,

and what are implications for the current transition?

Concurrent Stress – Are multiple sources of stress present?

Assessment – Who or what is seen as responsible for the transition, and how is the

individual's behavior affected by this person?" (p. 216-217).

To further explain, situations consist of the trigger for the transition, the timing,

factors that an individual can control, any role changes associated with the transition, and

the individual's feelings regarding the transition. A trigger can be external but it can have

internal consequences. For example, a milestone birthday is external, but the internal

consequence can be the awareness that time is running out (Schlossberg et al., 1995).

When understanding the timing of the transition, it is important to understand that events

or non-events can happen at any time, good or bad. The timing of the transition can make

the transition easier or more challenging (Schlossberg et al., 1995). Control is based on

the individual's self-control over the transition. Some transitions are deliberately made,

while others are forced upon individuals. Even with some transitions that are out of the

individual's control, the response to them is controlled by the individual (Schlossberg et

al., 1995). Role change is not always part of a transition, but it can be stressful when it is.

A role change can create new expectations or norms for the individual, making the

transition more difficult (Schlossberg et al., 1995). The duration of a transition will

directly impact the ease of the transition. If it is a temporary inconvenience, it will be

easier than if a transition causes a permanent inconvenience or stress. Previous

experience can also have an impact on the transition. If an individual has gone through a

similar transition, the previous outcome (good or bad) can affect the outcome of the new

transition. The concurrent stress can also impact the transition. If the transition is causing

stress from multiple angles, it may be more challenging to get through the transition

(Schlossberg et al., 1995).

Self is the second factor in the four S's. Since it has been indicated that an

individual's experiences are attached by meaning and purpose, student development

practitioners have to understand the transition process through the eyes of the student

(Killam & Degges-White, 2017). Self is classified into two categories, the first being

personal and demographic characteristics. These characteristics are how a person views

various aspects of life (Killam & Degges-White, 2017). Personal and demographic

characteristics may include socioeconomic status, age, gender, state of health, stage of

life, and culture or ethnicity. The second characteristic is psychological resources or an

individual's aid in coping with the transition. Psychological resources can include the

following: "ego development; outlook, in particular optimism and self-efficacy;

commitment and values; and spirituality and resiliency" (Killam & Degges-White, 2017,

pg. 39). Self-addresses how "both demographic and personal characteristics are essential

as filters and mediate whether or not an individual's life will be altered in ways basic to

the particular person. As an individual's social class, sex, age, life stage, and health all

bear on their options – perceived and real – these variables need to be explored"

(Schlossberg et al., 1995, p. 62).

Support is the third S of Schlossberg's theory's four Ss. It is further explained as

two circles around the individual. The first is "role dependent, irrespective of roles," and

the second circle is represented as the group that is "somewhat role dependent, the

support that is most likely to change" (Schlossberg et al., 1995, p. 68). Support is critical

to a person's everyday life, especially when a transition occurs. It is also important to

understand that men and women may experience support differently. Also, age can factor

in what types of support individuals lean toward more. Either way, individuals need a

robust, healthy support system to support them mentally and physically. Types, functions,

and measurements are the three facets that comprise support. It is also important to

remember that support in this specific model refers to social support, which is identified

into four types. These types are intimate relationships, family units, networks of friends,

and institutions/communities. The functions that serve as support are honest feedback,

affirmation, aid, and affect. Support is measured by the stable supports, supports that are

most likely to change, and role-dependent supports of the individual (Killam & Degges-

White, 2017, pg. 39).

Lastly, the fourth S is strategies. Nancy Schlossberg described strategy as "the

coping resources individuals bring to transition – in other words, how well people

negotiate transitions while, simultaneously, protecting themselves psychologically"

(Killam & Degges-White, 2017, pg. 39). Coping will fall into three known methods

which are as follows: individuals that modify the situation, individuals that control the

meaning of the problem, and individuals that aid in managing the stress the transition has

caused. Individuals who can cope effectively are able to use all three methods" (Killam &

Degges-White, 2017, pg. 39). Strategies refer to the coping mechanism that individuals

use to ease the stress of their transition. These coping mechanisms include stress

management, decision-making skills, and self-advocacy (Wheeler, 2012.) The three types

of coping mechanisms distinguished are responses by modifying the situation, controlling

the meaning of the problem, and stress management after the problem has occurred

(Schlossberg et al., 1995, p. 70).

Since these four factors are so dynamic, any changes in one of the four factors can

contribute to the improvement of another S factor. For example, if a student veteran

develops better study skills (strategy), it can contribute to the student gaining a greater

sense of self-confidence (self) (Ryan et al., 2011). Schlossberg (1995) notes that the two

areas of the self-factor that can affect transitions are demographic characteristics and

psychological resources. Support can come in various forms, from friends and family to

institutions and communities. Academic advisors are an excellent tool for students when

developing academic strategies for success (Ryan et al., 2011). Schlossberg (2011) also

noted:

> Transitions alter our lives—our roles, relationships, routines, and assumptions [...]
>
> It is not the transitions *per se* that are critical, but how much it changes one's
>
> roles, relationships, routines, and assumptions. The bigger the change, the greater
>
> the potential impact and the longer it may take to incorporate the transition and
>
> move on (p. 159).

While the transition may have happened due to one single event, the process in

which an individual will deal with that transition continues over time. Individuals move

into an integration of the transition that occurred from the preoccupation of the transition. The time needed to become integrated into the transition varies by individual. Transition can lead to growth or decline, and the individual experiencing the transition may be hesitant (Schlossberg et al., 1995).

Another helpful concept framework from Schlossberg and her colleagues, Chickering and Lynch (1989), was a model called Moving In, Moving Through, and Moving Out. This model was based on Schlossberg's Transition Theory, and it can help identify the factors that allow individuals to cope with transition and integration into their new life (Ackerman et al., 2009). DaRamio et al. (2008) theorized that student veterans cope with their transition by moving into their new environment. Moving through begins when the new environment is understood, and they can balance their new environment. Moving out is when the transition has ended, and the individual completes their transition and can look forward to the future and new transitions (Wheeler, 2012). When progressing through the three phases, individuals can evaluate each transition over time, determine the likely positive or negative outcomes, and develop an inventory of resources available to help manage change (Akerman et al., 2009). Wheeler (2012) indicated that veterans who had progressed to the final stage of moving out did so by balancing the 4S model.

Like any theory, Schlossberg's Transition Theory has benefits and disadvantages. One of her theory's greatest strengths is its application to many individuals. Although the theory was initially intended for adult males transitioning into new jobs, it evolved into an excellent model to help higher education administrators facilitate an understanding of transition and actions that someone can take. The theory was developed by recognizing,

extracting, and incorporating core ideas from various sources. This theory's comprehensive framework makes it practical and operationally sound (Killam & Degges-White, 2017). Schlossberg developed this theory from various writings, which are the most important thoughts and ideas, and she added her insights and insights from others to create a model theory that provides a solid framework for functionality in higher education. The functionality of Schlossberg's Transition Theory makes it possible to practice and is responsive to commonalities and peculiarities (Killam & Degges-White, 2017).

Another advantage of the theory is that Nancy Schlossberg is open to criticism and has been willing to revise and expand her theory since she developed it. This allows a practical resource for administration when assisting adult learners in the mists of transitions and change. This theory's structure emphasizes understanding the student's perspective of the situation and the specifics of the transition. This can be a helpful tool for higher education administrators when dealing with students who are transitioning and can also help with the incorporation of cultural as well as individual differences (Killam & Degges-White, 2017). Lastly, this theory is easily comprehendible, even for students. If it makes sense to students, they may be able to identify their transitions and use tools to move through them more manageably.

Numerous applications have supported the unitality of this transition theory, and it shows in the amount of student affairs literature in which it has appeared. Schlossberg's theory cannot only be used in working with adult learners, which is its original audience, but can also be helpful when working with traditional-aged students. Many situations happen in an individual's life when moving away from home and starting college. These

different scenarios show that the theory can be applied to any adult age, whether it is 18 or if the individual is in their 20s, 30s, 40s, or even older. For older students, transitions can be career changes while they are still in college or life changes such as getting married or starting a family. The theory is easily linked to outcomes regarding student learning. Even though it was developed originally for adult learners in transition, it can be easily adjustable for students at a post-secondary education level.

Tinto's Model of Student Departure is another theory that will give insight into this study. Vincent Tinto (1993) identified three primary sources related to student departure. They are academic difficulties, the inability to achieve their educational and career goals, and their failure to integrate into the institution's intellectual and social life of the institution. Tinto believed that student involvement was critical in positive academic outcomes for higher education students and that there was a need to understand further the relationship between student involvement and its impact on student persistence (Milem & Berger, 1997). Tinto stated:

> There appears to be an important link between learning and persistence that arises from the interplay of involvement and the quality of student effort. Involvement with one's peers and with the faculty, both inside and outside the classroom, is itself positively related to the quality of student effort and in turn to both learning and persistence (Tinto, 1993, p. 71).

He believed that the more students learn, the more likely they will have a positive academic outcome. Tinto claimed that "the process students of becoming integrated with the academic and social systems starts when a student successfully navigates through the states of separation, transition, and incorporation" (Milem and Berger, 1997, p. 388).

Tinto (2017) noted that student retention has two different perspectives, one from the student and one from the institution (p. 254). He said the "view of student retention has been shaped by theories that view student retention through the lens of institutional action and ask what institutions can do to retain their students. Students, however, do not seek to be retained. They seek to persist" (Tinto, 2017, p. 254). While these two perspectives are related, they differ. While the institution's interest is to increase the number of students graduating, the student's interest is to earn a degree, with no regard to the institution it is earned from. This idea could differ slightly among students who attend more prestigious universities.

Tinto (2006) noted that students must want to persist even in the face of challenges that they will encounter. The goal is finishing the degree; however, that is not a sufficient condition behind the motivation (Tinto, 2017). Students must be motivated, which can be strengthened or weakened based on the experiences the students have. Self-efficacy, a sense of belonging, and the perception of the curriculum are the driving factors behind motivation. Self-efficacy is an individual's belief in themselves and their ability to succeed in a particular situation or at a specific task. Self-efficacy is learned over time, and it is not something that is inherited. It also does not mean that just because an individual believes they can complete one task does not mean they believe they can complete all tasks (Tinto, 2017). Students need to have a sense of belonging and see themselves as a member of the community. If students feel out of place, without a sense of belonging, they can lose the motivation to persist. Having a community of peers and interactions with staff and faculty can give the students a sense of belonging. Lastly, the student's perception of the curriculum can add value to their motivation, increasing

persistence. The relevance and quality of the curriculum is essential. To justify their time

and effort, students need to feel that the materials they need to learn are of sufficient
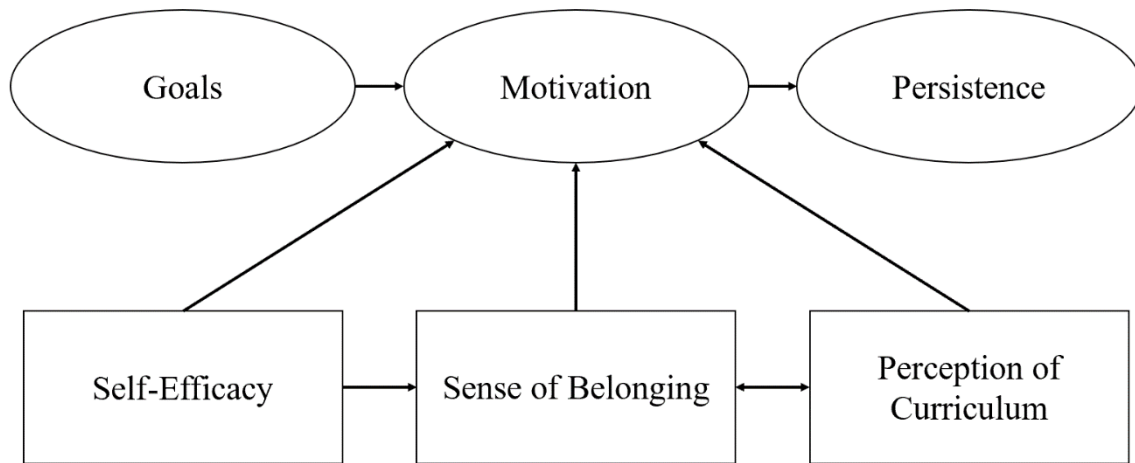
quality. Students' motivation will often decline if the content is perceived as irrelevant

and low-quality (Tinto, 2017).

Figure 1. A model of student motivation and persistence.

Separation starts with the student's capacity to separate themselves from the

norms of past communities, such as old friends, family members, and other community

ties. Once the student has successfully separated themselves, they can move into the

transitional stage. Within this process, they find themselves separated from their past

norms but have yet to adopt new norms and behaviors in their new environment.

Incorporation happens when students adopt their academic institution's norms and

behavioral patterns (Milem & Berger, 1997.) The student's ability to integrate into an

institution's social and academic system will ultimately define a student's commitment

and level of persistence. The question that is posed is, "What processes allow students to

successfully navigate the stage of transition and to enter the stage of incorporation?"

(Milem & Berger, 1997, p. 389)

Student Veterans Transition into Higher Education

The student veteran population is a unique group with different needs than other adult student populations. Higher education institutions require a strong understanding of student veterans' needs and a commitment to serve those needs (Wheeler, 2012). Due to the slim and dated amount of scholarly literature, there is inadequate knowledge about what expectations and experiences student veterans will bring to campus. Most of the literature dates back to the original GI Bill of 1944. Student veterans' transitions can be jarring. It affects their entire life and can be disorienting and uncomfortable. Past experiences of their military service can significantly impact their transition into higher education. In a survey of 1,853 veterans, 44% of veterans who served since the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, said they had difficulty adjusting to civilian life. These issues stem from family and personal life, anger issues, post-traumatic stress disorder, traumatic brain injuries, and loss of interest in daily activities (Morin, 2011). As veterans enroll in colleges and universities, it is understandable that they require additional support services (Ackerman et al., 2009).

In the past, the time an individual spent at a college or university was a vital transitional as well as a developmental transition phase for young people (Astin, 1985; Chickering & Schlossberg, 1995). Much of the existing literature surrounding higher education focuses on the transition into the first year of college and uses student development models and theory. Schlossberg's transition theory (Schlossberg et al., 1995) centers on how adults manage the transitions they experience. Psychology and counseling practices are deeply ingrained into Schlossberg's theory of transition (Jenner, 2017). According to Griffin & Gilbert (2015), initiating a student veteran organization on

campus may not be the complete answer to meeting the needs of student veterans.

Addressing student veterans' needs requires an approach that addresses each area of

transition, including reaching out to student veterans who are reluctant to self-identify.

Comprehensive efforts must be made to provide students with the resources that will

most successfully facilitate transitions.

Transitioning out of the military and into higher education causes significant

changes in a veteran's life. These changes can be lifestyle changes, loss of social support

systems, lack of healthcare, loss of employment, and integration into a civilian job. Dill

and Henley (1998) reported that non-traditional students who receive solid support from

family or a significant other could better cope more easily with the stress of their

transition and enjoy success in different life roles. This support can also come from

fellow veterans, peers, and faculty members (Ryan et al., 2011). Not only do these

adjustments make the transition out of the military complex, but adding to that, the

transition into higher education makes it that much more taxing. Studies have shown that

students transitioning into higher education have an increasingly more challenging time

when the adult learner has taken a break from academic studies (Falkey, 2016). The

perception of whether the transition is temporary or permanent can influence the

individual's hopefulness and sense of control over it (Ryan et al., 2011). Schlossberg et

al. (1995) stated that "the expected transition affects the ease or difficulty of assimilating

the transition. A change that is regarded as permanent will be perceived differently from

one that is viewed as temporary" (p. 56).

