A CASE STUDY OF COMBAT STUDENT VETERAN SUCCESS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

by

Mona Fazzina
Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Philosophy

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APPROVED BY:

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Abstract

The purpose of this case study was to gain a deeper understanding of the factors that support combat student veterans in a private institution of higher education. The theory guiding this study was Astin’s developmental theory of student involvement for higher education. The conceptual framework guiding the study was Vacchi’s model of student veteran support. The theory and conceptual framework explain the relationship between what these nontraditional students bring to the academic experience, the role of educators, and factors contributing to, or detracting from their success in higher education. Combat student veterans, and staff of support services were interviewed, and some participated in a focus group. They answered open-ended questions as related to the central research question “What are the factors that are supportive of combat student veterans at a private institution of higher education?” This was a single case study design with embedded multiple units of analysis. The sub-questions were designed to develop an in-depth description and analysis of key issues related to combat student veterans in higher education. Transcripts of collected data were analyzed to identify common themes and contextual information that were coded to develop and interpret meaning of the cases and lessons learned by using case assertions. The results of the study indicated that the quality of support services, caliber and characteristics of faculty and staff, and distinctive personal factors of combat student veterans were most supportive of combat student veterans in higher education. This study also yielded data indicating a need for a veteran-specific orientation session or course, and for targeted training for staff and faculty at institutions of higher education.

Keywords: veterans education, student veterans, higher education, support services
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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to all who have served in combat, to defend truth and liberty, with courage and integrity.

To the participants of this study: combat student veterans, and staff.

I also dedicate this work to my father, Late Col. Ebenezer Benedict (Retd.), VSM. He was in the Army Education Corp, Indian Ministry of Defense. He faithfully and proudly served in the Indian Armed Forces, receiving the Vishisht Seva Medal in 1984, for his distinguished service in Afghanistan. His legacy of excellence in military and civilian academic institutions was part of the inspiration for this work.

Finally, to my father’s colleagues and friends (including their families) in the Defence Forces of India, who have trained and led valiant troops in combating the enemies of our country with alacrity, be it on Land, Sea or Air. To name a few:

Lieutenant General (Dr.) J. R. Bhardwaj PVMS, AVSM, VSM, PHS
Colonel (Dr.) Dinesh Chandra Misra*
Group Captain R.P.G. Naidu (Retd.)
Major General R.P.R.C. Naidu (Retd.), VSM, AVSM.
Brigadier P. R. Prasad (Retd.)
Brigadier S. B. Ratnaparkhi* (Retd.)
Colonel Subhash Chandra Sareen (Retd.)

Thank you for the continued camaraderie and committed friendship spanning nearly five decades, which enriched not only his life, but continues to enrich ours as well.

*Deceased
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That the communication of thy faith may become effectual
by the acknowledging of every good thing which is in you in Christ Jesus.

Philemon v.6, The Holy Bible
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List of Abbreviations

Center for Disease Control (CDC)
Mild Traumatic Brain Injury (mTBI)
Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF)
Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF)
Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)
Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI)
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

Some student veterans struggle with transitioning from the military to the higher education environment. There is limited understanding regarding factors conducive to the success of student veterans and particularly of those who have suffered cognitive injuries. This paper outlines this problem with recommendations and suggestions for faculty, ancillary staff, and administrative staff at universities to increase retention, learning outcomes, and positive contributions to student veterans. To that end, this chapter discusses the issue of student veterans in higher education against the background of the institutional, relational, and internal factors that serve to support this nontraditional student demographic. The background consists of the historical, social, and theoretical context for student veterans in higher education. This chapter also includes the purpose and problem statements, the research questions, and definitions of key terms used throughout the present study.

Background

This section outlines the historical context that describes the reason for the influx of student veterans in higher education, the social context that outlines financial and political themes surrounding student veterans, and the theoretical context that focuses on theories used in student veteran literature.

Historical Context

The signing into law of the Servicemen’s Readjustment Act (also known as the GI Bill) in 1944 and the end of World War II gave rise to an increase in the student veteran population on college campuses. Later, the signing into law of the Post-9/11 GI Bill in 2008 further increased the ranks of student veterans in higher education (U.S. Department of Veterans’ Affairs, 2012).
Through these bills, the Department of Veterans Affairs has provided educational benefits to veterans and their families by equipping them to learn and develop professional skills in preparation for civilian life. Governmental provision of educational benefits for veterans is a way of compensating American veterans for military service (Altschuler & Blumin, 2009). The Servicemen’s Readjustment Act of 1944, which was the original GI Bill, put into place the programs and benefits that focus on helping veterans transition from the military into civilian life. These benefits included unemployment benefits, business loans, home loans, and educational opportunities. It was the educational benefit, and a vital part of the GI Bill (Olson, 1974). The GI Bill has provided educational assistance to service members, veterans, and their dependents through stipends for tuition and other expenses for college or trade schools. Initially, more than 2.2 million veterans pursued a college education between 1946 and 1950 (Clark, 1998; Serow, 2004; Thelin, 2004). This increased access to higher education for veterans and their families resulted in 5.2 million veterans, or 28% of all veterans, completing a postsecondary degree or credential between 1992 and 2017 (Postsecondary National Policy Institute, 2019).

The GI Bill has no end date, resulting in a growing population of student veterans in higher education.
Social Context

The years after WWII marked an increase in the societal, financial, and governmental support of student veterans. However, after the Korean and Vietnam Wars, the focus and attention on student veterans waned, and there was a lull in the scholarly inquiry into this student demographic. For political reasons, veterans from the Vietnam War era faced a societal stigma, and student retention literature in the 1970s began to focus on traditional students rather than nontraditional students. According to Olson (1974), the negative perceptions toward Vietnam war veterans were revealed in federal policy and reduced GI Bill benefits. The GI Bill of the Vietnam era was insufficient, and the Vietnam Education Assistance Program (VEAP) was developed to better the GI Bill of the Vietnam era (U.S. Department of Veterans’ Affairs 2013). The VEAP evolved into the Veterans Education Assistance Program offering a $2 to $1 government-match for education benefits. To further improve on the VEAP, the Montgomery GI Bill was established in 1985. It was planned and implemented by the U.S. military as a tool to recruit for an all-volunteer force. Eventually, the Post 9/11 GI Bill benefits were developed as an improvement to the Montgomery GI Bill (Vacchi & Berger, 2014).

The generous contemporary financial benefits afforded to veterans by the U.S. Government is an expression of gratitude for serving in the nation’s military (Shinseki, 2013). That said, this financial benefit is not a guarantee of educational success. For student veterans to succeed in college, there must be a good understanding of the unique stressors and needs of this student population, and universities need to invest in strategies and frameworks that support student veterans as they adapt from the military to the higher education academic environment (Vacchi & Berger, 2014).
The numbers of student veterans in higher education today warrant a closer look at how universities can support this growing population. In the last few decades, there has been an apparent lack of scholarly inquiry and attention toward student veterans as a unique demographic. More attention has been given to racial minorities, women, and students from underrepresented demographics. Since 2008, when the Post 9/11 GI Bill was enacted, a unique focus on student veterans due to the increase of student veterans in higher education began (Vacchi & Berger, 2014). By learning more about student veterans, and what contributes to their success, the stage can be set to ensure educational success for this immense group of nontraditional students.

**Theoretical Context**

Current literature on student veterans leans on Schlossberg’s 4S model (1981) as a theoretical framework (DiRamio et al., 2008; Livingston et al., 2011; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010; Van Dusen, 2012). However, this is a flawed approach as Schlossberg’s 4S Model is a counseling strategy, not a theory. Using Schlossberg’s Theory (1981) would have been more appropriate as exemplified in the scholarship of Diamond (2012) and Young (2012). Further, while there may be some overlap between adults in mid-career transition and student veterans in higher education, the complexity, and nuances of experiences of student veterans in college cannot be fully explained with a model that does not allow for a comprehensive approach (Vacchi & Berger, 2014). Not only do the transition experiences of student veterans potentially include identity shifts as they leave the military and enter college as adults, but student veterans between the ages of 17 and 25 are in the process of maturing as adults mentally, emotionally, and neurologically (Piaget, 1970/1972; Steinberg, 2007; Vacchi, 2011).
Although DiRamio’s model focuses on student veterans, it does so through the lens of Tinto’s theory of student attrition (1975, 1993) which was developed for traditional college students within the highly social context of the college campus. This inadequacy renders the model ineffective in astutely assessing the unique experiences of student veterans, a nontraditional population in higher education. A strength-based perspective on how student veterans succeed in college is needed.

This nontraditional demographic of postsecondary student veterans is lacking in comprehensive research. Hammond (2015) explored the experiences of combat student veterans in higher education, resulting in a stronger and truer representation of the college experiences of student veterans (Vacchi, et al., 2017). The transitions that veterans go through when entering higher education are not the same as traditional students’ experiences. Any attrition or lack of success in this student demographic should not be automatically attributed to traditional models of college attrition.

**Problem Statement**

The problem is that some student veterans struggle with transitioning from the military to the higher education environment, or when transitioning from combat to college (Kato et al., 2016) because the unique stressors that student veterans face can adversely affect their learning and education, and there is limited understanding regarding what composes the success of student veterans and especially of those who have suffered cognitive injuries. The transition from military to civilian life is challenging and can be a culture shock for student veterans (Kato et al., 2016). These aspiring students need a support system outside the military. Student veterans face stereotypical perceptions from other students regarding the military, veterans, and PTSD.
There has been an increased number of student veterans on college campuses as veterans seek higher education to prepare for a purposeful career and financial stability in civilian life. This demographic has unique challenges in the transition from the combat-related military environments to the college campus environment, heightening the need for colleges to have the right kind of support systems to ensure their academic success. There is a need for policies and programs tailored to address their unique needs (Borsari et al., 2017; Mobley et al., 2019).

**Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this case study was to gain a deeper understanding of the factors that support the success of combat student veterans in higher education. The central phenomenon was the experiences of student veterans in college that lead to successful outcomes, such as graduation or job attainment. “A student veteran is a student who is a current or former member of the Active Duty Military, the National Guard, or Reserves regardless of deployment status, combat experience or legal status as a veteran” (Vacchi, 2012, p. 17).

This research focus was framed by Astin’s developmental theory of student involvement for higher education (Astin, 1984; 1991). Astin’s inputs-environment-outcome (I-E-O) model (1984, 1991) is a diagrammatic representation of the theory, showing that student outcomes are a function of their demographic characteristics and their experiences in the higher education environment. In this model, college outcomes were viewed as functions of inputs, which are the demographic characteristics, family backgrounds, and academic and social experiences that students bring to the environment of higher education whether on or off-campus; and outcomes, which are students’ characteristics, knowledge, skills, attitudes, values, beliefs, and behaviors as they exist after college (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).
The conceptual model for this study was Vacchi’s model for student veteran support (Vacchi & Berger, 2014). Appropriately, this model situates within the environment of Astin’s I-E-O theory and focuses directly on the individual student veteran. The four tenets, or cornerstones, of the model support the successful degree completion of veterans (Vacchi & Berger, 2014). In this model, the vertical axis is aligned with the effectiveness of services for student veterans, and the horizontal axis is aligned with peer support, external campus support, and interactions with faculty and students in and out of the classroom. Based on the empirical work of Bean and Metzner (1985) and Weidman (1989), Vacchi’s model is the most grounded, and empirically sound model to explore the experiences of veterans in college.

**Significance of the Study**

This study has practical, theoretical, and empirical implications which are reported in Chapter 5. This study builds upon prior work by scholars in veteran studies. Results of this study could be used to improve the experience of student veterans in higher education, faculty and staff characteristics, and true veteran-friendliness of universities. It contributes to the knowledge base from each of the following perspectives.

**Practical Significance**

Student veterans should rightfully hope to feel welcomed and understood on traditional college campuses. Institutional factors, relational and peer, and internal factors that are supportive of student veterans can contribute to a successful academic experience making it beneficial not only for student veterans but ultimately for the institution and society as well (Branker, 2009; IVMF, 2017; Kelley et al., 2013). Data from this study can be used not only to improve the experiences of student veterans, but also to assist staff and higher education administrators to affect change and interact more meaningfully with students.
Theoretical Significance

The contribution of this study to the theoretical framework is the validation of Astin’s theory of student involvement (Astin, 1975, 1991, & Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). The contribution of this study to the conceptual framework and the model for student veteran support lies along the vertical and horizontal axes of Vacchi’s model for student veteran success (Vacchi & Berger) based on prior work by Bean & Metzner (1985), and Weidman (1989). This study also supported newer models of student veteran support that focus on the student veteran experience in college from a strength perspective. Specifically, Diamond’s (2012) Adaptive Military Transition Theory that renders a cohesive explanation of the individuality of each student veteran, in the larger context of their transitional journey to and through a new environment.

Empirical Significance

This study yielded data that can help universities create environments conducive to student veterans' success. Faculty, staff, and students can use this information to relate to student veterans with more emotional intelligence (Love et al., 2015). Additionally, policies, procedures, and operations at various support service offices can be improved so that student veterans are apt to use these services.

Research Questions

With a significant number of student veterans in higher education, gaps in understanding their unique experiences and needs in college abound. This study provided answers and evidence to guide programs and policies in higher education for student veterans, particularly related to what they need to succeed. This study also provided information to develop substantial direction and support for student veterans.
The following questions guided this study:

**Central Research Question**

What are the factors that are supportive of combat student veterans at a private institution of higher education? One of the characteristics of qualitative research is that usually, “multiple forms are data are gathered” (Creswell, 2018, p. 43). These included interviews, observations, and documents. The various forms of data were gathered, reviewed, sorted, and organized categorically and in themes that encompassed all the sources. In addition, this overarching question for this qualitative study was designed to yield multi-factorial information about support systems for student veterans in higher education institutions. The question, therefore, had substance, as it asked what the study is about, and the question also has form, as I asked a “what” question (Yin, 2018, p. 11).

Support for student veterans in higher education means not only support with financial and administrative procedures and social clubs but also clinical service programs. Accessing clinical care on campus for student veterans can help facilitate their transition from military service to higher education.

**Sub-Question One**

What institutional services do combat student veterans perceive as supportive of their success in higher education? This question was vital to this study because there is a “lack of systematic information about the landscape of support” for student veterans in higher education (Hitt et al., 2015). Literature within the past few years about student veterans in higher education lacks consensus on institutional programming that may benefit student veterans as the focus has been primarily on traditional students’ attrition (Tinto, 1975) with attempts to apply those concepts to a nontraditional student demographic (Vacchi, 2012).
Sub-Question Two

What are the academic interactions of combat student veterans in higher education? This question was based on literature suggesting that personal and relational factors between student veterans and faculty, family members and colleagues, have served as motivators toward academic success (Norman et al., 2015; Williston & Roemer, 2017). Positive interactions with faculty and the campus community facilitate positive outcomes for nontraditional students in college (Weidman, 1989). Tinto (1993) also acknowledged that academic interactions with faculty can influence the quality of academic experiences of nontraditional students.

Sub-Question Three

What personal characteristics of combat student veterans contribute to their success in higher education? This question was based on Astin’s developmental theory of student involvement for higher education (Astin, 1984; 1991), in which he explained that the academic curriculum alone is insufficient for students. The curriculum must elicit from the student the psychological effort, the time and energy needed for real learning. What students bring within themselves to the college campus is an indicator and predictor of their success in higher education. Personal and relational factors between student veterans and faculty, family members, and colleagues have motivated academic success (Norman et al., 2015; Williston & Roemer, 2017).