Student Veteran Characteristics

Although some studies exist, little attention has been given to student veterans'

characteristics within the college environment. Much less is known about how student

veterans experience college than their non-veteran peers (Durdella & Kim, 2012).

Furthermore, we do not understand how being a veteran can affect the students' end

result, specifically concerning their sense of belonging in the college environment and

GPA. Understanding who student veterans are, their strengths and weaknesses, and how

their GPA can be affected by being a non-traditional student is an even more pressing

matter when nearly 6% of all undergraduate students are student veterans. That number

continues to rise as more service members transition from the military. As more and more

veterans enroll in higher education, there is a great need to understand their

characteristics and how their veteran status impacts their college experience and

outcomes (Durdella & Kim, 2012).

In a study by Gregg et al. (2016), veteran students said that the military principles

of accountability and discipline helped them in their academic careers. Student veterans

are non-traditional students. Ross-Gordon (2011) defines non-traditional students as

"adults beginning or continuing their enrollment as college students at a later-than-typical

age" (p. 26). Kenner and Weinereman's (2011) definition of a non-traditional student is

"an entry-level adult learner who is between the ages of 25 and 50, have a high school

diploma or a GED, are financially independent and have one semester or less of college-

level coursework" (p. 88). According to Falkey (2016), the National Center for

Educational Statistics (NCES) has defined traditional students:

As those students who meet one or more of the following criteria: college entry

was delayed after high school by one or more years, single parents, do not have a

high school diploma, students attending college part-time, or 25 years of age or

older (p. 29).

Though not all veterans have been in combat, many have. Veterans' experiences

during combat can affect all aspects of their lives, including going to college. A study by

Ackerman et al. (2009) observed that veterans commented that combat gave them self-

discipline, time management, and goal setting, among other skills. One student veteran

said, "There are so many things you can get from the military to help you out as a college

student" (p. 7). Based on interviews conducted with student veterans, the study revealed

that they gain a wealth of global awareness and maturity from their military service,

which is a great asset in their college career (Schiavone & Gentry, 2014). Dartmouth

College's former President, a Marine Corps veteran, said that universities should be

highly supportive of having veterans on campus. He stated, "A student who has a gunshot

wound from a battle in Fallujah is going to bring something intangible to any classroom

discussion" (Falkey, 2016, p. 31).

Challenges Student Veterans Face

Veterans often deal with many stressors when exiting the military and

transitioning into civilian life. Adding college to the transition can make it especially hard

when so many routine things are in the process of changing. Since veterans are often

years older than traditional college students, they are further in their lives, and many have

full-time jobs and families to support. This age gap can make full-time enrollment

increasingly more challenging, which could take a toll on the timeliness of graduation.

Veterans enrolled in post-secondary education often take longer to graduate than traditional-aged students (Gregg et al., 2016). Another contributing factor is how well the institution they are enrolled in knows the student veteran population's academic needs.

Student Veteran Challenges in Higher Education

Veterans ending their military service and starting civilian life can face many challenges (Wheeler, 2012). Veterans' benefits can be confusing and difficult to navigate, which can cause more frustration if colleges and universities do not have trained staff to help veterans through the process. Although the Post-9/11 GI Bill provides generous education benefits, student veterans can experience many challenges during their educational careers. Some of these challenges include a lack of academic/study skills (Ackerman et al., 2009), lack of continuity in education, psychological issues, physical issues, and social isolation. Another issue that can be problematic is the financial aspect of higher education, as well as veterans sometimes having other financial responsibilities (Falkey, 2016). There is also the reality that student veterans who, on top of their college education, have priorities such as families and full-time jobs that can often take precedence over extracurricular activities such as different veterans' organizations that could benefit their academic environment.

Another cause for concern is that students are underprepared for higher education (Ackerman et al., 2009). DiRamio et al. (2008) suggest that veterans experience challenges with "relearning study skills, connecting with peers, and dealing with financial concerns" (pg. 97). These issues can have even more of an effect on those with a disability. Although there is limited research available, it is suggested through a cross-

sectional study that 90% of student veterans self-reported disabilities consistent with

psychological, mobility, and learning disabilities (Vance & Miller, 2009).

Veterans sometimes also struggle with the psychosocial effects of their military

service, especially those who fought in combat and fitting in on campus. This challenge

results from the age difference and life experience between traditionally aged students

and student veterans (Ackerman et al., 2009; Jones, 2013). Student veterans reported

commonalities of difficulty connecting socially with their peers.

One of the risk factors comes from the military-influenced culture. Veterans'

expectations of behavior in the classroom stem from the culture ingrained in them in the

military. Veterans believe students should show tremendous respect and behave well in

the classroom. There are vast differences between a student veteran with much more life

experience and maturity and an 18-year-old student fresh out of high school (Wheeler,

2012). One veteran said, "Being in a situation where one day you are on patrol down a

road in Baghdad, and now you are in a hallway full of kids. It's totally weird" (Wheeler,

2012, p. 789).

Service members have a very defined respect for the chain of command and are

extremely loyal to other service members. When they transition into higher education, the

hierarchy is less clear, staff responsibilities can become confusing, and resource centers

that are disorderly and disconnected from veterans can hinder a veteran from trying to

navigate into their new environment (Wheeler, 2012). Therefore, other students who do

not show respect to their professors and do not take their academic work seriously pose

problems for student veterans. They can hinder their transition into higher education and

civilian life. The transition will be easier for the student and any accompanying family

members because they are more likely to tolerate the lifestyle changes of being a college

student. After all, there is a predictable end date: graduation (Ryan et al., 2011). Thought

needs to be given to the veteran services office's role to ensure they have the correct

mission when providing specifically designed services to support veterans (Ackerman et

al., 2009). The institution should make the appropriate effort to understand the students

who comprise the veteran population and the barriers that exist to them.

Financial

When attending college, the financial aspect can cause stress for any student, let

alone a student veteran. Although veterans have the GI Bill to help with their tuition and

other college-related expenses, exiting the military and leaving a steady source of income

can come with its own stress and complications (Schlossberg et al., 1995). Their financial

situation has been dramatically impacted by not having a steady paycheck. Some veterans

were discharged involuntarily, whether caused by a disability or insubordination

(Wheeler, 2012). Regardless of how they exited the military, the financial aspect of

losing their steady paying job can be a massive stress for student veterans. Student

veterans still need to support their families, so working while in school can be taxing and

stressful (Falkey, 2016). Although veterans get education benefits to help them with the

financial aspect of their education, it can be challenging to navigate. Institutions should

be well-versed in the education benefits for veterans to help answer any questions and

submit any paperwork needed. This knowledge will help lift some of the student veterans'

financial burden and help them succeed academically.

Interactions with Civilian Students and Social Isolation

One of the most complicated challenges associated with student veterans is connecting with their non-veteran classmates (Schiavone & Gentry, 2014). Recent research has shown that veterans are more likely to appreciate the opportunity to be around other student veterans than traditional student peers (Griffin & Gilbert, 2015). A student veteran said they had nothing in common with the 18, 19, and 20-year-old students (Griffin & Gilbert, 2015). Student veterans cited that relating with peers at least three years younger than them was a struggle at times. Some student veterans called these peers "kids" and said that most of their frustrations came from classroom behavior, lack of knowledge about the war, and inappropriate questions (Wheeler, 2012). From the study, student veterans typically ignored their military service but discussed their service when appropriate in their classes. Some students commented, thanking the veteran for their service, while other students asked the student veteran if they had ever killed anyone in combat. These questions are inappropriate, disturbing, and difficult to answer (Ackerman et al., 2009). Another challenge among student veterans' experiences on campus is that they often get frustrated with what they perceive as poor work ethic, immaturity, and ignorance demonstrated by their traditional student classmates (Schiavone & Gentry, 2014). Veterans can also be treated poorly, such as being called different things derogatory toward United States service members and veterans. One student failed a class he took after he refused to take the final exam after the professor referred to United States soldiers as terrorists (Ackerman et al., 2009). Another veteran was called a traitor by a classmate after he said he opposed the war.

Participation in student veteran organizations can also benefit students wanting to connect with others who have gone through similar situations and transitions. According

to one student in a study by Griffin & Gilbert (2015), the veteran's group at their

institution allowed them to be around other peers who could relate better with the

experiences he had been through in his life (p. 88). In the same study, three institutions

stated that student veteran organizations were there to address the potential social

isolation that student veterans could face. The researcher indicated that while these

student veteran organizations have a positive impact, they are hard to keep going either

because the interest for them is not there or because of the high turnover rate of students

each year with no one willing to chair the organization (Griffin & Gilbert, 2015). Another

institution stated that some student veterans wanting to avoid including veteran status in

their identity would prevent some student veterans from joining (Griffin & Gilbert,

2015).

Living with Disabilities (Physical or Mental Health)

It is not uncommon for veterans to exit the military with disabilities, mental or

physical. Veterans can be highly susceptible to mental health stressors, leading to roughly

41% of veterans being diagnosed with substance use disorder or mental health conditions

(Messerschmitt-Coen, 2021). Unfortunately, many campus personnel are often not

prepared to deal with these issues among students. Many veterans arrive on campus with

physical and mental disabilities that they obtained from serving in a war zone. Academic

advisors and staff members need to understand the rights that students with disabilities

have. Advisors should also understand reasonable accommodations and be prepared to

make them when the situations arise, whether inside or outside the classroom (Ryan et

al., 2011). While the most prevalent disabilities among veterans are PTSD and TBI, as

earlier discussed, other injuries and illnesses can include alcoholism, limb loss, sexual

assault, burns, and suicide (Wheeler, 2012).

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and Traumatic Brain Injury

The presence of mental and physical health conditions can result in poorer

academic performance (O'Connor et al., 2017). Because veterans serve in hostile regions,

they commonly experience different injuries, which can cause them to live with

disabilities. The two common injuries discussed are Post Traumatic Stress Disorder

(PTSD) and Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI). Although there is no reliable data source to

accurately provide the number of veterans entering higher education who may have

disabilities, data does show that of the 950,000+ veterans receiving the Post 9/11 GI Bill,

up to 458,000+ are veterans with PTSD or TBI (López et al., 2016). Invisible injuries

such as PTSD and TBI can have a lasting effect on student veterans. PTSD is described

as feeling stressed and scared after living through traumatic events (Ryan et al., 2011).

PTSD can cause nightmares, anger issues, sadness, loneliness, substance abuse,

aggression, and other mood changes. As many as 18% of Operation Enduring Freedom

and Operation Iraqi Freedom veterans experienced or are experiencing some form of a

psychological issue, such as PTSD. It is also noted that PTSD can affect females at a

higher rate than males (Ryan et al., 2011). The U.S. Department of Defense Task Force

on Mental Health (2007) surveyed nearly 300 marines and found that 24% reported

substance abuse, including alcohol, 43% reported anger and aggression, and 27%

significant depression (Ryan et al., 2011).

Traumatic Brain injury occurs when an individual's brain function is disrupted by

an external force, as indicated by a loss of consciousness, an intracranial lesion, or

neurological defects (Wheeler, 2012). Unfortunately, most veterans do not report their

issues with mental health (Ryan et al., 2011). These injuries and health issues can make

veterans who suffer from them feel very isolated, guilty, depressed, or blame themselves,

which can cause it to be difficult for them to seek help. These injuries can prevent

successful acclimation into civilian life, including higher education (Ryan et al., 2011). A

successful transition into civilian life is vital for student veterans to succeed in their

education and start a new chapter.

Military Benefits

The educational benefits offered by the VA, while supposed to relieve many

students' financial stress when paying for tuition, can cause complications for student

veterans. Although experiences can be different, some student veterans have difficulty

navigating the choices they have for their educational benefits. Because of the difficulty

in navigating these benefits, the institution needs a staff member specializing in veteran

educational benefits. The Department of Veterans Affairs can have a long waiting period

between applying for benefits and those benefits paying out. This extended processing

time can cause undue stress for a student veteran if the institution is unwilling to wait for

those benefits and requires the student veteran to pay upfront. According to student

veterans in research completed by Ackerman et al., 2009, it would be helpful if the staff

could offer more resources on veteran programs (p. 8). Some student veterans felt that

there were programs that they were eligible for but did not know about. Having a

veteran's center specifically designed for student veterans with staff knowledgeable about

all the programs and resources offered to veterans would be beneficial and relieve some

of the stress of going to college. The veterans' administration is not easy to understand,

even for veterans, so it is of utmost importance that staff and advisors have a solid

understanding of the student veteran population (Ryan et al., 2011).

Structure and Transition

According to Schlossberg (1995), "the crisis of identity is reawakened whenever

the individual experiences a major transition" (p. 22). Once exited from the military,

veterans must learn how to be a civilian, which can be very challenging. Although it can

be difficult, one veteran said that the military helped her transition, crediting her Army

experience for her motivation to succeed (Wheeler, 2012). Higher education is very

different from military culture. Some student veterans appreciate the transition because it

is a change of pace from what they are used to, and leaving the military means they also

leave the military restrictions (attire, responsibilities, and decision-making). On the other

hand, others meshed well with the military environment and were highly respected by

their peers may have much more difficulty with the change. Schlossberg et al. (1995)

stated,

>   A given role change can be more or less difficult (and have a greater or lesser
>
>   impact) depending on whether the new role is a loss or a gain, positive or
>
>   negative, or has explicit norms and expectations for the new incumbent (p. 56).

Academic Advising

When people are introduced to new environments, they often question their ability

to succeed (Ryan et al., 2011). Student veterans may doubt their ability to succeed in their

higher education. They may just need a little reassurance of their abilities (Ryan et al.,

2011). To help build the required reassurance, institutions must prepare to aid student

veterans as they transition into higher education. The duties and responsibilities of the

campus staff, including veteran services staff and academic advisors, should be reviewed

to ensure that the appropriate resources are provided to best assist the student veteran

population (Ackerman et al., 2009). Academic advisors should understand whether the

student veteran left the military willingly or due to a specific situation (such as medical or

dishonorable discharge). Their discharge type will help the advisor indicate whether their

choice to enter higher education is a second preference to military participation. This

situation can put two situation factors into play: a trigger event and the timing of the

event (Schlossberg et al., 1995). The student veterans who did not voluntarily leave the

military may see the transition more negatively. These individuals will likely need more

support than the student veterans planning and looking forward to entering higher

education (Ryan et al., 2011). By having a more in-depth understanding of student

veterans' needs and challenges, academic advisors and veteran support staff can guide

them and help them succeed in their education.

Coping Mechanisms for Student Veterans

Once student veterans develop coping strategies, they are at the beginning stages

of the demands of their new environment. This stage is the "moving through" of

Schlossberg's Theory (Wheeler, 2012). In the study Wheeler (2012) conducted, she

questioned veterans about coping mechanisms associated with their transition. One

veteran said that when he is asked about his war service, his response is, "I know what I

did; I don't care what [people] think about it" (Wheeler, 2012, p. 788). Wheeler (2012)

called this "selective ignoring" (Schlossberg et al., 1995, p. 73).

In a study by Ackerman et al. (2009), nearly all the participants mentioned the efforts to identify other student veterans among them on campus. They spoke about the dependency on support from others who have had similar experiences. One method that some veterans use to cope with uncomfortable situations is sarcastic humor. Other student veterans stated the significance of having other veterans who could understand and empathize with their transition. Building relationships with other veterans was a way for student veterans to develop social support (Gregg et al., 2016). Social support also helped them participate in educational activities that benefit the students.

Yellow Ribbon

Established by the Post-9/11 GI Bill, the Yellow Ribbon Program allows higher education institutions to agree with Veterans Affairs to contribute to funding tuition and fees that exceed the allotted amount payable through the Post-9/11 GI Bill. The institution contributes a specific dollar amount for educational expenses, and Veterans Affairs will match the institution's contribution. This financial support can help veterans attend expensive private, public, or foreign universities without the costly price tag. As a provision of the Post-9/11 GI Bill, it allows schools to voluntarily agree with the VA to waive a portion of or all of the veteran's tuition costs that exceed the annual maximum reimbursement amount (Department of Veteran Affairs, n.d.c). For example, if a veteran attends an out-of-state private institution with a tuition rate of $16,000/year and the tuition exceeds the amount payable by the Post 9/11 GI bill of $10,000, the Yellow Ribbon Program will help. If their institution offers $3,000 in Yellow Ribbon contributions, the VA will match $3,000, and the student veteran's total amount will be paid. If the institution provides $2,000 in Yellow Ribbon contributions, the VA will pay

$2,000, and the student veterans will be responsible for the remaining $2,000. There are

eligibility requirements to receive the Yellow Ribbon benefits. Institutions can also limit

the amount of tuition they waive and the number of students receiving the waived tuition.

This program can help veterans struggling to pay for the rest of their education after the

GI Bill.

Student Veteran Group

Since one of the most substantial issues among student veterans is feeling isolated

and unable to connect with their traditional classmates, student veteran groups can help

them find peers with relatable life experiences. A veteran group can provide the needed

peer support to help them not feel isolated and alone in their transition into and

throughout their college career. Many, but not all, universities have some form of a

veterans' group.

One of the strongest challenges associated with student veterans is connecting

with their non-veteran classmates (Schiavone & Gentry, 2014). This is concerning

because, according to Tinto (1993), students are much more likely to succeed in their

academic studies if they become involved with other students outside their immediate

social group. In many ways, military culture is very family-orientated, with everyone

looking out for each other. Some student veterans felt that everyone was out for

themselves and that there was no team effort (Schiavone & Gentry, 2014). Veterans react

differently when questioned about their military experience. Some like to talk about it,

while others try hard not to discuss it with others (Wheeler, 2012). In a study by Wheeler

(2012), some veterans were comfortable talking with their peers about their time in the

military. Wheeler (2012) noted that since the veteran had never served in a war or combat

zone, it was likely part of the reason that they could build relationships with his peers regardless of whether they had served in the military. Veterans can also have issues re-establishing relationships once they get home from war. This is because veterans have difficulty maintaining relationships with those who have not shared the same experiences. This can create a feeling of frustration and isolation for the veteran (Wheeler, 2012).

Veterans can also be treated poorly, such as being called different things derogatory toward United States service members and veterans. One student failed a class he took after he refused to take the final exam after the professor referred to United States soldiers as terrorists (Ackerman et al., 2009). Another veteran was called a traitor by a classmate after he said he opposed the war. Those experiences, along with the perceived lack of work ethic, immaturity, and ignorance displayed by their traditional student classmates, can cause frustration for them (Schiavone & Gentry, 2014). Participation in student veteran organizations is crucial and can also benefit students who want to connect with others who have gone through similar situations and transitions.

Principles of Excellence

The Principles of Excellence is a program developed by the Veterans Affairs Department that requires higher education institutions that are federally funded, such as by the GI Bill, to follow specific guidelines. The principles of excellence have provided students with helpful information, such as the institution's financial cost and rating quality, and addressed deceptive and abusive recruiting practices. This program gives students the ability to have the knowledge they need about the intuition before deciding to enroll. According to the Department of Veterans Affairs (n.d.), "Schools that are a part of the program must:

- Give you a written personal summary of the total cost of your educational

  program, including:

  - o The costs covered by your benefits.

  - o The financial aid you may qualify for.

  - o Your expected student loan debt after you graduate.

  - o Other information to help you compare aid packages offered by different

    schools.

- Give you an educational plan with a timeline showing how and when you can

  fulfill everything required for you to graduate.

- Assign you a point of contact who will give you ongoing academic and financial

  advice (including access to disability counseling).

- Allow you to be gone for both long and short periods of time due to service

  obligations (service you must fulfill) for active-duty service members and

  Reservists.

- Make sure all new programs are accredited (officially approved) before enrolling

  students.

- Make sure their refund policies follow Title IV rules, which guide federal student

  financial aid programs.

- End fraudulent (deceitful) and aggressive methods of recruiting.

- Schools that do not charge tuition and fees do not have to follow the Principles of

  Excellence guidelines. These include:

- Foreign schools

- High schools

- On-the-job training and apprenticeship programs

- Residency and internship programs" (Principles of excellence program, para. 1).

Student Veteran Learning

Students learn by building on previous experiences (López et al., 2016). In the

military, service members use the *buddy system,* a support system meant to rely on each

other as a team. Creating team assignments in a classroom can be a very effective and

fundamental part of the service member's thinking process (López et al., 2016).

Retention & Graduation Rates Among Student Veterans in Higher Education

Most higher education institutions identify retention as one of their primary

concerns (Falkey, 2016). The American Council on Education (2009) completed another

report that surveyed academic institutions, asking them to recognize the most urgent

issues regarding the student veteran's population. Financial aid and retention were among

75% of the institutions included in the study. An interesting point to note regarding this is

that although retention is one of the top issues that institutions are having, less than 25%

of the institutions that serve student veterans have a streamlined process for re-enrollment

if the student needs to take a leave of absence due to military duty (Falkey, 2016). Since

retention is recognized as a primary concern for institutions, re-evaluating the re-

enrollment process for student veterans is essential.

About 62% of institutions require vets returning from deployment to use the

standard re-enrollment process rather than an expedited process to help veterans restart

their academic careers. About 16% of institutions require student veterans to start

enrollment as if they had not previously been enrolled (Falkey, 2016). This process can

confuse student veterans returning from deployment and can cause the transition back into education from deployment to be more complicated for the student veteran.

According to data from the Department of Veterans Affairs, 71% of veterans use their education benefits, but only 6% deplete all of their education benefits (McBain (2009). Seven factors have contributed to the risk of student veterans not obtaining a degree. These factors include financial responsibilities, delayed entry, employment (full or part-time), lack of a high school diploma, dependents, and single parenthood (Coley, 2000; Hawley & Harris, 2005).

The Focus on Veteran Friendly Higher Education Institutions

A student's success relies not only on the student but also on the institution (Herrmann, 2007, 2008, as cited in Falkey, 2016). Less than 25% of institutions provided transition support, a veteran-only lounge, or an orientation geared explicitly toward student veterans (Falkey, 2016). Only 32% of college campuses have veteran support organizations and groups for student veterans to be a part of to connect with peers. (Falkey, 2016). For a university to provide resources to student veterans to help them push through their challenges, they must first find ways to integrate them into the campus community (Schiavone & Gentry, 2014). Campuses can meet the challenge of becoming veteran-friendly by having personnel, policies, programs, and resources that acknowledge the sensitivity of veteran students as well as the needs of these students (Akerman et al., 2009). The need for institutions to have practices in place to support this student population is urgent. In order for an institution to gauge how "veteran-friendly" they are, they can ask themselves the following questions:

- Do they offer priority registration for student veterans?

- Do they offer a simplified admission and readmission process?

- Do they offer flexible enrollment deadlines?

- Do they offer staff/academic advisors who are knowledgeable about student veterans and the programs/benefits directly accessible to be a resource for students?

- Do they have a web page specifically designed for returning or newly admitted student veterans?

- A veteran's office staffed with experienced personnel (even veterans themselves) that student veterans can use as a resource?

In a study by Ackerman et al. (2009), student veterans spoke about "veteran-friendly" institutions. While this term is hard to define, the understanding is that veterans used it to refer to institutions with programs in place that helped them transition between leaving the military and entering their higher education. In a survey conducted of 723 institutions, only 22% offered orientation geared explicitly toward veterans. Ackerman et al. noted that nearly half of these institutions had no staff trained to assist with student veterans' transition (2009). 57% of institutions do not even provide training to assist staff with veterans in transition, and less than 37% of institutions have staff trained to assist student veterans with disabilities (Cook & Kim, 2009). Around the same time that Ackerman et al. completed this study, the Post 9/11 had been passed through legislation, so institutions were asked what they would do to prepare for the influx of student veterans (2009). The responses that were given, listing the most popular answers first, are below:

- Provide appropriate training for faculty and staff to provide resources for veterans.

- Pursue funding from state and federal sources to provide student veterans with grants.

- Increase training and professional development programs to assist veterans with health issues, including PTSD and TBI.

- Establish a center specifically for veterans and increase staffing.

- Establish a center and increase staff.

- Increase budget.

The institutions surveyed planned to implement their plans within five years after the data collection in 2008 (Cook & Kim, 2009).

In Wheeler's (2012) research, when interviewing student veterans, one mentioned that he should not have to find resources on his own, and the college and the military should have provided them. Training the staff and faculty who work with student veterans can help address many of the concerns that student veterans have brought up within the research. Knowing simple things, for example, that veterans can get uncomfortable when asked to discuss their war or service experience, can help the faculty create a better environment in a classroom setting. This understanding can also help other staff members understand what acceptable conversation is and is not (Wheeler, 2012). Higher education institutions can support student veterans to help them cope and successfully transition to higher education after the military. According to McBain et al. (2012), 62% of the 690 institutions included in their study provided programs and

services specifically designed for student veterans. Another 9% had to add such services and programs to their strategic plan (McBain et al., 2012).

Some institutions have gone one step further by adopting a curriculum model called Supportive Education for Returning Veterans (SERV) to help create a veteran community. The SERV model created a learning community in which general education courses are offered as "veterans only" courses (Schiavone & Gentry, 2014).

Ohio State University converted a former fraternity house into a residence for veterans only and can house 17 student veterans. A veterans' lounge was opened by the University of Akron, where student veterans can study, socialize, and receive assistance for their transition to higher education (Schiavone & Gentry, 2014). Learning communities geared explicitly toward veterans can be highly beneficial to student veterans. These communities help develop relationships among peers with similar experiences. These relationships can "enhance veteran success [by providing] a sense of community and identity for student veterans" (Schiavone & Gentry, 2014, as cited in O'Herrin, 2011, pp. 17-18). The creation of student veterans' organizations has given them some of the support they need to successfully transition and succeed in their higher education experience.

Student Veterans of America (SVA) is an excellent example of a student veteran organization. They have grown from 20 to 500 chapters nationwide since 2012 (Schiavone & Gentry, 2014). Student veterans' organizations like SVA help students orient themselves to the college campus and provide support and fellowship, which is crucial to student veterans' transition to student life after exiting the military (Schiavone & Gentry, 2014).

Orientation is standard at most universities. Unfortunately, it is geared more toward traditional students, not non-traditional students like student veterans. Veterans have a lot of life experience and are not necessarily shown around campus or sit in orientation all day with their 18-year-old classmates. Higher education institutions should develop an orientation specifically geared to the veteran population to help them acclimate to college life more easily. The orientation can be designed to give the crucial information they need to know for academics, as well as components that include GI Bill benefits, services available for veterans, and where they can find those resources when needed. Orientation will also allow student veterans to meet fellow veterans going through similar life changes and having had similar experiences (Wheeler, 2012). Some orientations specific to veterans also facilitate the development of coping skills and a more welcoming environment, which can help the strategies and support factors discussed in Schlossberg's Transition theory (Ryan et al., 2011).

Another action that institutions are taking is to have a dedicated Veterans Service Office. Staff members in this office are either veterans themselves or specially trained to understand the needs of student veterans. Academic advisors can understand the complexity of military life and the stressors of transitioning to civilian life and being a college student. These resources can include access to counselors who understand the veterans' transition process, as well as challenges they may face and disabilities such as PTSD and TBI. A university needs to have a Veterans Services office aside from the Veterans Administration office set forth by the government (Falkey, 2016). Having a centralized location for these services will aid the veteran's transition process and allow them to succeed academically (Wheeler, 2012). Having a designated student veterans

resource center is more essential than ever because the number of student veterans is

rising, and institutions need to prepare for their influx in enrollments.

According to the study by Schiavone and Gentry (2014), respondents reported

services, such as registration and financial aid assistance, assistance with military

transcripts and career support, and a monthly newsletter with relevant information to

student veterans. A few other services that the university in the study provided included

online courses in which student veterans were a subpopulation; a center for counseling

for anyone who had issues psychologically or emotionally; and a Veterans Health clinic

located on the university campus near the institution's medical college (p. 35). Having

services like these can help student veterans drastically regardless of the psychological,

financial, academic, or physical challenge.

Possible solutions

The faculty and staff can be affected if they are working with a student veteran

and have little knowledge of what the student is going through. If universities held

training sessions or resources that helped educate the faculty and staff on student

veterans' obstacles, it would create a more welcoming environment for the veterans

(Romesser et al., n.d.). Some of the topics in training could be the military-related

language that they have become accustomed to, the basics of issues like PTSD and

Traumatic Brain Injuries (TBI), and a general idea of the transition process for a veteran

along with the stress that it brings (Romesser et al., n.d.). If the faculty and staff have a

basic understanding and additional resources, it will put them in a better position to create

a welcoming environment and help student veterans successfully complete their post-

secondary degrees.

Numerous solutions have been identified throughout the studies. Everyone involved with a student veteran can impact that individual, so there are things that everyone can do to help their transition go more smoothly. Starting with higher education institutions, a few recommendations that came from a research study in Australia are as follows:

- Recognize military service within the admissions process (Andrewartha et al., 2018)

- Consider flexible study arrangements with student veterans to increase attendance and student engagement (Andrewartha et al., 2018)

- Create a "Veteran's Committee" by gathering a group of voluntary employees from different departments of the institution to handle veteran-specific concerns and as another way to support the veterans (Romesser et al., n.d.)

- Encourage student veterans to disclose their veteran status as part of the enrollment process for the staff to advise about academic, financial, disability, and counseling support that the university is offering (Andrewartha et al., 2018)

- Collect and track all veteran enrollment, retention, and geo-demographics to help future studies on this topic (Andrewartha et al., 2018)

- Create a Veterans Affairs center within the institution run by military veterans who are more relatable to the student veterans.

- Introduce financial support, such as waived application fees, scholarships, or no tuition hikes for student veterans (Andrewartha et al., 2018)

- Deferment of tuition can take off much-added stress. VA benefits usually do not pay out until after the term begins, so extending the due date would be beneficial (Romesser et al., n.d.) The Department of Veterans Affairs can take a

significantly long time for the initial application to use the G.I. Bill, so institutions

need to be made aware of that.

- Providing workshops is an excellent way to create financial awareness, stress

   management, and study skills (Romesser et al., n.d.)

- Build an institution website specifically for veterans. List requirements for the

   institutions as well as the G.I. Bill requirements and feature links to resources and

   documents that they can use when applying for aid through the G.I. Bill

- Upon graduation, an institution could present veterans with a special

   acknowledgment, whether it is a different diploma cover or a red, white, and blue

   honor cord that they can wear at graduation (Romesser et al., n.d.)