Sub-Question Four

How do combat student veteran support relationships affect their success in higher education? Some personal and relational factors between student veterans that serve to motivate them toward academic success are their peers and colleagues (Norman et al., 2015; Williston & Roemer, 2017). Staff at higher education institutions should be trained to dialogue appropriately
with student veterans so as not to inadvertently isolate and misunderstand them. Making disapproving remarks of the military causes student veterans to disengage and feel unsupported and misunderstood. The National Survey of Student Engagement in 2010 reported less engagement and the perception of deficient support from the campus community, particularly amongst combat veterans (NSSE, 2010). Although one of the reasons for this difference was the greater family and financial obligations that student veterans had, compared to traditional college students, it only served to reinforce the fact that the campus community of faculty, administrators, and staff, were positioned to influence the experience of student veterans positively. Regardless of any reasons for dissatisfaction that student veterans may have for their college experience, the campus community plays a role in student veterans' educational experience and provides opportunities for meaningful interactions. Higher education institutions serve to educate and support student veterans, faculty and staff, and traditional students and provide interventions to remediate and alleviate the psychological effects of combat that hinder learning (Love et al., 2015).

**Definitions**

1. *Combat veteran* – Defined for this study as a current or former service member who experienced kinetic warfare while deployed to a combat zone. Some examples of kinetic warfare include being shot at, or shooting at, an enemy combatant, being bombarded by indirect fire by an enemy, and being in, or very near, a vehicle struck by an improvised explosive device or roadside bomb. While excluding those who have not experienced kinetic warfare, I remain exceedingly respectful of the service and sacrifice of these conventionally defined war and combat veterans.
2. Force multiplier – This refers to a combination of factors that allows for greater accomplishments than without it. It is used to amplify the effort to increase output. In military science, it refers to “the effect produced by a capability that, when added to and employed by a combat force, significantly increases the combat potential of that force and thus enhances the probability of successful mission accomplishment” (Oxford University Press, 2001).

3. Mild traumatic brain injury (mTBI) — Loss of consciousness lasting less than 30 minutes, any alteration in consciousness, or post-traumatic amnesia lasting less than 24 hours; some definitions include a Glasgow Coma Scale score of 13 to 15. Symptoms include transient to no focal neurologic signs and usually negative neuroimaging (Hoge et al., 2009).

4. Student veteran – “A student veteran is a student who is a current or former member of the Active Duty Military, the National Guard, or Reserves regardless of deployment status, combat experience or legal status as a veteran” (Vacchi, 2012, p. 17).

5. Traumatic brain injury (TBI) – A traumatically induced structural injury and physiological disruption of brain function as a result of an external force, indicated by new onset or worsening of at least one of the following clinical signs immediately following the event:

   • any period of loss of or a decreased level of consciousness
   • any loss of memory for events immediately before or after the injury
   • any alteration in mental state at the time of the injury (e.g., confusion, disorientation, slowed thinking)
neurological deficits (e.g., weakness, loss of balance, change in vision, praxis, paresis or plegia, sensory loss, aphasia) may or may not be transient.

and intracranial lesion. (O’Neil et al., 2013).

6. Vestibular rehabilitation – This is an exercise-based treatment program designed to promote vestibular adaptation and substitution. It is a specialized physical therapy that uses specialized exercises to improve gaze stabilization, balance, and gait. This treatment results in reduced vertigo, improved postural stability, and an improved ability to perform the activities of daily living (Han et al., 2011).

7. Vestibular system – This system includes the balance system that uses the eyes, muscles and joints, and the inner ear (vestibule) and the communication between these and the brain. The peripheral vestibular system includes the labyrinth and vestibule of the inner ear and the pathways to the brain and brainstem. The central vestibular system consists of the brain and the brainstem. Some symptoms of vestibular disorders include headache, fatigue or drowsiness, blurry vision, dizziness, imbalance, vertigo, brain fog, tinnitus, hearing loss, vision impairments, nausea, cognitive changes, psychological changes, motion sickness.

8. Yellow Ribbon Program – This program allows degree-granting institutions of higher education in the United States to voluntarily enter into an agreement with the U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs to fund tuition expenses that are not covered by the Post-9/11 GI Bill. Degree-granting institutions of higher education that participate in this program can contribute up to 50% of the tuition expenses and this amount is matched by the U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs.
Summary

The purpose of this case study was to gain a deeper understanding of the factors that support combat student veterans in a private institution of higher education, especially for those who have suffered invisible injuries. Institutional factors, internal factors, peers, academic interactions, campus services, transitional courses, orientations, and social connections with the military all serve student veterans in a way that elicits their involvement and gives them a richer academic experience.

Student veterans in higher education are nontraditional students; however, their unique background and need for appropriate support in higher education warrant studies focused on strategies that contribute to their success. Student veterans face unique stressors that affect their learning and education, such as combat experiences, the rigors of military training and life, and some bring invisible injuries with them to college.

Institutions of higher education can support student veterans in meaningful ways that contribute to their success. Institutional support systems focused on student veterans' specific needs and concerns, strategies to facilitate access to these services, and military-friendly policies and procedures are all helpful in creating a thriving environment. Learning about military culture, positioning to serve this student population, and being approachable, go a long way toward creating a welcoming and supportive atmosphere.
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

A systematic review of the literature was conducted to explore difficulties that some student veterans have as they transition from the military to civilian life, particularly as related to higher education, and how this affects their integration into higher education and their academic outcomes. This chapter presents a review of current literature and research related to the topic of study. First, the relevant theories and integration from the combat zone to the classroom are discussed. Then, a synthesis of recent literature regarding challenges that student veterans face in the college classroom, the role of support services and academic interactions to improve student veterans' learning, and the necessity of training educators to assist student veterans in achieving academic success. Finally, the literature surrounding the factors which lead to the successful integration of student veterans in the higher education environment are addressed. In the end, a gap in the literature is identified, presenting a likely need for the current study.

Theoretical and Conceptual Frameworks

The role of having a theoretical framework for qualitative inquiry is significant as it influences the research process. A theoretical framework provides an “explanation of a certain set of observed phenomena in terms of a system of constructs and laws that relate these constructs to each other” (Gall et al., 2007, p. 32). This literature review examined how the phenomenon of cognitive deficits and learning difficulties due to mTBI in student veterans relates to the constructs of Astin’s Developmental Theory of Student Involvement for higher education (Astin, 1984; 1991), and the model for student veteran support (Vacchi & Berger, 2014). Constructs, constitutively defined, are “descriptive labels that refer to phenomena of interest” (Gall et al., 2007, p. 36). The theoretical framework was the lens through which this
study was viewed. Astin’s theory of student involvement for higher education (Astin, 1984; 1991) has been tested and validated and is part of the body of knowledge in scholarly literature. The conceptual framework outlined the research problem, explained how it was studied and the direction and intent of the research, and ultimately, the relationship between the variables in the study (Grant & Osanloo, 2014). The conceptual framework is a system of concepts, assumptions, and beliefs that undergird this research (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Vacchi’s conceptual model of student veteran support outlines the key constructs that are inter-related, and as asserted by Camp’s (2001) description of a conceptual framework, it represents what has been learned to explain the phenomenon being studied. Vacchi’s model captures the experiences of student veterans while in the environment in Astin’s I-E-O model, and thus these models were most appropriate for exploring the experiences of successful student veterans.