- Have student veterans create an annual "Veteran's Needs Survey" for the

   institution to stay current with the concerns or offerings that could make their

   experience better (Romesser et al., n.d.)

All these recommendations are the beginning of possible solutions for institutions to

become more veteran-friendly. One of the recommendations read multiple times

throughout the studies was to track and collect data for veterans' enrollment, graduation

rates, retention rates, and geo-demographics (Andrewartha et al., 2018; Romesser et al.,

n.d.). This is so important because if these variables are not tracked, an institution has no

way of knowing if what they are doing or the programs they are creating and putting in

place are working.

The second recommendation that was shown multiple times in the research was to

hire veterans to work in the veteran's department at the institution. The individual hired is

crucial because they are relatable to the student veterans. They also possibly know more

about the ins and outs of the veterans' affairs requirements of the G.I. Bill benefit.

Veterans serving their fellow servicemen and women can create a powerful connection

and help in the transition process of the student veteran.

In conclusion, this research study focuses on student veterans' challenges and how

institutions can support veterans better throughout their higher education journey. While

the retention and graduation rates have no significant difference from those of traditional

students, that is an excellent start to improvement. Institutions implementing support

programs to target student veterans will help student veterans with a smoother transition

and enhance academic outcomes. It is also imperative for institutions to familiarize their

faculty and staff with VA resources, policies, and, specifically, the GI Bill application

process. It would also benefit all parties if the institution collaborated with the

Department of Veterans Affairs, which could help minimize response time, confusion,

and frustration. If institutions take the steps recommended, they can provide a conducive

environment where student veterans can thrive.

Summary

With the education benefits student veterans receive, this population will forever

be embedded within the higher education community on campus and off. The need for

higher education institutions to properly support student veterans is greater than ever.

Higher education institutions cannot adequately service the unique needs of student

veterans. Institutions will need to continue to research the transition of student veterans

and how processes and procedures they are currently using can be revised and revamped

to create areas of improvement. Schlossberg's (1981) transition theory can provide

critical insights into the transition process of adults, specifically student veterans. Every

institution should have staff trained to handle veteran issues and advocate for them by

taking leadership of institutional directives and programs that the institution can enforce

to help support student veterans. All university staff should have essential training on this

student population. Once higher education institutions take the proper steps to provide the

best learning environment for student veterans, better outcomes will be created for this

student population during their college careers and into their future. Chapter Three will

give insight into the design of the study, as well as the data collected for both the

qualitative and quantitative pieces, the participants, and the instruments used to collect

the data.

Chapter Three: Research Method and Design

Introduction

  This mixed-methods study took place at a private, four-year University in the Midwest. It aimed to explore the barriers veterans face in their academic lives and what institutional programs are beneficial to overcome these challenges. As indicated by Creswell (2014), a mixed methods study is a convergent parallel mixed method, which is a "comprehensive analysis of the research problem" (p. 16). In a convergent parallel study, the researcher collects the qualitative and quantitative data simultaneously and analyzes the information for overall results (Creswell, 2014). The first data collected was from student veterans who answered surveys with criteria-based questions and questions about barriers and challenges within higher education. The researcher also analyzed graduation and retention data to find any correlation between students using veteran-offered services and those who did not, as well as any differences in graduation rates among student veterans (non-traditional students) and their peers (traditional students). This chapter describes the methodological procedures the researcher used to address the research questions and hypotheses in this mixed methods study. This study will include further details on the following steps the researcher took to explain the methodology used for this study.

Problem Statement

  Transitioning from the military to higher education presents unique challenges for student veterans that can significantly impact their academic success and overall higher education experience. As veterans of diverse backgrounds increasingly pursue post-secondary education, it has become imperative to understand and address the

multifaceted challenges they can encounter to ensure equitable access to higher education and facilitate successful integration into academic environments.

This dissertation explored the challenges faced by student veterans in higher education, revealing various factors that contribute to these challenges. By examining the issues that student veterans face, this research seeks to provide higher education institutions and support services with the information needed to meet the unique needs of student veterans.

After a diligent review of numerous studies and literature, the researcher determined that there was a shortage of research regarding how beneficial academic programs offered to veterans are and the graduation and retention rates between student veterans and traditional students. Researchers (Callahan & Jarrat, 2014; Griffin & Gilbert, 2015; Livingston et. al, 2011; Persky & Oliver, 2011) concluded that retention and graduation rates of student veterans are inconclusive, due to the lack of tracking by institutions both at the university and community college levels.

Questions and Hypotheses

Null Hypothesis 1: There is no statistically significant difference in graduation rates between traditional students and student veterans.

Null Hypothesis 2: There is no statistically significant difference in retention rates between traditional students and student veterans.

Null Hypothesis 3: There is no statistically significant difference in retention rates between student veterans using VA programs offered by the institution and student veterans not using programs.

Null Hypothesis 4: There is no statistically significant difference in graduation rates between student veterans using the VA programs offered by the institution and student veterans not using those programs.

Research Question 1: How do the current veterans' programs being offered actually help veterans throughout their four-year degree program?

Research Question 2: Are the programs offered to student veterans helping them academically or just during the admissions process?

Research Question 3: What program, based on student veterans' perspectives, benefits them most and why?

Research Question 4: What can universities do to support veterans' success in higher education in addition to the veterans' programs offered?

Methodology: Gathering the Data

This study occurred on campus at a four-year private university in the Midwest. The students targeted to participate in the study were military veterans enrolled in a four-year undergraduate program. The qualitative portion of the data gathering began with the researcher requesting the Veterans Affairs Center to send the survey out via email to all the student veterans currently enrolled at a Midwest university. The students received an email with a link to the survey through *Qualtrics*. Using this data helped the researcher answer the research questions of this study.

The secondary data was sourced from the university by requesting graduation and retention rates for the 2015, 2016, and 2017 cohorts. The data provided was of all new first-year students, the retention of those new freshmen, and the completion of the degree program for those cohorts. The cohorts consisted of both traditional and non-traditional

students. The researcher analyzed the data and examined each cohort individually to obtain graduation rates. The researcher sorted each data set between traditional and non-traditional students. The researcher ran a *z*-test for difference of proportions to prove or disprove the study's hypothesis.

The Midwest University sourced the potential participants of this study, as well as any additional data needed. More specifically, the participants were undergraduate students at a private Midwest University who were veterans of the United States Armed Forces, including Marines, Army, Navy, Air Force, and Coast Guard. The researcher completed any request forms needed and followed any policies and procedures the institution has in place regarding obtaining data. The request for qualitative data was obtained with the help of the Student Veterans Center. Due to FERPA, the University sent out an email on the researcher's behalf (see Appendix A).

Once the students completed the surveys, the researcher used the criteria to select which veterans would be included in the research study. All of the respondents who met the following criteria were included in the survey: a) the veteran must be enrolled as a full-time or part-time undergraduate student at the subject university, b) receive G.I. Bill benefits, c) served at least two years in the Armed Forces, and d) have an honorable discharge or separation in good standing. Due to regulations, all active-duty personnel were excluded from this study. This exclusion included any potential participants still on active duty or employed as service members in the National Guard or Reserves of any United States Armed Forces branch.

The quantitative data the researcher requested from the Institutional Research Department was:

1. Retention Data (2019, 2020, 2021) for all veteran students

2. Retention Data (2019, 2020, 2021) for veterans using VA Programs

3. Retention Data (2019, 2020, 2021) for veterans not using VA Programs

4. Retention Data (2019, 2020, 2021) for non-veteran students

5. Graduation Rates (2015, 2016, 2017 Cohorts) for non-veteran students

6. Graduation Rates (2015, 2016, 2017 Cohorts) for veteran students.

The Institutional Research Department sent in the data as an Excel file.

According to Creswell (2014), mixed methods involve integrating qualitative and quantitative research and data in a single research study. While qualitative data tends to be open-ended, quantitative data usually includes closed-ended responses, such as those found in questionnaires or other psychological instruments. This study's sample consisted of undergraduate student veterans currently enrolled at a four-year private university in the Midwest region. The researcher determined that a mixed methods approach was the most suitable design for this study. Since the researcher explored veterans' programs from the perceptions of student veterans and retention rates of student veterans, the researcher will use a two-phased approach. The qualitative design was appropriate for the study to understand student veterans' thoughts and perceptions regarding support services offered, challenges, and barriers that present themselves during a student veteran's academic career. In the first phase, the researcher used surveys to gather participants that fit the criteria for the study. The survey recipients were all 285 student veterans currently enrolled as students. The survey was used to identify those who fit the study's criteria and gain insights into their perceptions of the student services offered. The survey also further questioned student veterans' barriers and challenges when attending college. During the

second phase, the researcher gathered graduation and retention data from the institution.

Using this data will allow the researcher to test the variables using the *z*-test for

difference of proportions to determine if there is a significant relationship between these

variables. According to Creswell and Plano-Clark (2017), an explanatory sequential

design should be used if the researcher needs qualitative data to explain quantitative

results (p. 77). The quantitative design puts a stronger emphasis on the numbers.

Instrument

The researcher chose a survey as the instrument of choice for collecting the data.

This provided an anonymous way for student veterans to offer truthful answers, which

can be easier to do via an online survey than sitting in front of someone asking them

questions. A survey was used as the initial instrument to determine if the participant met

the criteria to continue the in-person interview. The survey consists of multiple-choice

and open-ended questions. The survey starts by asking demographic questions and then

goes through questions relating to the student's transition into higher education and the

use of veteran programs offered by the institution. This survey will allow the researcher

to determine if they fit the criteria to be included in the study. The dissertation committee

confirmed that the instrument possessed both face and content validity.

Survey

The researcher utilized *Qualtrics* as the platform for the survey. The survey

consisted of 20 questions ranging from multiple-choice to open-ended questions that gave

a text box for answers. To understand the demographics of the student veterans, the first

six questions were to understand their enrollment status (full or part-time) and their

military service (branch, reserve status, combat deployment, rank, and how many years of

service). The following 11 questions asked were to understand their classes' delivery

method, educational goals, and the transition from the military to civilian life, including

higher education. The last three questions asked student veterans about the veteran

programs they utilized during their enrollment and a text box to explain further their

thoughts on whether the programs they used were beneficial.

Participants

The institution selected for this study was a four-year private university in the

Midwest. The data collected for this study was analyzed and examined to satisfy the

purpose of this study: to examine the perception of student veterans who utilize veteran-

specific student services to navigate challenges in academic success. Upon IRB approval,

the researcher contacted the Veterans Affairs Center to commence the participant

recruitment process. With the assistance of the VA Specialist, 285 potential participants

received the recruitment email. Within the first day of the email distribution, 24 students

had completed the survey. The last 10 trickled in within two weeks of the distribution

email. Of the 34 participants in the survey, 28 qualified to participate in the study.

The researcher received feedback from 34 student veterans in response to the

survey. Of those 34 veterans, the researcher eliminated six student veterans from the

survey due to their current National Guard or Reserve employment. The researcher

analyzed the data from the remaining 28 student veterans who were enrolled full-time or

part-time. There were nine Air Force, 14 Army, two Marines, and three Navy veterans

who participated in this study. Roughly 54% of the student veterans had deployed to a

combat zone. The students included in the study had up to 20 years of service, with

3.57% having less than two years of service, 42.86% with more than two but less than

five years of service, 42.86% having more than five years but less than 10 years of

service, 7.14% have more than 10 years but less than 20 years of service, and 3.57% have

more than 20 years of service. The ranks of the student veterans, when they served

ranged from E-3 to E-8 and one rank of O-3. When asked, the students responded that

their future goals were earning a master's, doctorate, or re-enlistment.

Table 1 – Demographics of Survey Participants

Participant	Branch of Service	Combat Zone Service	Military Rank	Length of Service
Participant 1	Air Force	Yes	E-6	More than 10 but less than 15 years
Participant 2	Air Force	Yes	E-5	More than 2 but less than 5 years
Participant 3	Air Force	Yes	E-4	More than 2 but less than 5 years
Participant 4	Army	Yes	E-4	More than 2 but less than 5 years
Participant 5	Air Force	Yes	E-5	More than 10 but less than 15 years
Participant 6	Army	Yes	E-4	More than 2 but less than 5 years
Participant 7	Army	Yes	E-8	More than 20 years
Participant 8	Army	No	E-3	More than 2 but less than 5 years
Participant 9	Army	Yes	E-5	More than 5 but less than 10 years
Participant 10	Air Force	No	E-4	More than 5 but less than 10 years
Participant 11	Air Force	No	E-4	More than 5 but less than 10 years
Participant 12	Army	No	E-4	More than 2 but less than 5 years
Participant 13	Army	Yes	E-5	More than 5 but less than 10 years
Participant 14	Marines	No	E-5	More than 5 but less than 10 years
Participant 15	Marines	Yes	E-5	More than 5 but less than 10 years
Participant 16	Navy	Yes	E-5	More than 5 but less than 10 years
Participant 17	Army	Yes	E-5	More than 5 but less than 10 years
Participant 18	Army	No	E-5	More than 5 but less than 10 years
Participant 19	Army	No	E-4	More than 2 but less than 5 years
Participant 20	Army	No	E-4	More than 2 but less than 5 years
Participant 21	Army	No	Other	More than 5 but less than 10 years
Participant 22	Navy	Yes	O-3	More than 5 but less than 10 years
Participant 23	Air Force	No	E-4	More than 2 but less than 5 years
Participant 24	Air Force	No	E-3	More than 2 but less than 5 years
Participant 25	Air Force	Yes	E-4	More than 2 but less than 5 years
Participant 26	Army	No	E-3	Less than 2 years
Participant 27	Army	Yes	E-6	More than 5 but less than 10 years
Participant 28	Navy	No	E-5	More than 2 but less than 5 years

Summary

This mixed methods study aimed to examine programs offered to student veterans through the eyes of the student veterans taking advantage of them. It was also to determine if there was a correlation between graduation and retention rates of student veterans versus traditional students. This chapter explained the study design and methodology of the survey that student veterans completed and the data collection from the university for both graduation and retention rates. Once the researcher collected all the data, the researcher reviewed and analyzed it to identify themes and hypotheses. Chapter Four will discuss the results of both the research question themes and hypotheses.

Chapter Four: Analysis

This mixed methods study aimed to examine the perceptions of student veterans who utilize veteran-specific student services to navigate challenges in academic success at a private four-year university and to explore student veterans' graduation and retention rates compared to traditional students. Additionally, the researcher wanted to determine if the veteran programs being utilized by student veterans gave them a better success rate (graduation and retention) than those not utilizing veteran-specific programs. The data collection to answer the research questions consisted of multiple-choice and open-ended survey questions. The data collected for the quantitative piece of this study was graduation data for the 2015, 2016, and 2017 cohorts, as well as first-time freshmen for 2019, 2020, and 2021. Veteran status was indicated within the data.

This study's qualitative data was obtained from a survey with 20 questions. The questions asked were to identify if the participants qualified to participate in the study and questions regarding the challenges, barriers, and programs they utilized during their higher education experience. The questions allowed the researcher to gain insight into student veterans' struggles from the student veterans' viewpoint. The researcher was then able to answer the research questions using themes to identify areas that student veterans highlighted for this research to help higher education institutions have more understanding and knowledge about what this unique population of students goes through when transitioning from the military to civilian life, including higher education. This chapter describes the findings of the research study.

Questions and Hypotheses

Null Hypothesis 1: There is no statistically significant difference in graduation rates between traditional students and student veterans.

Null Hypothesis 2: There is no statistically significant difference in retention rates between traditional students and student veterans.

Null Hypothesis 3: There is no statistically significant difference in retention rates between student veterans using VA programs offered by the institution and student veterans not using programs.

Null Hypothesis 4: There is no statistically significant difference in graduation rates between student veterans using the VA programs offered by the institution and student veterans not using those programs.

Research Question 1: How do the current veterans' programs being offered actually help veterans throughout their four-year degree program?

Research Question 2: Are the programs offered to student veterans helping them academically or just during the admissions process?

Research Question 3: What program, based on student veterans' perspectives, benefits them most and why?

Research Question 4: What can universities do to support veterans to succeed in higher education in addition to the veterans' programs offered?

Quantitative Results

The quantitative piece of this research study was to determine if there was a statistically significant difference when looking at student veterans' graduation and retention rates among their peer group of traditional students. Furthermore, the researcher

wanted to see if there was a statistically significant difference between the student veteran population of those who used veteran programs and those who did not, regarding graduation and retention. For graduation rates, the researcher analyzed three cohorts (2015, 2016, 2017) for both student veterans and traditional students. For the purpose of retention, the researcher analyzed three cohorts (2018, 2019, 2020) for both student veterans and traditional students.

Null Hypothesis 1: There is no statistically significant difference in graduation rates between traditional students and student veterans.

2015 Cohort: The researcher conducted a two-sample z-test for difference of proportions to determine if there was a significant difference in graduation rates between student veterans versus traditional students. The analysis revealed that the 2015 cohort graduation rates for student veterans (n = 29, 58.6%) had no significant difference from that of traditional students (n = 1206, 52.5%); $z = 0.65$, $p = .5016$. The researcher failed to reject the null hypothesis and concluded that the graduation rates of both the student veterans and traditional students were the same.

2016 Cohort: The researcher conducted a two-sample test for difference of proportions to determine if there was a significant difference in graduation rates between student veterans versus traditional students. The analysis revealed that the 2016 cohort graduation rates for student veterans (n = 21, 57.1%) had no significant difference from that of traditional students (n = 987, 53.0%); $z = 0.37$, $p = .709$. The researcher failed to reject the null hypothesis and concluded that the graduation rates of both the student veterans and traditional students were the same.

2017 Cohort: The researcher conducted a two-sample test for difference of proportions to determine if there was a significant difference in graduation rates between student veterans versus traditional students. The analysis revealed that the 2017 cohort graduation rates for student veterans (n = 16, 43.8%) had no significant difference from that of traditional students (n = 933, 36.8%); $z = 0.58$, $p = .565$. The researcher failed to reject the null hypothesis and concluded that the graduation rates of both the student veterans and traditional students were the same.

Table 2

Total Graduation Rates by Cohort for Traditional and Student Veterans

2015 Cohort	Total Enrolled	Total Graduated	Graduation Rate	z-Score	p-Value
Student Veterans	29	17	58.6%	0.65	.502
Traditional Students	1206	633	52.5%		
2016 Cohort					
Student Veterans	21	12	57.1%	0.37	.709
Traditional Students	987	523	53.0%		
2017 Cohort					
Student Veterans	16	7	43.8%	0.58	.565
Traditional Students	933	343	36.8%		

Null Hypothesis 2: There is no statistically significant difference in retention rates between traditional students and student veterans.

2018 Cohort Retained to 2019: The researcher conducted a two-sample test for difference between proportions to determine if there was a significant difference in retention rates between student veterans versus traditional students in the 2018 cohort who were retained to the 2019 academic year. The analysis revealed that the 2019 retention rates for student veterans (n = 14, 57.1%) had no significant difference from that of traditional students (n = 1050, 68.7%); $z = -0.93$, $p = .353$. The researcher failed to

reject the null hypothesis and concluded that the retention rates of both the student veterans and traditional students for the 2018 cohort to the 2019 academic year were the same.

2018 Cohort Retained to 2020: The researcher conducted a two-sample test for difference of proportions to determine if there was a significant difference in retention rates between student veterans versus traditional students in the 2018 cohort who were retained for the 2020 academic year. The analysis revealed that the 2020 retention rates for student veterans (n = 14, 35.7%) had no significant difference from that of traditional students (n = 1050, 56.2%); z = -1.53, p = .125. The researcher failed to reject the null hypothesis and concluded that the retention rates of both the student veterans and traditional students for the 2018 cohort to the 2020 academic year were the same.

2018 Cohort Retained to 2021: The researcher conducted a two-sample test for difference of proportions to determine if there was a significant difference in retention rates between student veterans versus traditional students in the 2018 cohort who were retained for the 2021 academic year. The analysis revealed that the 2021 retention rates for student veterans (n = 14, 50.0%) had no significant difference from that of traditional students (n = 1050, 47.3%); z = -0.20, p = .841. The researcher failed to reject the null hypothesis and concluded that the retention rates of both the student veterans and traditional students for the 2018 cohort to the 2021 academic year were the same.

2019 Cohort Retained to 2020: The researcher conducted a two-sample test for difference of proportions to determine if there was a significant difference in retention rates between student veterans versus traditional students in the 2019 cohort who were retained to the 2020 academic year. The analysis revealed that the 2020 retention rates for

student veterans (n = 17, 70.6%) had no significant difference from that of traditional

students (n = 789, 72.9%); z = -0.21, p = .833. The researcher failed to reject the null

hypothesis and concluded that the retention rates of both the student veterans and

traditional students for the 2019 cohort to the 2020 academic year were the same.

2019 Cohort Retained to 2021: The researcher conducted a two-sample test for

difference of proportions to determine if there was a significant difference in retention

rates between student veterans versus traditional students in the 2019 cohort who were

retained for the 2021 academic year. The analysis revealed that the 2021 retention rates

for student veterans (n = 17, 64.7%) had no significant difference from that of traditional

students (n = 789, 62.4%); z = 0.19, p = .846. The researcher failed to reject the null

hypothesis and concluded that the retention rates of both the student veterans and

traditional students for the 2020 cohort to the 2021 academic year were the same.

2020 Cohort Retained to 2021: The researcher conducted a two-sample test for

difference of proportions to determine if there was a significant difference in retention

rates between student veterans versus traditional students in the 2020 cohort who were

retained to the 2021 academic year. The analysis revealed that the 2021 retention rates for

student veterans (n = 16, 75.0%) had no significant difference from that of traditional

students (n = 667, 77.1%); z = -0.20, p = .844. The researcher failed to reject the null

hypothesis and concluded that the retention rates of both the student veterans and

traditional students for the 2020 cohort to the 2021 academic year were the same.

Table 3

Number of Traditional and Student Veterans Retained for each Cohort Year by Year

2018 Cohort	Total Enrolled	Retained to 2019	Retained to 2020	Retained to 2021
Student Veterans	14	8 (57.1%)	5 (35.7%)	7 (50.0%)
Traditional Students	1050	721 (68.7%)	590 (56.2%)	497 (47.3%)
		z = -0.93	z = -1.53	z = -0.20
		p = .353	p = .125	p = .841
2019 Cohort	**Total Enrolled**	**Retained to 2020**	**Retained to 2021**	-
Student Veterans	17	12 (70.6%)	11 (64.7%)	
Traditional Students	789	575 (72.9%)	492 (62.4%)	
		z = -0.21	z = 0.19	
		p = .833	p = .846	
2020 Cohort		**Retained to 2021**		
Student Veterans	16	12 (75.0%)		
Traditional Students	667	514 (77.1%)		
		z = -0.20		
		p = .844		

Null Hypothesis 3: There is no statistically significant difference in retention rates between student veterans using VA programs offered by the institution and student veterans not using programs.

2018 Cohort Retained to 2019: The researcher conducted a two-sample test for difference of proportions to determine if there was a significant difference in retention rates between student veterans who used institution-offered VA programs versus student veterans not using any programs in the 2018 cohort who were retained to the 2019 academic year. The analysis revealed that the 2019 retention rates for student veterans using programs (n = 13, 53.8%) had no significant difference from that of traditional students (n = 1, 100%); $z = -0.90$, $p = .368$. The researcher failed to reject the null hypothesis and concluded that the retention rates of both the student veterans using

programs and student veterans not using programs for the 2018 cohort to the 2019

academic year were the same.

2018 Cohort Retained to 2020: The researcher conducted a two-sample test for

difference of proportions to determine if there was a significant difference in retention

rates between student veterans who used institution-offered VA programs versus student

veterans not using any programs in the 2018 cohort who were retained to the 2020

academic year. The analysis revealed that the 2020 retention rates for student veterans

using programs (n = 13, 46.2%) had no significant difference from that of traditional

students (n = 1, 100%); z = -1.04, p = .300. The researcher failed to reject the null

hypothesis and concluded that the retention rates of both the student veterans using

programs and student veterans not using programs for the 2018 cohort to the 2020

academic year were the same.

2018 Cohort Retained to 2021: The researcher conducted a two-sample test for

difference of proportions to determine if there was a significant difference in retention

rates between student veterans who used institution-offered VA programs versus student

veterans not using any programs in the 2018 cohort who were retained to the 2020

academic year. The analysis revealed that the 2021 retention rates for student veterans

using programs (n = 13, 46.2%) had no significant difference from that of traditional

students (n = 1, 100%); z = -1.04, p = .300. The researcher failed to reject the null

hypothesis and concluded that the retention rates of both the student veterans using

programs and student veterans not using programs for the 2018 cohort to the 2021

academic year were the same.

2019 Cohort Retain to 2020: The researcher conducted a two-sample test for difference of proportions to determine if there was a significant difference in retention rates between student veterans who used institution-offered VA programs versus student veterans not using any programs in the 2019 cohort who were retained to the 2020 academic year. The analysis revealed that the 2019 retention rates for student veterans using programs (n = 9, 77.8%) had no significant difference from that of traditional students (n = 8, 50.0%); $z = -1.20$, $p = .231$. The researcher failed to reject the null hypothesis and concluded that the retention rates of both the student veterans using programs and student veterans not using programs for the 2019 cohort to the 2020 academic year were the same.

2019 Cohort Retain to 2021: The researcher conducted a two-sample test for difference of proportions to determine if there was a significant difference in retention rates between student veterans who used institution-offered VA programs versus student veterans not using any programs in the 2019 cohort who were retained to the 2021 academic year. The analysis revealed that the 2019 retention rates for student veterans using programs (n = 9, 44.4%) had no significant difference from that of traditional students (n = 8, 50.0%); $z = -0.23$, $p = .817$. The researcher failed to reject the null hypothesis and concluded that the retention rates of both the student veterans using programs and student veterans not using programs for the 2019 cohort to the 2021 academic year were the same.

2020 Cohort Retain to 2021: The researcher conducted a two-sample test for difference of proportions to determine if there was a significant difference in retention rates between student veterans who used institution-offered VA programs versus student

veterans not using any programs in the 2020 cohort who were retained to the 2020

academic year. The analysis revealed that the 2021 retention rates for student veterans

using programs (n = 13, 69.2%) had no significant difference from that of traditional

students (n = 3, 100.0%); z = -1.11, p = .267. The researcher failed to reject the null

hypothesis and concluded that the retention rates of both the student veterans using

programs and student veterans not using programs for the 2020 cohort to the 2021

academic year were the same.

Table 4

Number of Student Veterans Retained for each Cohort Year by Year
(Using VA Programs vs. Not using VA Programs)

2018 Cohort	Total Enrolled	Retained to 2019	Retained to 2020	Retained to 2021
Using Programs	13	7 (53.8%)	6 (46.2%)	6 (46.2%)
Not Using Programs	1	1 (100%)	1 (100%)	1 (100%)
		z = -0.90	z = -1.04	z = -1.04
		p = .368	p = .300	p = .300
2019 Cohort	Total Enrolled	Retained to 2020	Retained to 2021	
Using Programs	9	7 (77.8%)	5 (55.6%)	
Not Using Programs	8	4 (50.0%)	4 (50.0%)	
		z = -1.20	z = -0.23	
		p = .231	p = .817	
2020 Cohort	Total Enrolled	Retained to 2021		
Using Programs	13	9		
Not Using Programs	3	3 (100%)		
		z = -1.11		
		p = .267		

Null Hypothesis 4: There is no statistically significant difference

in graduation rates between student veterans using the VA programs offered by the

institution and student veterans not using those programs.

2015 Cohort: The researcher conducted a two-sample test for difference of proportions to determine if there was a significant difference in graduation rates between student veterans who use VA programs versus student veterans who do not use VA programs. The analysis revealed that the 2015 cohort graduation rates for student veterans using programs (n = 23, 65.2%) had no significant difference from that of student veterans not using programs (n = 6, 33.3%); $z = 1.41$, $p = .158$. The researcher failed to reject the null hypothesis and concluded that the graduation rates of both the student veterans and traditional students were the same.

2016 Cohort: The researcher conducted a two-sample test for difference of proportions to determine if there was a significant difference in graduation rates between student veterans who use VA programs versus student veterans who do not use VA programs. The analysis revealed that the 2016 cohort graduation rates for student veterans using programs (n = 12, 66.7%) had no significant difference from that of student veterans not using programs (n = 9, 44.4%); $z = 1.02$, $p = .307$. The researcher failed to reject the null hypothesis and concluded that the graduation rates of both the student veterans and traditional students were the same.

2017 Cohort: The researcher conducted a two-sample test for difference of proportions to determine if there was a significant difference in graduation rates between student veterans who use VA programs versus student veterans who do not use VA programs. The analysis revealed that the 2017 cohort graduation rates for student veterans using programs (n = 12, 33.3%) had no significant difference from that of student veterans not using programs (n = 4, 75.0%); $z = -1.46$, $p = .145$. The researcher

failed to reject the null hypothesis and concluded that the graduation rates of both the

student veterans and traditional students were the same.

Table 5

Total Graduation Rates by Cohort for Student Veterans
(Using VA Programs vs. Not using VA Programs)

2015 Cohort	Total Enrolled	Total Graduated	Graduation Rate	z-Score	p-Value
Using Programs	23	15	65.2%	1.41	.158
Not Using Programs	6	2	33.3%		
2016 Cohort					
Using Programs	12	8	66.7%	1.02	.307
Not Using Programs	9	4	44.4%		
2017 Cohort					
Using Programs	12	4	33.3%	-1.46	.145
Not Using Programs	4	3	75.0%		

Quantitative Summary

The researcher's objective in running these hypotheses was to see whether student

veterans' graduation and retention rates differed from those of traditional students.

Another part of these hypotheses was to see if veterans using VA programs differed from

those not using any VA programs. The researcher failed to reject the null on all four

hypotheses. This analysis did not provide enough evidence to say that these two student

groups' graduation and retention rates differ statistically.

Qualitative Results

In the context of higher education, the effectiveness of programs offered to

student veterans stands as a focal point of this study. The researcher wanted to know if

the programs the institution offered helped the student veterans throughout their

academic journey. This inquiry prompted the researcher to use the research questions in

this study to assess the impact of these specialized programs that higher education

institutions offer to determine their effectiveness throughout their college journey. The

researcher designed the survey to uncover the programs utilized by student veterans,

understand the student veterans' viewpoints regarding the programs, and explore the

challenges they encountered during their transition to higher education. Additionally, the

survey aimed to capture the opinions of student veterans regarding areas for improvement

in higher education institutions beyond the scope of the existing programs.