The purpose of this case study was to gain a deeper understanding of the factors that support combat student veterans in a private institution of higher education. Appropriately, the theoretical framework that framed this study was Astin’s developmental theory of student involvement for higher education (Astin, 1984; 1991). He described student involvement as concrete initiative and acts, the student’s physical and psychological input into their academic experience (Astin, 1984, p. 518). He explained that having a static curriculum for students is insufficient. The curriculum must draw psychological effort from student, and an investment of energy, so that true learning and development occur. This means that educators, faculty, and the campus community all need to focus on what the student brings to the academic experience and what the student does. This resembles the psychological concept of motivation as an intrinsic factor. Astin’s theory of student involvement (Astin 1984; 1991) was rooted in his longitudinal study of college dropouts (Astin, 1975), in which he linked every reason for attrition to a deficit
in student involvement. In his longitudinal study, Astin explained that the influence of environmental circumstances on students’ chances of successful graduation from college is significant (1975). In addition to students’ academic and career progress, their experiences since entering college should be examined. Astin’s three-part I-E-O model offers that inputs, environment, and outcomes explain success or failure in college. He explained that student outcomes are a function of students’ demographic characteristics, or inputs, and their experiences in college, the environment. Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) noted that the students’ demographic characteristics, family background, and the combination of past academic and social experiences that they bring to the college environment all help shape their college experience. While in college, the programs, culture, and experiences into which they immerse themselves add further to their college experience. Finally, these factors combine to produce the college graduate with their resultant values, skillset, and behavior (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Astin’s developmental theory of student involvement for higher education (Astin, 1984; 1991) aligns with and supports this study’s purpose, research questions, significance, and design (Grant & Osanloo, 2014).

This study's conceptual framework was Vacchi’s model for student veteran support (Vacchi & Berger, 2014). In this model, the individual student veteran is the central focus of conceptualizing the veteran’s experiences in college (Fig.1). The model includes the student veterans’ college experience related to support, services, academic interactions, and transitions. Envisioned through the theoretical lens of student involvement, we can identify the components of student success and any well-intentioned, albeit misguided, efforts on the part of the higher education institution. The vertical axis comprises the student veteran’s institutional services to transition successfully from the military to civilian life. This is where administrators tend to
focus their efforts to support student veterans. These efforts have the potential to influence student veterans toward success or disrupt success. Initiatives arising from the constructs on the vertical axis are those that view student veterans from a deficit perspective. They facilitate transitions and support the goals of student veterans (Jones, 2020; Vacchi, 2020).

The horizontal axis comprises support systems, both peer and external campus supports, and academic interactions with peers and faculty in and out of the classroom. These were derived from the conceptual model of nontraditional undergraduate student attrition by Bean and Metzner (1985), and Weidman’s (1989) model of student retention in postsecondary education. Weidman noted that non-college reference groups could be significant in the development of nontraditional students. It should be noted that having support systems that student veterans need in higher education is one thing while ensuring that the support systems are accessible and that student veterans are encouraged and feel free to avail themselves of the services, is another.

Vacchi and Berger (2014) argue that for student veterans, the connection between non-college reference groups and veteran success as college students is twice as great because not only does external support help veterans while in college, but military socialization extends into their college lives even after they leave the military. The quality of interactions between student veterans, faculty, and peers directly influences academic experiences and thereby influences academic success (Jones, 2020; Vacchi, 2020). Support for student veterans in this context comes from off-campus interactions and on-campus interactions. Off-campus interactions could be between peers, friends, family, church community, and other veterans. Their support of student veterans can be significant as this nontraditional student population aims to achieve their goal of earning a college degree. On-campus interactions could be faculty, administrators, and staff: someone who makes such a positive impression on a student veteran that this person begins
to be a success-influencer, spurring on the student veteran toward success (Jones, 2020; Vacchi, 2020). Academic interactions influence academic experiences like no other, especially considering that the primary goal for student veterans in college is to get a college degree (Jones, 2020; Vacchi, 2020).

**Figure 1**

*Vacchi’s Model for Student Veteran Support*

In Vacchi’s model, student veterans occupy the central position between the vertical and horizontal axes depicting the areas that impact them. At the top are the general services created for all students as well as those unique to the veteran experience. Rather than presuming student veterans are a problem that must be solved, this model prescribes a strengths perspective of supporting veterans by addressing their individual needs. The vertical axis also includes programming support from the literature targeted toward navigating the complexities of transitioning from the military to the university.

The foci of the horizontal axis round out the support systems by including peer and on-campus support and the profound effect that varied academic interactions have on student veterans (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Weidman, 1989). Bean and Metzner (1985) argue that in the case of nontraditional students, such as student veterans, the connection between non-college-related influences on the development of college students is twice as great; not only does the influence of the military shape college students currently serving in the National Guard or Reserves, but military socialization extends into their college lives even after they leave the military (Vacchi & Berger, 2014). The identification of student veterans with the military is strong; military culture is demanding and associated with a high degree of discipline (Vacchi, 2012). Entrance into college does not automatically nullify or reduce that sense of identity as student veterans bring with them innate military culture (Vacchi & Berger, 2014). The goal is not to reduce their identification with the military but to ensure that the support given to this nontraditional student population by higher education institutions is useful.

Bean and Metzner (1985) explain that external support factors are important for nontraditional students because their peers, friends, family, and employers are usually external to the academic institution. Their conceptual model of nontraditional undergraduate student
attrition excludes social integration as an influencing factor in attrition decisions, based on various prior studies that revealed the lack of evidence of a positive correlation between social integration and persistence (Martin, 1974; Pascarella & Chapman, 1983; Roesler, 1971; White, 1972). Vacchi and Berger (2014) reinforce this concept by exploring the limitations of applying models developed from traditional college students’ research to nontraditional students. While Vacchi and Berger (2014) acknowledge that there may be some commonalities between traditional and nontraditional students in higher education, the marked differences warrant different strategies by institutions to recruit and successfully retain nontraditional students. Socialization patterns of nontraditional students are not to be compared with those of traditional students because nontraditional students have shorter, less involved, and more sporadic interactions with their peers and faculty (Bean & Metzner, 1985). They are also affected to a greater degree than traditional students by their external environment. Indeed, just as the social integration into the institution heavily affects the traditional student, the lack of social integration into the institution is a defining characteristic of the nontraditional student and thus requires a different theory to explain contributing success factors (Bean & Metzner, 1985). Even in their definition of the nontraditional student, they highlight that the nontraditional student’s primary goal is not socialization or integration but what the university offers academically (p.489).

**Related Literature**

Related literature on student veterans (Livingstone et al., 2011; Radford, 2009; Vacchi, 2012) indicates that while there have been measures taken to support student veterans in higher education, much still needs to be accomplished to truly support this nontraditional student population in ways that are meaningful and effective for them. First, this is a nontraditional group of students. Second, the definition and parameters that identify student veterans should be
established. Third, in selecting literature to make a point, we must not attempt to make disparate comparisons. Student veterans are more accurately viewed as a nontraditional demographic and a group that has shown promise of success (Vacchi & Berger, 2014). The assumption that there is a problem with student veterans that needs to be solved is presumptuous at best. From an open stance of a broad definition of student veterans and an enquiring mindset on what factors contribute to their success, past deficit models of understanding student veterans may only be as strong as their weakest points (DiRamio et al., 2008).

The student veteran is at the center of the I-E-O model without being identified as the sole input, the sole environment, or the sole output. Instead of focusing on perceived deficits and weaknesses, the goal is first to understand this nontraditional student demographic, discern their needs, and then determine ways for higher education institutions to provide appropriate inputs and environments to secure the best output. For this reason, Tinto’s (1975, 1993) theories of student attrition need not be thoughtlessly applied to student veterans. His theories focused on traditional students and suggested that social integration on residential college campuses was a prerequisite to academic success and retention. Traditional students are a group disparate from student veterans. The translation of knowledge and findings from one group to another requires foundational coherence and marked similarities, not dissimilarities, in the two groups. The impact of military experiences of veterans contributes significantly to the military culture inherent in student veterans. The prior input into the student veteran requires faculty and administrators at higher education institutions to support student veterans and foster scholastic success.
Military Experiences of Veterans

By its nature, military life experience serves as a maturing and hardening experience for the young adult (Vacchi, 2011). Military culture's uniqueness is due to its organizational structure, rules, boundaries, and an obvious chain of command (Redmond et al., 2015). Military culture is institutionally oriented and cohesive. A military identity is a result of military socialization (Moore, 2019; Soeters et al., 2006).

Training Experiences

As eligible recruits enter the military after graduating from high school, the process of developing recruits is rigorous, with the intent to develop disciplined, fit, specialized, and mission-ready individuals into military service members (U.S. Marines, 2020; U.S. Department of the Army, 2019; U.S. Navy Academy Naval Service Training Command, 2011). Military experience is a turning point in the life of an individual (Jackson et al., 2012), and the training upon entry is highly structured and demanding regarding nutritional intake and physical fitness training (Bartlett & Stankorb, 2017). Military experiences affect and alter life trajectories, and some influences persist five years after training and even after veterans enter college or the workforce (Jackson et al., 2012). Bootcamp experiences in the military are designed to break down civilian status and forge a new identity as a military recruit (Arkin & Dobrofsky, 1978; Jackson et al., 2012; Redmond et al., 2015). The recruit is immersed in a process that has the strength to enforce behavior change and socialize the recruit to the military recruit (Arkin & Dobrofsky, 1978; Jackson et al., 2012). The process is undeniably harsh, humiliating, and exhausting, both physically and emotionally (Redmond et al., 2015; Soeters et al., 2006), and serves to expose them to a new culture and society. Those who undergo military training have lower neuroticism, and demonstrate flexibility and maturity with life experiences, even if their
military experience does not involve combat (Jackson et al., 2012). Generally, military service members consider military service a maturing, life-changing experience, rather than a war, although those who have experienced combat undergo unique personal change (Elder, et al., 1991; 2001).

**Combat Experiences**

Veterans who have witnessed their colleagues being wounded or killed in combat, as well as those who have been exposed to “friendly” fire, are at high risk for combat-related PTSD (Pietrzak et al., 2011). Regardless of prior combat experience, the probability of multiple physical symptoms is much greater in those deployed into combat zones (McCutchan et al., 2016). Combat-related experiences increase the risk for adverse mental and physical health outcomes for which an integrated healthcare approach post-deployment has been recommended (President’s Commission on Care for America’s Returning Wounded Warriors, 2007; Vanderploeg et al., 2012; Moore et al., 2017).

Over 2.2 million military personnel were deployed in two foreign wars within the past 20 years (Johnson et al., 2014). The war in Afghanistan (Operation Enduring Freedom, OEF), and the war in Iraq (Operation Iraqi Freedom, OIF) resulted in over 6,500 fatalities, 48,000 injuries, which include both psychological and invisible trauma, as well as physical injuries, and over 250,000 veterans of OEF and OIF have been diagnosed with TBI (Bhatnagar et al., 2019; Frain, et al., 2010). This is a conservative estimate as some with mTBI Military do not seek medical treatment. Those exposed to trauma in OEF/OIF had a survival rate of over 90%, which was due to advances in rendering medical treatment to military personnel and technological advances in their protective gear (Hyer, 2006). This means that they survive with severe injuries requiring a long transition and road to rehabilitation from injured military personnel to student veterans.
Injured service members of OEF/OIF emerge with polytraumatic injuries that require intensive and multidisciplinary care within the American healthcare system (Frain, et al., 2010).

The Human Vestibular System

The purpose of the human vestibular system is to detect and respond appropriately to the human body's spatial position and motion. This exquisitely sensitive and accurate system is monitored and calibrated by the cerebellum. Movement-related informational inputs to the vestibular system include the inner ear signals (vestibular component), the sensation of spatial position (proprioception), visual signals, and intended movement (motor commands) (Hain & Helminski, 2014; Herdman & Clendaniel, 2014).

The peripheral vestibular system lies deep within the skull, within each side of the head, within the inner ear, with the air-filled middle ear laterally, and the temporal bone of the skull, medially. It is posterior to the cochlea, which is responsible for hearing. The peripheral vestibular system is responsible for sensing angular and linear acceleration, and the movement of the head in various directions and planes (Hain & Helminski, 2014; Herdman & Clendaniel, 2014). The central vestibular system includes the vestibular nuclear complex, the cerebellum, the reticular activating system, midbrain, and higher centers of cortical function (Farrell, 2019).

Being oriented in space and walking upright are basic and critical abilities for humans, therefore injuries to the vestibular system are compensated by multiple vestibular repair mechanisms. Plasticity aims to restore normal function so that the body seeks to compensate for deficits by substituting and adapting. In fact, up to 50% of vestibular function can be compensated for in a way that makes the injury invisible to a casual observer. However, a sophisticated clinician with specialized training can detect this problem. It is rare for those with vestibular injuries to achieve a 100% recovery, and vestibular rehabilitation is necessary to
alleviate symptoms and to improve function (Farrell, 2019; Hain & Helminski, 2014; Herdman & Clendaniel, 2014). Adaptive repair of peripheral vestibular deficits is extraordinarily efficient, although injuries inflicted upon the central vestibular take much more work and time to recover, and generally prove to be more problematic. This is the vulnerability of the vestibular system (Hain & Helminski, 2014; Herdman & Clendaniel, 2014).

The vestibular system is highly sophisticated, and exquisitely sensitive to information. The rapid and accurate processing of informational inputs and outputs is not only intricate and complex but also critical to survival. If a part of the vestibular system is subject to injury, the human body uses multiple sensory and motor pathways, along with a competent central vestibular repair capability. While injuries to the peripheral vestibular system are fairly responsive to treatment, injuries to the central vestibular system tend to be recalcitrant to repair (Hain & Helminski, 2014; Herdman & Clendaniel, 2014).

Mild Traumatic Brain Injuries

“TBI is a traumatically induced structural injury and physiologic disruption of brain function as a result of an external force” (VA, DoD, 2016). An encompassing definition of TBI is “damage to the brain, resulting from an external force such as an impact, penetration from a projectile object, rapid acceleration/deceleration forces, or blast waves” (Herdman & Clendaniel, 2014, p. 504). TBIs are classified as mild, moderate, or severe based on the Glasgow Coma Scale ratings, the presence of loss of consciousness, or post-traumatic amnesia. In this classification, the severity of TBI is not based on the type of impairments that the individual has (Table 1). The severity of TBI is categorized as mild, moderate, or severe, depending on the Glasgow Coma Scale ratings, loss of consciousness, and any post-traumatic amnesia.
Table 1

Severity Classification for Traumatic Brain Injury

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Mild</th>
<th>Moderate</th>
<th>Severe</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Glasgow Coma Scale</td>
<td>13-15</td>
<td>9-12</td>
<td>3-8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loss of Consciousness</td>
<td>0-30 minutes</td>
<td>&lt;30 minutes to &lt;24 hours</td>
<td>&gt;24 hours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-traumatic amnesia</td>
<td>&lt;1 day</td>
<td>&gt;1 day but &lt; 7 days</td>
<td>&gt; 7 days</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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There is a wide range of levels of frequency of mTBI or PTSD in veterans, ranging from 0-89% (Haber et al., 2016; Carlson et al., 2011). Although studies vary in the variables employed, there is the consensus among the American Veterans Health Administration and the Department of Defense that mTBI in veterans should be identified and treated early (Veterans Administration Task Force, 2007; Veterans of America, 2007; Department of Veterans Affairs & National Institute of Mental Health, 2006).

Veterans with worse PTSD report increased symptoms related to vestibular dysfunction (Haber et al., 2016), and the need for reporting vestibular symptoms in veterans with PTSD has been established. Vestibular symptoms are a significant source of disability in veterans (Haber et al., 2016). The results of the Dizziness Handicap Inventory used in this study also established a significant impact on quality of life (QoL) due to vestibular symptoms.
Prevalence of Vestibular Injuries and mTBI Among Veterans

Injuries to the auditory and vestibular apparatus in the inner ear are common in veterans with blast-related injuries and auditory dysfunction, in particular, is the single most prevalent service-connected disability in veterans (Fausti et al., 2009). Complicating this grim fact, sensorineural hearing loss is a type of injury that progresses and advances with age, unlike other physical injuries. Exposure to blasts on the battlefield results in a 35 to 100 percent incidence rate of sensorineural hearing loss (Lew et al., 2007), and it is the single most prevalent type of hearing loss in veterans with blast-related injuries. One societal impact of PTSD and mTBI is that these injuries are invisible, not overt. Often, all may seem to be well to a casual observer unless the student veteran chooses to disclose the injury (Rattray et al., 2019). The combat veteran transitioning from the military to civilian life is often also transitioning to the higher education experience. They pursue their educational goals with the GI Bill and may find problems with memory and concentration surface after they begin their academic experience (Rattray et al., 2019).