For the qualitative section of the study, the researcher developed a survey to be

completed online using *Qualtrics*. The researcher gathered feedback from 34 student

veterans from the survey distributed. From this group, six veterans who were currently

employed in the National Guard or Reserve were excluded from the survey. This analysis

focused on the responses from the remaining 28 student veterans, all enrolled part-time or

full-time. The study included nine Air Force, 14 Army, two Marines, and three Navy

Veterans.

Research Question 1

To better understand veterans' programs utilized and their potential importance,

the researcher gathered feedback through the survey instrument from the honest and

detailed viewpoints of student veterans themselves. The objective was to identify if any

programs that student veterans were using proved beneficial to them throughout their

four-year journey in higher education. The responses from the participants provided

authentic reflections of the perspective held by the student veterans themselves.

Within the survey, there were two primary questions aimed to help the researcher

determine which programs were utilized by participants., The first question presented a

list of programs explicitly offered to student veterans, allowing participants to select

multiple options.

The second question encouraged participants to provide detailed opinions and

insights regarding the programs' effectiveness using an open-text format.

Q1.   How do the current veterans' programs being offered actually help

veterans throughout their four-year degree program? Two themes emerged from the

participants' responses:

1. Importance of Military Tuition Assistance and GI Bill

2. Importance of Student Veteran Group

Theme 1: Importance of Military Tuition Assistance/GI Bill

It is important to remember that student veterans can experience significant

financial barriers when attending post-secondary education. With that in mind, it is

unsurprising that the Military Tuition Assistance/GI Bill was by far the most utilized

program, with 16 participants (who chose Military Tuition Assistance) selecting it from

the list of programs within the survey.

More than half (54%) of the survey participants chose Military Tuition

Assistance/GI Bill as a program utilized. Ten of the 15 participants selected Military

Tuition Assistance/GI Bill as a support service that significantly impacted their ability to

continue their education. Of those, 10 stated the program was helpful, and five

specifically noted that it was the only way they could make attending college possible.

The survey asked participants to give a detailed opinion on whether or not the program(s)

they utilized were effective. Although not all participants provided detailed insights, a

dominant pattern in the feedback highlighted the Military Tuition Assistance/GI Bill as a

primary source of financial support for their higher education and a sole factor enabling

their ongoing attendance in school.

Research participants described the significant impact of the Military Tuition

Assistance/GI Bill on their pursuit of higher education. One participant emphasized that

the GI Bill "makes transitioning back into a student doable," highlighting the "support it

provides during their college journey." Another participant acknowledged, "Truthfully,

the GI Bill is the only reason that I'm still in school," emphasizing its critical role in

assisting their continued academic path. Participants also reveal a sense of financial

security, finding it "less stressful knowing that all my college was paid for." Emphasizing

the importance of tuition assistance further, other participants stated, "Without the tuition

assistance, I would not have been able to attend," and "I would not be able to afford the

education," underscoring the importance of how it makes education accessible. Five

participants selected Military Tuition Assistance/GI Bill but did not detail whether the

program was effective. The remaining participants said the programs were "effective" but

did not provide details. These responses highlight the GI Bill's important role in making

higher education possible for student veterans.

Theme 2: Importance of Student Veteran Group

Another theme that emerged from the responses from survey participants when

asked about programs they utilized and if they found them effective was the institution's

Student Veteran Group. The Student Veteran Group provides a sense of security with

peers who have similar mindsets, life experiences, and sometimes even age. Since social

isolation is a substantial barrier for student veterans attending college, the Student

Veteran Group can provide the support this unique student group needs. The survey

participants used words like "comradery" and "welcoming" to describe the Student

Veteran Group.

Since social isolation is among the top challenges among student veterans

attending college, the Student Veteran Group is a program that should remain active.

When participants were asked about the most significant barriers they dealt with while in

college, there were seven separate responses regarding feeling isolated when

starting/returning to college after their military service career had ended. Interestingly,

one participant stated, "Because I had been out of the military for several years before

starting school, I did not feel any barriers were present." They did not state how long it

had been since they left the military.

The researcher is unsure whether the Student Veteran Group is not a well-known

program or if there is another reason for low use, with only four participants

acknowledging the program. However, seven participants described at least some form of

social isolation in their responses about barriers they face in higher education. The

responses from participants provided insights into the supportive community for veterans.

One participant outlined the welcoming atmosphere: "They were helpful, and the student

veteran group was very welcoming. It was nice to know that there were so many veterans

enrolled at [University]."

Furthermore, the Student Veteran group was acknowledged as helpful with a short

yet meaningful comment: "The veterans club helped." There was a strong emphasis on

the value of camaraderie among student veterans, with one participant noting, "Yes, it

was good to have that sense of camaraderie again with fellow Veterans." However, the

pandemic may have attributed to challenges associated with the group not being active, as

mentioned by one participant, "Didn't last long due to COVID." They did not specify

whether the Student Veterans Group helped but commented later that it would be helpful

if the university could put veterans in the same classes together. So, it was safe to assume

that the veteran group was effective while it was active. One piece of negative feedback

from a participant mentioned that they received zero correspondence from the Student

Veterans Group after joining. The number of student veterans who mentioned social

isolation, compared to the number of student veterans who mentioned the Student

Veterans Group, could show that this program is not widely recognized, and the

university could promote it more. Despite this, the responses showed that the student

veterans group provided a positive and supportive environment to the student veterans.

Research Question 2

This research question aimed to understand student veterans' insights regarding

programs that supported them throughout their college journey compared to those that

primarily assisted them during enrollment. Three themes that surfaced from this research

question highlight programs that are consistently utilized throughout the participants'

college journey.

Q2.   Are the programs offered to student veterans helping them academically or

just during the admissions process? The first two themes from research question two

were the same as those of research question one. Three themes emerged from this

research question. These themes were:

1. Importance of Tuition Assistance (GI Bill)

2. Importance of Student Veteran Group

3. Importance of Veteran Readiness and Employment (VR&E)

Theme 1: Importance of Tuition Assistance (GI Bill)

The Military Tuition Assistance/GI Bill was a common theme throughout the survey responses. It is a benefit that student veterans receive and continue for an allotted amount of time (typically several years) if they are enrolled in higher education courses. The assistance was paramount, with over half (54%) of respondents selecting it as a benefit they received that has helped them throughout their higher education journey. The assistance was paramount, with 15 of 28 participants selecting this program, and several of them said that this assistance was the only reason they could make going to college "doable."

Participants enthusiastically praised the effectiveness of the GI Bill. They emphasized the critical importance of the financial support it provides them and facilitates a smoother transition into academic life. When asked if the programs they utilized were effective, one participant affirmed, "I believe they are. They make transitioning back into a student doable." Additionally, one participant who has utilized the GI Bill since the start of their academic journey praised the extensive support that it provided them, saying, "I have used GI Bill benefits since starting college. The benefits are great. Not only do they pay for 60% of my tuition, but I also receive a monthly stipend (Basic Allowance for Housing) and book allowance." Another participant complimented the use of the GI Bill for its continued support, stating,

> Post-911 GI Bill has been very helpful. My tuition has been fully paid for every
>
> semester. I receive a $250 payment every semester for book costs, which has
>
> always covered their cost (thank goodness for online services where you can

usually get them cheaper than the school bookstore). The monthly housing

allowance, on top of my pay, has allowed me to just focus on school.

There was expressed appreciation for the GI Bill and its financial relief, including tuition

and an allowance for housing and books, fostering an environment where student

veterans can focus on their academic pursuits.

The feedback received regarding Military Tuition assistance was overwhelmingly

positive. Many student veterans can attest to the invaluable support it provided them to

pursue higher education without suffering the financial burdens that higher education

often comes with.

Theme 2: Importance of Student Veteran Group

The Student Veterans Group and social isolation are consistent themes throughout

all four research questions. Social isolation can have a significant negative impact on

student veterans. Student Veterans Group provides a supportive community of veterans

with commonalities with their peers. However, while seven participants mentioned some

form of social isolation as a challenge, only four mentioned being part of the Student

Veteran Group. Veterans want to feel a sense of camaraderie and welcomeness in their

entering environment. Having fellow veterans as classmates helps them have a sense of

security. They can often feel out of place when they are in a classroom full of younger

classmates or those who do not have the same life experiences. The feedback about the

Student Veterans Group was mainly positive. At the same time, one participant said that

COVID ceased the Student Veteran Group; it is unknown whether or not this group will

be active again. Another participant mentioned that while they joined the Student Veteran

Group, they received zero correspondence about it. As indicated earlier, feedback from

participants who participated in the Student Veteran Group mentioned having

camaraderie and being very welcoming. One participant also noted that "it was nice to

know there were so many other veterans enrolled." Overall, the effectiveness of the

Student Veteran Group is made up of the ability to create an environment that enhances

the student experiences and unique challenges that student veterans face.

Theme 3: Importance of Veteran Readiness and Employment (VR&E)

The survey did not inquire about the Veteran Readiness and Employment

program as the VA provided it, and it was not offered in collaboration with the

university. Despite the survey not directly addressing this VA-provided program, four

respondents emphasized the program's effectiveness. One participant mentioned, "I use

VA VOC Rehab," but did not give specifics on how the program benefits them. Another

participant responded with a more detailed perspective: "My experience with voc-rehab

has been nothing short of great. All of my VA counselors have always been there to assist

me with any concerns I have ever had." The remaining two participants acknowledged

the program's effectiveness but did not provide additional details. While the study did not

study this program, the mentions of the VR&E and positive viewpoints indicate a positive

influence this program has on student veterans.

Research Question 3

This research question aims to identify the program that student veterans find

most beneficial based on their insights and perspectives. By exploring the viewpoints of

student veterans, this question aimed to identify the specific program(s) they find most

advantageous. The participant responses unveiled two overarching themes that have

shown up recurringly throughout the results of the research question.

Q3.   What program, based on student veterans' perspectives, benefits them most and why? Two themes emerged from the participant's responses:

1. Importance of Military Tuition Assistance (GI Bill)

2. Importance of Student Veteran Group

Theme 1: Importance of Military Tuition Assistance (GI Bill)

Like the themes observed in the first two research questions, Military Tuition Assistance continues to be a dominating program that student veterans find effective. Several participants emphasized the impact and importance of the Military Tuition Assistance program in facilitating their higher education journey. When service members leave the military, it can be very daunting. They face the task of securing employment to establish a source of income. Fifteen of the 28 participants who utilized different programs stated that military tuition assistance was very effective. Most participants stated that they would not have been able to attend college without the aid. This program was the most common response to the survey question asking what program was most effective.

Theme 2: Importance of Student Veteran Group

According to the literature, social isolation can be something that many student veterans struggle with in higher education setting. This challenge is because their classmates are usually younger, do not have the same life experiences as them, or have both, among other issues. While seven student veterans identified social isolation as a challenge, only four commented about a Student Veteran Group. While a Student Veteran Group seems to be a beneficial program, the researcher is unsure whether it is still active at the university studied or widely advertised due to the limited response to the survey.

Participants expressed social isolation as a "massive barrier," "intimidating," and "learning alongside kids I could have birthed." Seven participants specifically acknowledged that age differences played a prominent role in feeling socially isolated, which caused a challenge for them in college, so having a veteran peer group would help. One participant reflected on their initial barriers regarding difficulty integrating with the younger traditional students. The quote, "My first semester was at a different college, so starting with the younger students was a challenge, but being part of the Veterans Club helped," highlights the significance of a like-minded community and a sense of camaraderie in overcoming the social isolation challenges this student population faces. Another viewpoint from a participant regarding age and experience disparity stated, "The biggest barrier was the separation (real or perceived) between my classmates and me. Everyone else was 18 and fresh-faced, and I was 26 and the bearded, 'grizzled veteran'." They did not indicate whether that changed in the years since. Two participants commented that adjusting to being older in a class full of younger students who do not face the same struggles was difficult. This challenge aligns with the literature regarding social isolation and age playing a significant factor in the cause of it. These quotes from student veterans emphasize the challenge of social isolation in an academic setting and underscore the importance of student veteran groups to help aid student veterans' successful integration into higher education.

Research Question 4

Transitioning veterans from the military to higher education is challenging for some. This research question was important to understand what student veterans think that higher education institutions can do in addition to the existing programs. If

institutions can gain insight into what can be done better or differently, they will be better

equipped to support student veterans during their higher education journey.

Q4.   What can universities do to support veterans succeed in higher education in

addition to the veterans' programs offered? Five themes emerged from the participants

responses:

1.   Importance of Social Isolation Prevention

2.   Importance of Staff/Faculty Training

3.   Importance of Veteran Communications/Resource Awareness

4.   Importance of Creating Expectations

5.   Importance of a Safe Space for Student Veterans

Theme 1: Importance of Social Isolation Prevention

Social isolation remains a critical theme discussed throughout the results of the

research questions. If universities can prevent social isolation as much as possible, it will

reduce a massive challenge for many student veterans. When student veterans responded

to what institutions can do to support veterans better, most responses were related to

social isolation. Student veterans are usually in different age groups with varying life

experiences, so it can be challenging to relate to their peers. Many of the responses

trended toward creating a community of like-minded peers. Including quotes from

student veterans' feedback, a few key points emerged. One recognizes the importance of

the knowledge of fellow veterans within their academic environment, stating, "Make

them aware of who their veteran peers are." Another participant acknowledged the need

to have communities strictly designed for student veterans during their transition to

higher education. As stated in a quote, "Create better communities for veterans to

transition to. A community of like-minded individuals who've experienced some of the same life experiences is key for helping them transition." It has consistently shown throughout the literature and the themes that student veterans are looking for a sense of belonging and are given a network of peers they can relate to.

Higher education institutions may face challenges regarding this as their primary focus tends to be on academics rather than fostering social connections. Due to this, one participant said,

Many veterans' transition and immediately go online. It's easy. We don't have to communicate with people whose views and opinions often differ greatly from ours. Not to mention it's much harder to hold a conversation with an 18-year-old than a 31-year-old. The climate in today's universities is often much more leaning toward one direction politically, and freedom of expression and speech often is trumped by the safe space contingent. It can be daunting for transition veterans.

Some of the recommendations made by the student veterans partaking in the survey consisted of:

- Scheduling student veterans together in the same classes, one participant pointed out, "like they do with athletics."
- Creating a "volunteer buddy program volunteer buddy program in which higher year and peer year students check on other veterans."
- Assigning "a buddy to make transitioning less intimidating" would help the student veteran "get the lay of the land."

Participant 18 said that the university could "try to possibly schedule them (veterans) together in the same classes like they do for athletics." Participant 19 gave the idea to

create a volunteer buddy program in which higher year and peer year students

check on other veterans. Volunteers only. Assigned to keep track (just in case). To

make sure they have a peer contact outside of school administration. Also, to just

touch base about their classes and progress.

Participant 28 had a similar idea: "I think it would have been cool to have someone help

me get the lay of the land when I first came to campus. Assigning students a "buddy"

would make the transition less intimidating." Participant 7 took a different approach how

to prevent social isolation, saying:

In general, do not make a spectacle of us; this hinders the transition to "normal"

life, especially for those with mental health issues. Constantly reminding an

individual they are different and more likely to commit suicide than their peers

does not help.

Undoubtedly, student veterans struggle with finding peers to relate to when they

are a small percentage of the student body. However, if universities can provide them

with additional resources by truly understanding their challenges, it can benefit not only

the student veterans but the institution as a whole.