Blast Induced and Impact Related TBI. Exposure to blast waves occurs in explosions during industrial accidents and military operations, and is a major cause of head injuries, with over 80% of battlefield injuries due to blast exposure (Hoffer et al., 2010). In blast exposures, before the individual hears the noise of the explosion, the pressure from the blast wave is felt, and this pressure wave is the primary reason for the brain injury. The symptoms and injury patterns of blast induced TBI are complex, and involve multiple systems (Hoffer et al., 2010). The pressure wave can cause tremendous middle and inner ear damage, as well as injury to components of the vestibular system. The trauma and sequelae from blast-induced head trauma, or concussions, can be greater than from impact-related head trauma, with symptoms being more
persistent, and extending into the subacute and chronic phases, and accompanied by greater hearing loss, post-traumatic spatial disorientation, and cognitive dysfunction (Hoffer et al., 2010). After-effects of close-range blast-induced concussions are also more persistent than the effects of blunt concussions, even if the veteran had no symptoms of a concussion at the time of exposure (Robinson et al., 2015).

**Figure 2**

*Mechanism of Blast-induced Concussions*

![Diagram of Blast-induced Concussions](image)

*Note:* A diagrammatic representation of how the wave from a blast can injure the brain.

Neurocognitive testing, including functional MRIs, are an integral part of assessing a concussed individual, and objective data rather than subjective reports of symptoms should be used in determining an individual’s progress (Chen et al., 2007; Covassin et al., 2009). An injury
to a developing brain can easily lead to longer-lasting changes in the individual’s cognitive potential, even if there is little evidence of a deficit or dysfunction initially (Giza & Hovda, 2014). A developing brain has not yet fully matured, and maturation of the human brain occurs over the first 24 years of life, through adolescence and adulthood (Crone, 2013).

**Vestibular Rehabilitation for mTBI.** Management for mTBI is presently based on research on sport-related concussions and acceleration/deceleration injuries regardless of the causative factors, even though the prevalence of comorbid health conditions in veterans with TBIs is greater than that of civilians (Bhatnagar et al., 2019). Symptoms span a wide range, from headaches, to sleep-related problems, seizures, and comas. Bhatnagar et al. (2019) state that vestibular physical therapy may be helpful and that it is the mainstay of treatment for dysfunctions of the vestibular system, including those involving visual dysfunction. Untreated neurosensory deficits after TBIs can lead to disability and should be diagnosed and treated promptly and accurately. Visual dysfunctions and oculomotor dysfunctions are prevalent in 50-90% of patients with TBI (Alvarez et al., 2012; D’Silva et al., 2020; Mac Donald et al., 2017; Samadani et al., 2015).

While student veteran support involves academic, social, administrative, and financial supports, the concept of clinical support on campus for relatively invisible injuries is not yet one that has been commonly operationalized in higher education institutions to meet veterans where they are – on campus. Timely identification and treatment of invisible injuries following military service can improve outcomes, and partnerships in the community would be beneficial (Department of Veterans Affairs and the Department of Defense, 2017). Another reason to have clinical and health services in higher education institutions for PTSD and mTBI is that most student veterans work and have families and children. They have difficulty leaving to attend a
clinical appointment off-campus. Even if the invisible injury affects their academic learning and quality of life (O’Connor et al., 2018).

Collaboration with outside organizations to provide robust and comprehensive support services on campus while also working with the offices of disability services on campus to provide supports for students in the higher education classroom would be beneficial for higher education institutions (O’Connor et al., 2018). For example, physical therapists treat not only physical conditions but also cognitive and vestibular conditions that are a result of impact-related or blast-related concussions, TBI, PTSD, migraine headaches, and the sequelae of oculomotor symptoms. Physical therapists who specialize in concussion and vestibular rehabilitation can evaluate and treat invisible injuries of combat in vestibular rehabilitation (Yorke et al., 2016).

While student support services in higher education institutions are many and varied, student veterans need access to this kind of clinical care on campus.

Insights into an effective infrastructure of support services for student veterans can also be gained from a recent study that assessed academic functioning and the service satisfaction of student veterans who used the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) health services on a college campus (O’Connor et al., 2018). For this student demographic, the most common difficulties related to learning in the classroom were information retention, meeting academic deadlines, and socialization with traditional students. The presence of PTSD or TBI related cognitive symptoms can hinder learning and affect academic outcomes as it impairs memory and concentration. Multiple studies within the past ten years have identified that healthcare utilization among student veterans is low, with nearly 60% of veterans with PTSD not engaged in VHA care (Friedman, 2004; Kim et al., 2010; Sharp et al., 2015).
In a study of college students with mild TBI, the authors identified deficiencies in episodic memory and lower processing speeds, among other problems (Lee et al., 2020). Cognitive and psychosocial functions were affected adversely. A strong recommendation for early detection of mild mTBI is not new. Students with mTBI face tremendous pressures of academic demands, along with the necessity of reintegrating into civilian life, taking care of their families and jobs, and any training schedules. Dealing with this is challenging enough, but the addition of a TBI makes it profoundly burdensome (Lee et al., 2020). Forty-five percent of higher education institutions stated that the healthcare needs of student veterans were a pressing issue (Cook & Kim, 2009).

Veterans with mTBI demonstrate a decline in cognitive function and executive function and this can result in time away from school or work (Karr et al., 2019; Murray & Lennon, 2017), and this is true for student-athletes with mTBI and concussions as well (Reneker et al., 2019). Studies have shown that these symptoms, which affect executive function and learning, can be alleviated with vestibular rehabilitation, and can benefit from these physical therapy interventions (Karr et al., 2019; Kontos et al., 2018; Murray & Lennon, 2017; Reneker et al., 2019).

The best outcomes with vestibular rehabilitation occur when administered as close to the day of injury as possible and continued until there is a resolution of symptoms (Reneker et al., 2019). However, there has also been evidence that vestibular rehabilitation, when administered to those who have intractable mTBI, has been useful provided the approach involves targeted interventions (Broglio et al., 2015; Kontos et al., 2018).

Vestibular rehabilitation includes gaze stabilization exercises, habituation exercises, oculomotor exercises, gait and balance, and tests and outcome measures that help diagnose and
treat symptoms such as vertigo, motion sickness, headaches, photo-sensitivity, concentration, focus, tracking with eyes, reading, cervical posture, pain, and self-management of chronic symptoms (Herdman & Clendaniel, 2014). Sessions commence with an initial evaluation by a physical therapist specialized in vestibular rehabilitation, followed by treatment sessions, including a home exercise program (Murray & Lennon, 2017). For those student veterans who experience these difficulties in higher education due to their medical history as related to military service, the need for on-site, campus access to vestibular rehabilitation may be helpful. A delay in starting treatments and continuing treatments can result in unfortunate development and maintenance of post-concussive symptoms (Rigg & Mooney, 2011).

**Veterans in Higher Education**

Student veterans have the potential to be leaders in society, given their discipline and wisdom they may have gained from their sacrifices and injuries; this coupled with a commitment from institutions of higher education to serve their needs as they reintegrate into society, can help launch this demographic into an enhanced quality of life (Branker, 2009).

A qualitative study by Kato et al. (2016) showed that seven themes emerged in the readjustment phase occurring in student veterans between deployment to civilian life. These are (a) the transition from the military to civilian life is challenging, (b) veterans need a support system outside the military, (c) readapting to the culture of civilian life was a shock, (d) veterans have to battle stereotypes, (e) there are difficulties with taming the fight-or-flight response in civilian life, (f) veterans have to deal with attitudes about mental illness, and (g) they need to find meaning in a new life to give them perspective and purpose to move forward. Success in higher education requires the ability to harness the power of executive function, which involves higher-order thinking such as goal setting, planning, time management, and organizational skills.
A quantitative study explored the adverse effect of impaired executive functioning and impaired cognition, on educational outcomes, in veterans with mTBI (Karr et al., 2019). For universities, establishing and maintaining connections with student veterans is singularly beneficial to their success (IVMF, 2017). When universities proactively create an environment in which student veterans can pursue academic and professional achievements in a supportive environment, they help student veterans find purpose and meaning within society and to make positive contributions to society (IVMF, 2017). In other words, universities can help student veterans achieve academic success by understanding their difficulties and creating an environment in which student veterans feel a sense of purpose, significance, and support.

Student veterans in higher education institutions come with life experiences and a mindset toward service and sacrifice, which may be unknown to traditional students (Zalaznick, 2019). Their experience in the military gives them a “greater self-efficacy, enhanced identity” and also a deep sense of purpose, proper “pride and camaraderie” (Litz & Orsillo, 2004, p. 21). If transitioning from the military into higher education is one of the significant challenges for student veterans, the other challenge is dealing with current and possible disabilities. Higher education institutions that are intentional and strategic in developing services with the strengths and difficulties of student veterans in mind, position themselves to succeed in recruiting and retaining these students while also fulfilling an obligation to this outstanding, nontraditional student demographic. By providing an excellent education for student veterans, higher education institutions will discover that student veterans can contribute to the institution for good in society (Kelley et al., 2013).
Misconceptions about Student Veterans

Historically, there has been a somewhat erroneous idea that veterans lack intelligence (Olson, 1974) and that those who have served in the military have eroded academic abilities (Frederiksen & Schrader, 1950). In fact, in the study by Frederiksen & Schrader (1950), veterans’ performance in all the measured variables was remarkably superior to that of non-veterans. This validated the study by Thompson and Pressey (1948) that demonstrated the same, and these authors “concluded that the superior record of the veterans is a complex product of maturity, wide experience, motivation, and relative freedom from financial needs” (p. 252). Interestingly, Tanielian and Jaxcox (2008) found that there is a correlation between invisible injuries, such as PTSD and TBI and lower education levels, which suggests that the pipeline for student veterans has a significant percentage of wounded warriors. However, Vacchi and Berger (2014) contest the veracity of this conclusion because the predominance of servicemembers involved in direct combat are enlisted members who typically do not have a college education. Subsequently, the results of a study that evaluated the relationships between PTSD and measures of intelligence in veterans (Shura et al., 2020) indicated that PTSD was not associated with lower Intelligence Quotient (IQ) scores in combat student veterans.

Veterans show a strong commitment to organizations and a sense of connection and responsibility to an institution they identify with. Part of the reason for this is that the military is skilled at acclimatizing its members to the roles and responsibilities that serve the organization. A sense of unity, cohesiveness, teamwork, and responsibility is inculcated in them, and there is bred in them the capacity to transition smoothly between various roles within the group. For example, this translates into less burnout, more vocational satisfaction, and greater efficiency for employers. These positive traits are sustained across civilian settings, and this includes
institutions of higher education. This strong sense of commitment by student veterans endows them with a sense of perseverance, making them an asset to higher education (IVMF, 2017).

Student veterans are motivated to enter and succeed in the next phase of their life. Their entry into higher education is a big part of the beginning of their re-entry into civilian life. Due to their military training, the characteristics that the military espouses and develops in them, and their work ethic, their potential for success in higher education should not be underestimated. Considering that student veterans are nontraditional students, it has been suggested that scholars should use nontraditional literature to make a connection with developing this student population (Vacchi & Berger, 2014). While student veterans undoubtedly need support systems in higher education institutions that are different from traditional support services for traditional students, the concept that student veterans can and will easily access health, clinical or medical services off-campus is questionable (McCaslin et al., 2013).

Transition to and through Higher Education

Student veterans are not a homogenous population, and therefore their academic experience should not be compared with student populations whose college experience is linear and socially integrated on campus. As a non-homogenous and diverse population, they (Vacchi, 2012). This is the shortcoming of models of college experiences such as those proposed by Tinto (1975) and misapplications of Schlossberg’s 4S model (1981). Instead, Bean and Metzner’s (1985) model for nontraditional student retention is more congruous with the student veteran population by its contrast with Tinto’s theory, which requires a college campus context (Vacchi et al., 2017). Another problem is using models designed for traditional student populations and using them without having undergone empirical testing and validation to explain the experience of a nontraditional student population. For example, DiRamio et al. (2008) attempted to explain
veterans’ transitions from the military to academia through the lens of Schlossberg’s 4S Model (Schlossberg, 1981). Schlossberg’s 4S Model has been used by support staff in college to assist students through transitions.

In contrast, Hammond’s (2015) research aims to study combat student veterans as they experience college with their complex self-identity as adults and veterans. Livingston et al. (2011) first offered a conceptual model designed specifically for student veterans. The student veteran academic and social transition model identifies student veterans as a culture within the larger higher educational context that deserves a focused and separate treatment. Still, a subsequent study by Van Dusen (2012) to validate the student veteran academic and social transition model failed to find internal or external validity for the constructs offered in the Livingston et al. (2011) model. The greater need was for a conceptual model that identifies the uniqueness of student veterans, and therefore a unique and interconnected network of success strategies (Vacchi et al., 2017). Hence the development of Vacchi’s model of student veteran support in 2013. This model avoids a deficit perspective, focusing instead on the factors contributing to student veteran success in higher education. Vacchi (2011) brings into question the premise advanced by studies (DeRamio et al., 2009; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010) that student veterans experience difficulties with transitions from the military to being a student and problems with student veteran persistence.

Hammond’s (2015) Combat Veteran Conceptual Identity Model explores student veteran identity in relation to internal, experiential, and external factors and explains the fluidity of identity in the context of higher education. The study of student veteran identity with the uniqueness of experience as active duty military warrants a relevant ideological lens to explore this student population (Hammond, 2015).
Another theory that explains the transition from military to civilian life is the Adaptive Military Transition Theory (Diamond, 2012). Each individual transitions to college at a unique pace and intensity depending on experiences (Schlossberg, 1981), so the Adaptive Military Transition Theory uses the constructs of adaptation, passage, and arrival to chart the course from the military to civilian life (Diamond, 2012). Although this model represents a linear progression, it does not adequately account for the myriad changes that student veterans face in their journey from the military to civilian life, through academia, and through entry into the workforce.

An alternate, functional, conceptual model is Vacchi’s model of student veteran support, which puts the student veteran at the core while exploring success factors in broader concepts as applicable to the higher education experience (Vacchi, 2011, 2013). This multi-dimensional model is non-linear, avoids deficit modeling, and focuses on four cornerstones of success for student veterans by bringing student veterans' academic and social experiences center-stage. The horizontal axis of Vacchi’s model of student veteran success is derived from the academic research of Bean and Metzner (1985) and Weidman (1989) and brings the students’ environmental and peer influences to the forefront. The vertical axis of Vacchi’s model of student veteran success outlines veteran-friendly services and transitional aids tailored to the needs of student veterans. The cornerstones of this conceptual model then seek to increase awareness of the stark difference in student veterans' cultural backgrounds and identify the strengths of this population to support and serve them in meaningful ways. To the extent that strategies are adapted for student veterans, their transition through higher education and success will be facilitated (Vacchi et al., 2017; Vacchi, 2018).
Organizations seeking to serve veterans need to first understand their needs before improving efforts to reduce veterans' barriers in accessing services (Morgan et al., 2020). Some student veterans' journeys through higher education mean that invisible injuries may manifest after they commit to studying, and test-taking and increased time to degree completion will require educational support (Rattray et al., 2019).