Theme 2: Importance of Veteran Communications/Resource Awareness

The student veteran population is distinguished by their unique challenges, which

sets them apart from traditional students, along with benefits that would not be accessible

to individuals outside this group. Higher education institutions need to ensure they have

staff who are well-versed in the student veteran population. If universities can find a way

to streamline the process, it will reduce the stress associated with navigating resources

independently. Student veterans highlighted a need for improved veteran communications

and resource awareness, indicating that institutions should better understand the resources available to student veterans.

Program and resource awareness are integral to the university's helping veterans succeed. Several participants responded about staff being more knowledgeable and passionate and ensuring that veterans are aware of/getting all the additional resources they need. A university needs to have staff trained and experienced in VA benefits. Some veterans reported that it was a very confusing process on benefits such as the GI Bill and having to contact the VA themselves to find the resources or information they needed.

One participant noted the importance of VA representatives being passionate about advocating for veterans' needs and ensuring they are well-informed about available resources. Similarly, another participant suggested connecting the university and the military's education department, stating, "coordinate with education department on base. Once a person transitions out of the military, they don't have access to as much information with the military."

Specifically, regarding the application process, one participant stressed the importance of institutions' responsibility to inform student veterans about additional resources to help them manage overwhelming courses. One participant mentioned "utilizing the writing center and librarian all the time" for support. Additionally, there was a strong response that universities should have check-ins with student veterans, specifically a few weeks after classes start and also regularly at the start of each semester, to ensure they receive the support they need to succeed.

In terms of guidance during the application process, one participant proposed a proactive approach, suggesting

a short email campaign through the school application of choice helping the

veteran understand and learn whom to go to for questions or guidance during the

application process, and the steps that follow, frequently asked questions from

confusion from VA site, how the process goes, etc.

This viewpoint emphasizes the importance of proactive communication and support,

which can improve the overall experience for student veterans.

Theme 3: Importance of Staff/Faculty Training

This theme goes hand in hand with theme two. For student veterans to have the

resources they need, the staff needs to know about the resources to be able to offer them.

Not only can the VA benefits be confusing to navigate, but veterans also experience other

challenges when transitioning out of the military. It would be beneficial for staff, faculty,

and instructors to have a sense of what the transition is like and the challenges that can

occur.

Instructors and professors play a crucial role in facilitating student veterans'

transition into higher education. One participant mentioned, "Maybe for instructors, more

than the institute needs to be aware, transitioning from the military to being a student is

very difficult and frustrating no matter how long you have served." This response sheds

light on the unique challenges that student veterans face, and shows the variety of

emotions, from excitement to frustration associated with starting or returning to higher

education. This participant further noted that some military members may not have been

skillful in academia initially, which is what caused them to choose the military as their

career. Emphasized in the quote, "Some students were never good students in the first

place, so that is why they enlisted or were commissioned. So going back to school is

equally as exciting and terrifying." Professors and instructors should remember that some

students have not experienced a classroom environment since high school.

Another response identified needing to know their options when struggling with

mental health:

> Another thing Lindenwood could do better is advertise what kind of support may
>
> be out there for Veterans like myself, who are combat Veteran and suffering from
>
> PTSD. Speaking for myself, I'm not doing well, and I do not know where to turn.
>
> A Lion Life coach has reached out to me to offer assistance, and I truly appreciate
>
> that, but I do not know what my options are when I am struggling.

Another comment that was made was in regard to trauma that some veterans have

regarding their military service in general and may not relate to deployment.

Finally, a female participant provided the following comment:

> Also understanding MST (military sexual trauma) among the female veteran
>
> population. Veterans experience a lot of trauma regardless of deployment. I've
>
> been put on the spot about why my service wasn't a full term; I don't want to have
>
> to explain or prove myself as a veteran. I was brutally assaulted while on base
>
> resulting in lifelong injuries that resulted in my discharge, I don't have to prove or
>
> validate my service to anyone and being questioned just causes you to relive it all.

Staff and faculty should be trained to be well-equipped to provide student veterans with

the appropriate support they need throughout their academic journey. Specialized training

will enable staff and faculty to understand the unique experiences that student veterans

face to create a supportive environment to help the veterans best succeed.

Theme 4: Importance of Creating Expectations

Although this theme only came up from two participants' responses, this is an

essential step toward veterans' success in higher education. Some veterans have never

attended college and do not know what to expect. During their first few semesters,

preparing for what is to come in the aspect of course workload could be challenging if

they do not know what to expect. Usually, military service can be from a few years to

several years. Still, either way, the gap from their last academic experience to higher

education can be overwhelming and may take time to adjust. To avoid setting veterans up

for failure, two participants responded that universities could be better for college life.

Establishing clear expectations can help provide a framework for their higher education

journey. What can they anticipate regarding academic coursework, workload, and

standards? Many veterans have a great deal of life that is occurring around their higher

education and must put the hard work in to be successful, with one participant saying:

> Be honest and upfront about college. The truth is service members are ahead in a
>
> few areas, most of which have little to do with higher education and behind in
>
> many that do. It will not be easy; they will have to work hard if they intend on
>
> succeeding.

The second participant stated that the university could "provide counseling sessions to

educate veterans on how the process of enrollment works, online classes, or what campus

life is like."

Setting clear expectations for higher education is critical for student veterans to

have a smoother transition and the ability to navigate their academic journey. By

highlighting expectations early in the enrollment process, institutions will better support

student veterans, giving them the resources they need to pave the way for success. Not

only within admissions, but faculty can set expectations from the start of the class. One way for professors to do this is by creating a syllabus that covers course overview, class schedule and workload, class policies, grading rubric, and providing a list of resources and support. By providing this information upfront, the students will have a chance to familiarize themselves at the start of class.

Theme 5: Importance of Safe Space for Veterans

The final theme identified in this research question emerged from two participants commenting on the importance of having a "safe space." Safe spaces are crucial for the student veteran population. It gives them a supportive environment around peers where they can openly express themselves, share experiences, and collaborate with other student veterans. The two participants who commented negatively did so regarding the location of the VA Center on the campus of the university studied, with them stating, "Give us some windows. Plus, it's a little odd our VA Center is located inside the LARC basement. It's troubling and sad. Veterans shouldn't be shoved in a basement" and Give student veterans an actual place of study. "Not like the one in the LARC. No offense, but I rather not be shoved in a basement."

Student veterans in this study wanted their VA Center to have a better-provided location, noting that it was in the basement and had no windows. If student veterans do not like the atmosphere of their VA Center, they are less likely to use it. Creating a welcoming environment with a preferred location can demonstrate the institution's commitment to supporting veterans.

Qualitative Summary

Through investigating student veteran experiences, several key themes emerged that shed light on the challenges that veterans face, highlighting the specific needs of student veterans and how veteran-related programs play a role in their success. Military Tuition Assistance/GI Bill and Student Veterans group were two themes seen throughout the research questions. The GI Bill gave student veterans financial stability to enroll in higher education. Student Veterans Groups emerged as a vital support network, offering camaraderie, and understanding. The qualitative results also highlighted the importance of training for staff/faculty to understand the challenges faced by student veterans and provide appropriate support. Participants also responded that more awareness of veteran-specific resources would benefit veterans as it would help them navigate academic and social environments more efficiently. Providing clear expectations is crucial to foster a less stressful transition into higher education. When providing clear expectations of course workload and resources, student veterans can have an easier time navigating through higher education. The qualitative piece of this study highlights how higher education institutions can support student veterans during various aspects of their transition into their educational journey.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Chapter Four sheds light on student veterans' intricate experiences and perspectives as they transition into higher education. The statistical portion of the research did not identify any significant difference in retention and graduation rates between student veterans and traditional students. In addition, there was no statistically significant difference when looking at the outcomes of student veterans using VA

programs versus those that do not. With that being said, the themes that were concurrent

throughout the entire chapter were identified as the challenge of social isolation and the

significant benefit of Military Tuition Assistance. According to the literature and the

participants' responses, social isolation is one of the biggest challenges student veterans

face when entering and throughout their college education. The Student Veteran Group

was mentioned several times as a benefit. The negative feedback received was that due to

the COVID-19 pandemic, it did not last long. The second piece of negative feedback was

that once the student veteran joined, they received no further correspondence. With the

feedback given, the institution could certainly remedy these concerns. A preeminent

theme was Military Tuition Assistance and how it was a massive factor in many student

veterans being able to continue to secondary education after their military career ended.

Chapter Five: Discussion

This study aimed to explore the multifaceted challenges faced by student veterans from a private four-year university in the Midwest during their transition from military life to higher education, as well as an analysis of graduation and retention rates compared to traditional students. Through a mixed methods approach, the researcher investigated the unique experiences, challenges, and support systems that influence student veterans in a higher education setting. The study also aimed to explore if there was any significant difference in the rate of retention or gradation among student veterans and traditional students.

The researcher utilized surveys to gather qualitative data, as well as graduation (2015, 2016, 2017 cohorts) and retention (2018, 2019, 2020 cohorts) rates from the university participating in the study. The researcher used qualitative data to identify themes. At the same time, the researcher applied the *z*-test for difference of proportions to the quantitative data to identify any statistically significant difference in the retention rates of student veterans and traditional students. The researcher also identified if there was any statistically significant difference in graduation and retention rates for student veterans using support programs versus student veterans not using support programs. This study highlighted the challenges and barriers that student veterans face during their transition into higher education while shedding light on any differences in graduation and retention rates for this unique student population. As this study concludes, it is essential to consolidate the findings, reflect on their significance, and propose implications for practice and future research to positively impact the future of student veterans in higher education.

Hypotheses & Research Questions

Null Hypothesis 1: There is no statistically significant difference in graduation rates between traditional students and student veterans.

Null Hypothesis 2: There is no statistically significant difference in retention rates between traditional students and student veterans.

Null Hypothesis 3: There is no statistically significant difference in retention rates between student veterans using VA programs offered by the institution and student veterans not using programs.

Null Hypothesis 4: There is no statistically significant difference in graduation rates between student veterans using the VA programs offered by the institution and student veterans not using those programs.

Research Question 1: How do the current veterans' programs being offered actually help veterans throughout their four-year degree program?

Research Question 2: Are the programs offered to student veterans helping them academically or just during the admissions process?

Research Question 3: What program, based on student veterans' perspectives, benefits them most and why?

Research Question 4: What can universities do to support veterans?

Summary of Findings

Starting with the qualitative data, the researcher determined that there are challenges for veterans when they begin their higher education journey that correlates with prior literature. Student veterans are a particular population, and their needs are specific. The data to answer the research questions shed much light on the challenges that

student veterans have coming directly from the student veterans. From the perception of

student veterans, universities are not doing everything they can to be welcoming to

student veterans. They do not have the resources available to find other student veterans

with similar backgrounds and experiences to have the support they need to make the

transition process more manageable. While several themes emerged from this research

study, two continually stood out as issues: social isolation and lack of staff/faculty

support. The student veterans' perspectives ranged from being unable to relate to other

classmates due to life experience and age difference to not receiving the support from

staff or the staff not having the knowledge needed to get veterans through the process of

using their benefits. These two areas could be alleviated with changes made by the

university. While the quantitative data did not show any significant difference (in any of

the hypotheses) regarding graduation and retention when comparing student veterans to

traditional students and student veterans who use programs versus those who do not, it

does not necessarily mean there is no issue. Still, it may bring light to the average

graduation rate for all students to see if the institution can do anything to make it higher.

   Null Hypothesis 1. The researcher conducted a *z*-test for difference of

proportions to determine any statistically significant difference in graduation rates

between student veterans and traditional students. The Institutional Research department

at the studied university provided all the graduation rate data. The researcher grouped

student veterans separately from traditional students for the 2015, 2016, and 2017

cohorts. The researcher had to conduct a *z*-test for difference of proportions for each

cohort year. The 2015 cohort resulted in a *p*-value of .5016, causing the research to fail to

reject the null hypothesis. The 2016 cohort resulted in a *p*-value of .709, causing the

research to fail to reject the null hypothesis. Lastly, the 2017 cohort resulted in a *p*-value of .565, causing the researcher to fail to reject the null hypothesis. The researcher determined no statistically significant difference between the graduation rates of student veterans and their traditional student peers.

Null Hypothesis 2. The researcher conducted a *z*-test for difference of proportions to determine any statistically significant difference in retention rates between traditional students and student veterans. The Institutional Research department at the studied university provided all the retention rate data. The researcher grouped student veterans separately from traditional students for the 2018, 2019, and 2020 cohorts. The researcher verified each student from each cohort's retention to determine retention. This was done by sorting the data to show if each student enrolled into the next academic year following their last, until they reached their senior year for the 2018 cohort, junior year for the 2019 cohort, and sophomore year for the 2020 cohort. The researcher failed to reject the null hypothesis for all three cohorts. This was due to 2018 cohort p-values of .353 (2018 retained to 2019), .125 (2018 retained to 2020), and .841 (2018 retained to 2021). The 2019 cohort's *p*-values were .833 (2019 retained to 2020) and .846 (2019 retained to 2021). The 2020 cohort had a *p*-value of .844 for 2020 students retained to 2021.

Null Hypothesis 3. The researcher conducted a *z*-test for difference of proportions to determine any statistically significant difference in retention rates between student veterans using veteran support programs versus those not using veteran support programs. The Institutional Research department at the studied university provided all the retention rate and program use data. The researcher grouped student veterans using

support programs separately from student veterans not using support programs for the
2018, 2019, and 2020 cohorts. The researcher verified each student from each cohort's
retention to determine retention. This was done by sorting the data to show if each
student enrolled into the next academic year following their last, up until they reached
their senior year for the 2018 cohort, junior year for the 2019 cohort, and sophomore year
for the 2020 cohort, as well as categorizing student veterans who used support programs
versus student veterans who do not use veteran support programs. The researcher failed
to reject the null hypothesis for all three cohorts. This was due to 2018 cohort p-values of
.368 (2018 retained to 2019), .300 (2018 retained to 2020), and .300 (2018 retained to
2021). The 2019 cohort's p-values were .231 (2019 retained to 2020) and .817 (2019
retained to 2021). The 2020 cohort had a p-value of .267 for 2020 students retained to
2021.

      Null Hypothesis 4. The researcher conducted a z-test for difference of
proportions to determine any statistically significant difference in graduation rates
between student veterans using veteran support programs versus those not using veteran
support programs. The Institutional Research department at the studied university
provided all the graduation rates and program use data. The researcher grouped student
veterans using support programs separately from student veterans not using support
programs for the 2015, 2016, and 2017 cohorts. The researcher had to conduct a z-test for
difference of proportions for each cohort year. The 2015 cohort resulted in a p-value of
.158, causing the research to fail to reject the null hypothesis. The 2016 cohort resulted in
a p-value of .307, causing the research to fail to reject the null hypothesis. Lastly, the
2017 cohort resulted in a p-value of .145, causing the researcher to fail to reject the null

hypothesis. The researcher determined no statistically significant difference between the graduation rates of student veterans using veteran support programs versus those not using veteran support programs.

Research Question 1. When examining if veteran support programs are genuinely beneficial throughout student veterans' four-year program, two themes resulted: the importance of Military Tuition Assistance (GI Bill) and the importance of a Student Veteran Group. The researcher needed to understand the support programs' effectiveness from student veterans' perspective. Student veterans highlighted the importance of Military Tuition Assistance (GI Bill) because it assists student veterans with overcoming financial barriers, with several participants acknowledging that it was crucial to their higher education. While the Student Veteran Group utilization seemed relatively low, it emerged as a vital program, due to the support it provided student veterans, helping them combat social isolation. Participants praised the program for its camaraderie and the support it offered. Overall, the student veterans who participated in this study highlighted the crucial role that the GI Bill plays in fostering financial support in their education journey, as well as the Student Veteran Group's role in bringing together a sense of belonging and support among the population of student veterans.

Research Question 2. This study aimed to identify the effectiveness of veteran support programs through student veterans' perceptions throughout their four-year college journey instead of primarily aiding them during enrollment. The survey results provided three themes, two of which occur frequently: the importance of Tuition Assistance (GI Bill), Student Veteran Groups, and Veteran Readiness and Employment (VR&E) programs. Military Tuition Assistance (GI Bill) was a consistent theme throughout the

study results due to relieving the financial strain and aiding veterans in pursuing higher

education. Participants emphasized how Military Tuition Assistance (GI Bill) covered

tuition, a monthly housing stipend, and textbook expenses, providing a smoother

transition to academic life. Similarly, Student Veterans Groups were praised for fostering

a sense of camaraderie and support among peers of similar backgrounds and experiences.

Although positive feedback was received regarding the effectiveness of the VR&E

program, there was no focus on this program because it was offered by Veterans Affairs

and not in collaboration with the university.

Overall, the study highlights the critical role veterans support programs like

Military Tuition Assistance (GI Bill), Student Veterans Groups, and VR&E play in

facilitating academic success for student veterans. The programs provide vital social

support connections and help reduce the stress of the financial burdens that student

veterans can face. The feedback was overwhelmingly positive and showed the

importance of the programs to serve the unique student veteran population better when

transitioning into higher education.

Research Question 3. This research question aimed to determine which programs

offered to student veterans were most beneficial. After analyzing participant feedback,

two themes emerged: Military Tuition Assistance (GI Bill) and the importance of Student

Veteran Groups. The first theme highlights the crucial role of Military Tuition Assistance

(GI Bill) in facilitating veteran students' transition into higher education by alleviating

the financial strains of higher education. The second theme, Student Veteran Groups,

helps address the issue of social isolation, a challenge many student veterans face. The

student veteran feedback emphasizes the value of camaraderie and support from peers.

Although financial and social isolation emerges as prominent challenges to student veterans, these two programs combat them as much as possible. While most participants highlighted the positive impact of Student Veteran Groups, participants raised concerns regarding the availability and advertisement within the university where the study occurred.

Research Question 4. Veterans transitioning out of the military and into civilian life, including higher education, presents challenges, prompting an investigation of additional support measures universities can take in addition to current programs. Five key themes emerged from participant responses: preventing social isolation, strengthening staff/faculty knowledge regarding student veterans, and existing programs, improving communication and resource awareness, setting clear expectations, and creating safe spaces for student veterans. The issue of social isolation highlights the need for community and understanding among peers with similar life experiences and backgrounds. Recommendations include that universities can implement a buddy system, for example, pairing a second-, third-, or fourth-year student veteran with a first-year student to allow direct peer support. Another recommendation was for the university to schedule veterans in the same classes to help ease social isolation and create a support system to ease the transition.

Participants noted that communication with veterans regarding resource awareness could improve, due to the importance of knowledgeable staff regarding VA benefits and available veteran-specific programs. Participant recommendations varied from regular check-ins with student veterans to proactive email campaigns. The student veterans that participated in this study stressed the importance of staff/faculty training,

ensuring they thoroughly comprehend the obstacles and challenges they face while

allowing for support geared toward the student veteran population. In addition,

participants recommended that staff/faculty create clear and concise expectations for

academic life while the institution, as a whole, creates safe spaces for student veterans.

Participants emphasized that they need spaces where they feel safe, supported,

understood, and respected.

Implications

The findings from this study included several implications that leadership in

higher education institutions should consider. Unfortunately, many colleges and

universities nationwide cannot provide the support that student veterans need, which can

lead to a difficult transition for this student population (Ryan et al., 2011). Student

veterans have unique needs, and higher education institutions must understand the needs

of the student veteran population to ensure the best possible outcome of success. The

implications from this study are the need for higher education institutions to implement

strategies aimed at fostering a sense of belonging and community, the necessity for

higher education institutions to provide training to faculty and staff that is specifically

geared toward challenges and barriers that student veterans face, the importance of

resource awareness/communications to student veterans and the need for higher

education institutions to have safe space to the student veteran population.

Sense of belonging and community. Participants discussed the need for a sense

of belonging, camaraderie, and the desire to be surrounded by other student veterans.

Finding peers who share similar life experiences can create a sense of camaraderie and

provide an environment where they feel supported, understood, and accepted. Also, due

to the unique challenges that student veterans face, having a support system for student

veterans can ease the challenges of transitioning to civilian life and higher education.

When student veterans have a peer support system, it can enhance their overall well-

being and academic success. This peer support can also provide a platform to share

resources and advice.

Staff and faculty need training. If higher education institutions develop and

implement training designed to support student veterans, it ensures that the student

veteran population receives the necessary support. The student veteran population needs

their advisors and professors/instructors to understand their specific needs and how they

can foster an inclusive environment while promoting academic success. In addition,

training should also cover how to recognize and address other student veteran-related

issues, such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), traumatic brain injury (TBI),

everyday stressors for student veterans during their transition, and knowledge of

programs that the institutions offer student veterans.

Student veterans need communication and resource awareness. Student

veterans face unique challenges when transitioning from their military career to academic

life. They have maintained that clear and effective communication is needed to navigate

the transition into higher education successfully. Communicating about academic life,

support services, and veteran resources to programs and groups can alleviate the burden

of navigating with little to no assistance. Regular communication with student veterans

can allow for a better integration into academic life and support their overall success.

Student veterans need safe spaces. Student veterans have identified the need for

a safe space within their higher education institutions that allows them to address their

unique needs, experiences, challenges, and perspectives. Having a support group with peers who can relate due to similar experiences is an essential step for their academic success. While having safe spaces with peer groups is one way to support the need, student veterans also highlighted the importance of a veteran's lounge space (not a room in a basement). They could also meet peers within this space and cultivate a sense of belonging and community among student veterans.

Study Limitations

Some limitations identified in this study were concerning sample size. The first limitation was the sample size. The survey instrument utilized was volunteer only, with no incentive. Since the study was conducted at a single university in the Midwest, the sample size of 28 was smaller, which could affect the response rate and skew the results by stronger positive or negative responses. Responses could also vary from one institution to another due to institutions offering or not offering specific programs/groups. The small sample size also raised concerns about the generalizability of the findings, going beyond the university studied. If the study had included several institutions, more participation would have allowed for further results regarding student veteran perceptions.

The second limitation, the smaller sample size, could have been due to the voluntary nature of the survey participation and when the email for participation was sent out. The limited response rate could have been partly due to the email during the summer break and being sent to student emails instead of personal emails. Students may not check their student email as often as their personal email, especially during the summer break. The timing of the survey could have likely decreased the number of respondents.

Recommendations for Study Replication

The researcher explored the research questions by gathering data through a survey. The research analyzed the hypotheses by comparing retention and graduation data between student veterans and traditional students and student veterans utilizing veteran programs versus those who do not. The researcher proposed changes to be made before study replication took place.

Survey Recommendations

Additional Questions. The researcher recommends adding additional questions to the survey, such as:

- Was the VA Center at [university] knowledgeable about resources and programs offered specifically to veterans?

- How many months/years were between your military exit and your higher education enrollment?

- Did you attend college before entering the military?

- What is your race?

- What is your age?

- Do you have any mental/medical issues from your military service?

These questions will allow the researcher to delve into specific characteristics of student veterans to investigate whether there are similar statistics between veterans who answer these questions similarly.

Recruiting Participants. The recruitment of survey participants was done entirely by email and was voluntary. Offering email participants a small gift card to encourage them to complete the survey could increase the number of survey respondents. Other

ways to increase the sample size would be to advertise (by email and flyers around

campus), host a focus group(s), and offer a small gift for participating.

Interviewing Participants. Another recommendation would be for the researcher

to interview participants with follow-up questions based on responses to the survey.

Facilitating follow-up interviews and focus groups can help the researcher clarify

ambiguous responses or better understand student veteran perceptions. Hosting individual

1:1 interviews and focus groups would allow the researcher to ask any further questions

that were not fully clarified in the survey.

Recommendations to the Field of Study and Practitioners of the Field

Based on the results of this study, the researcher has recommendations for the

field of study and the practitioners in the field. Due to student veterans needing support

from several different areas of the institution, the researcher considers practitioners in the

field to be faculty, admissions, financial aid, and the veterans center (if the institution has

one in place). The recommendations made by the research are gaining an understanding

of the veteran experience, providing academic support, striving to be as veteran-friendly

as possible, and requesting feedback from learners.

Gaining An Understanding of the Veteran Experience. Faculty and staff must

support and accommodate student veterans throughout their academic journey. One way

to do this is to engage directly with student veterans. Engaging with student veterans can

provide ways for veterans to share their perspectives on what their challenges were, as

well as their successes. The institution can train faculty and staff regarding the various

resources that student veterans have to utilize. In addition to this, training can be provided

regarding the issues that veterans face, such as TBI and PTSD, which, unfortunately, are

diagnoses that veterans can often have. Knowing about military/veteran culture, challenges during their transition out of the military and into higher education, PTSD, TBI, and other disabilities that could cause them to struggle will equip educators with the proper knowledge necessary to support student veterans in their academic journey.

     Provide Academic Support. Institutions can offer various academic support to student veterans through a comprehensive approach that acknowledges the challenges and experiences they bring into their higher education. First, it is essential to have a VA resource center with knowledgeable advisors that can assist veterans with academic needs and accessing benefits, including internal programs, such as veterans' groups and external programs such as military tuition assistance/GI Bill. The institution could also offer specialized counseling services specifically for the needs of veterans, addressing issues, such as their transition from the military, managing PTSD or other mental health-related concerns, and setting expectations of what their academic life will consist of. They could develop a free workshop course for student veterans exiting the military. The military is a unique lifestyle, with set expectations, and civilian life can vary significantly from what they are used to. It is up to institutions to truly understand the military culture; it can develop a sense of belonging and inclusion while providing and developing resources to assist this unique student population.

     Institutions can also develop a mentorship program or a buddy system for student veterans. For mentorship, student veterans can be paired with faculty or staff members who can provide guidance, encouragement, help navigating coursework, and academic advice. A buddy system, pairing student veterans into pairs, is a system that the military uses as a way to monitor each other, provide company, and help reduce suicide rates.

Institutions could establish a buddy program as a voluntary program for veterans who want a sense of camaraderie, understanding, and belonging. First-year student veterans can be paired with student veterans in their second, third, or fourth year as another form of support. If institutions can foster a sense of support and an inclusive environment where student veterans feel recognized, it can empower them to achieve their academic goals.

Strive To Be A Veteran Friendly Institution. While "veteran-friendly" is a term that does not have one definition, it is often defined by how well an institution supports student veterans with support, tuition assistance, communication, admissions, and advisory assistance. This recommendation aligns with the first two recommendations, as to provide a "veteran-friendly" institution, staff and faculty will need to know the struggles, hardships, transition, funding, and veteran-related policies. Hiring veterans would also be beneficial, as this will create a sense of support for student veterans. This can include veterans employed throughout the institution, such as professors/instructors, VA Center, counselors, and academic and admissions advisors. If a student veteran can enroll in their first semester and establish this support with things such as getting their GI Bill set up, it can relieve the financial stress in which they can focus on their education. It could also benefit student veterans if institutions create a type of "onboarding" that includes how to find resources, what to expect for their academic path, and assistance with their military tuition assistance. Hiring veterans who have insight on this or have had to go through the same processes would help keep the transition to higher education as smooth as possible.

Request Feedback From Student Veterans. One way to understand if the institution is fulfilling its duties as a higher education institution is by asking student veterans for their perspectives. Obtaining student veterans' feedback is a great way to see if the institution is providing the appropriate support that student veterans need. Input can be requested in a couple of different ways. The professors/instructors can ask for feedback at the end of the class, and the VA center can request feedback at the end of each semester. An anonymous survey can be sent to student veterans (for individual classes or the institution as a whole), asking if they felt their needs were met, what the institution is doing great, and what the institution can work on.

This feedback can provide the faculty and staff with invaluable information to enhance the experiences offered in the classroom and the institution. Suppose faculty request feedback from the class they were teaching. In that case, it can give instructors insight into how they can tailor their teaching methods to foster a supportive learning environment that is inclusive to everyone, including student veterans, and, in turn, ensure that the needs of student veterans are met. From a broader aspect, at an institutional level, requesting feedback enables institutions to identify what areas they can improve. If institutions and faculty continually seek feedback to create actions based on them, institutions will be much more adaptable to fulfill the commitment of all student veterans and help them be the most successful in their academic journey.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to examine student veterans' challenges during the transition into higher education, as well as compare retention and graduation rates between veterans and traditional students, while also taking into account the programs

that are offered to student veterans and if they statically showed beneficial to veterans, as well as the benefits from the perceptions of student veteran themselves. The quantitative data collected showed no significant difference for all four hypotheses, comparing retention and graduation rates between student veterans and traditional students over cohort years. The researcher determined no significant difference between graduation and retention rates among student veterans compared to traditional students. Also, when examining graduation and retention rates of student veterans taking advantage of veteran-specific programs versus those who do not, there was no significant difference between the cohort years.

The qualitative results identified several themes involving veterans' challenges when transitioning out of the military and into higher education. Some of the biggest challenges student veterans face are social isolation, insufficient resource awareness, and tuition assistance. There are several programs for student veterans, but the study showed that resource/program awareness was not strong, and veterans were often left wondering how to find resources, such as other student veteran peers or navigating the GI Bill through the Veterans Affairs, which is a usually long process to get the funding approved.

Higher education institutions need to understand the student veteran population to be able to assist them through challenges or academic issues they may face. Higher education institutions must promote student veteran resources, have knowledgeable staff, and a strategy to create an environment that fosters inclusivity and understanding within academic life. By leveraging the strengths and unique experiences of student veterans while also addressing the challenges being faced, they can work toward creating a

fulfilling higher education environment that is welcoming and empowers all student

veterans to have a successful college journey.

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Appendix A

Good afternoon,

I am sending this on behalf of a doctoral student Alexandra here who needs help with completing her research. Therefore, I am asking if you are able to participate to please see the email below for further guidance:

Hello!

My name is Alexandra Brandriff and I am a doctoral student in the Department of Educational Leadership Program at [4-Year Midwest University]. I am writing to invite you to participate in my research study examining the barriers student veterans face in higher education to better understand the transition from active duty to higher education, as well as graduation and retention rates. Coming from a military family (dad, brother and sister), this research is very personal to me and I want it to have an impact on veteran's education in the future.

This research will explore if any of the veteran programs and services offered by the university are beneficial to student veterans from their transition from active duty to higher education as well as throughout all four years of college. The research will be based on the perspective of the student veteran themselves. Graduation and retention rates will also be analyzed to see if the data shows any correlation between the two. We hope what we learn from this research study may benefit other student veterans in the future.

If you decide to participate in this study, you will need to complete a quick

survey. The survey should only take about 5-8 minutes. To complete the survey

please click [here](#).

Remember, this is completely voluntary. If you'd like to participate please click

the link above to take the survey. If you have any questions about the study,

please email me at [university email].

I appreciate your time in helping me with my research and I wish you the very

best in your academic career.

Thank you so much for your military service.

Sincerely,

Alexandra Brandriff