The mentoring relationship between students and their professors in higher education institutions, as well as students’ positive perceptions of their relationship with professors in college, impact retention or attrition, successful completion of the college degree, and post-graduation career opportunities (Bell-Ellison & Dedrick, 2008; Fernandez et al., 2019). Findings suggest that successful degree completion depends on the type, amount, and positive interactions between students and their faculty, and students need quality interactions with their professors (Bair & Haworth, 2004; Van der Linden et al., 2018). Part of the difficulty for student veterans is that 50% of teachers, including those in higher education, are under the mistaken notion that a concussion does not affect academic performance (Dreer et al., 2016), and less than half the teachers had received any training or information on concussion itself (Dreer et al., 2016).

Although physical and cognitive rest is prescribed following a concussion, there is also the optimal timing and protocol for return to learn, and this is something that not all faculty are well-versed in, whether in student-athletes or student veterans (Dreer et al., 2016; Vreeland, 2017).

Most student veterans are between the ages of 24 and 39 years (Radford & Wun, 2009), and they enter higher education with a background of having served in the military (Soeters et al., 2006). In addition to this, many veterans have in their history, deployment to combat zones or active military duty (Bauman 2009; DiRamio et al., 2008; Livingston et al., 2011; Radford & Wun, 2009; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010; Steele et al., 2011). Approximately 89% of veterans
enroll in bachelor’s or associate degrees, with 64% attending public institutions (Vacchi & Berger, 2014). The number and percentage of undergraduate student veterans increased between 2007-08 and 2011-12, from 914,000 to 1.1 million (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). The significant numbers of student veterans in higher education have revealed gaps in the campus community’s understanding of their unique experiences and college needs. To develop definite direction and support for student veterans, their clinical needs, and needs arising out of invisible or silent, non-physical injuries, should be addressed. At present, programs and policies in higher education for student veterans, particularly as related to clinical services, seem to be lacking in colleges, along with interventions to link student veterans to clinical health services, a problem compounded by the lack of help-seeking behaviors of student veterans in college (Fortney et al., 2016).

Student veterans have difficulties integrating into their communities and higher education classrooms (Norman et al., 2015; Rattray et al., 2019). The difficulties inherent in integration have been described as a “culture shock” (DeCoster, 2018, p.15), alienating (Elliott et al., 2011 & Smith et al., 2017), and with stressors (Kato et al., 2016). The transition includes adapting to a new environment and new role expectations. While the literature reviewed shows various studies on this demographic, the consensus appears to be that there are significant challenges to integration into higher education settings in addition to challenges related to mTBI for student veterans.

**Supporting the Success of Student Veterans**

By the time most student veterans are in higher education, they are in their mid-twenties or later, have family commitments and work obligations, and higher education is the additional responsibility they shoulder. With this broad definition, student veterans are nontraditional
students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018). Bearing in mind that this population has a fluid and changing identity at a critical period in their adult life, the kind of support they receive in higher education from their peers and faculty, and their perception of institutional support systems, makes a difference in the experiences of student veterans in higher education (Vacchi, 2018). One qualitative study (Griffin & Gilbert, 2015) showed that university services geared toward the specific needs and concerns of student veterans helped them access support systems on campus. In addition to military-friendly policies and procedures, and a culture that facilitated peer and faculty relationships, this contributed to their success.

Another qualitative study (Killam & Degges-White, 2018) used a structured interview protocol and identified themes to interview student veteran men in higher education. The authors explored challenges faced by student veterans when transitioning from military life to campus life and explored resources to facilitate this transition. The themes that emerged in the interviews were: academic challenges, reluctance and resistance to seeking assistance, challenges in connecting with university personnel, difficulty finding a work-life balance, and the value of campus-based veterans. This study found that veterans are a unique population for whom there should be special consideration and specialized services. To meet their needs effectively, the campus Veterans Support Services Center should be easily accessible, and their staff should be approachable, and the campus community should gain knowledge about military culture. Higher education institutions should adopt social media to connect with them, and they should offer resources aimed toward persisting through to graduation. Student veterans’ reluctance to seek help on campus complicates this issue, and with the military culture ingrained in student veterans, they are often resistant to seek help proactively (Killam & Degges-White, 2018).
For higher education institutions to support student veterans, having a space on campus dedicated to student veterans, or having a student veteran organization on campus, may not ultimately prove supportive of student veteran success. One reason is that student veterans may want to be perceived as “normal” and may seek to socialize with traditional student groups (Cook & Kim, 2009; Radford, 2009). Student veterans tend to be self-sufficient; while they may choose to connect with student veteran organizations on campus, less than 20 percent do so (SVA, 2011). Thus, the veteran friendliness of a college campus depends not so much on structures and organizations on campus but on the people, the factors, and influences on campus that truly support student veterans. Student veterans can decide whether their college experience is veteran-friendly or not, rather than a college promoting itself as such, based only on the presence of a student veteran organization or a Veteran Support Services Center.

**Challenges Related to Injury.** The incidence of mTBI in military veterans is 80-85%, as reported by the Defense and Veterans Brain Injury Center (DVBIC, 2017). Associated literature identifies 45.9% of student veterans experiencing resultant symptoms that adversely affect learning, including 2.7 million service members deployed as active duty members and many seeking higher education (Morissette et al., 2019; Rudd et al., 2011). A history of mTBI has a significant ability to affect cognitive functioning and educational outcomes (Gallagher, 2017; Morissette et al., 2019). Unfortunately, there is often a stigma associated with brain injuries.

Furthermore, mTBI is harder to detect and apt to remain invisible to the observer, partly because the physiological damage occurs at the cellular levels by blocking chemical processes (Wiederhold, 2011). It is not apparent, and often if the student veteran chooses not to disclose an mTBI, then identifying and serving the students’ needs becomes harder. Concussions are vastly underreported, mainly because many do not seek medical treatment (Kenzie et al., 2017).
experiences of military personnel pose unique challenges in higher education classrooms. The cognitive and neurological challenges of learning, studying, memorizing, and applying learned content, can be immensely challenging to a brain that has suffered a functional injury such as a concussion, even though to the casual observer, all may seem to be well (Covassin & Elbin, 2010). Some symptoms of a concussion are “irritability, depression, insomnia, inability to concentrate, anxiety, liability to fatigue, persisting headaches, restlessness, dizziness, temper tantrums, short attention span, impaired memory and learning, emotional lability, frustration, slowed mental processing and stressfulness” (Shaw, 2002, p. 320).

Even years after a concussion, individuals can have deficits in dynamic visual acuity, which is also associated with poorer sleep quality and higher daytime sleepiness. Considering that dynamic visual acuity is necessary for gaze stability with the movement of the head, these vestibular deficits can persist in chronic stages of concussion, even a year after the initial concussive insult (D’Silva et al., 2020). Approximately 65% of individuals with blast-induced traumatic brain injuries had resultant visual abnormalities, and 68% of patients with blast-induced injuries had visual problems that made reading difficult. Accompanying symptoms were photophobia, convergence insufficiency, and accommodative insufficiency (Goodrich et al., 2013; Magone et al., 2014). In fact, in combination with visual problems, they tend to have a decline in ocular health and require additional vestibular therapy (Barnett & Singman, 2015). Dysfunctions of eye movement, including and particularly conjugate eye movement, have been reported in up to 90% of those who have experienced a blast-induced concussive event (Armstrong, 2018). Persistent symptoms lasting for years after the initial injury are collectively known as a post-concussive syndrome and are common in military populations who have been exposed to blast induced TBI (Bryden et al., 2019).
Individuals with prior mTBI, such as concussions, are at risk for deficits in cognitive functioning in the future as their symptoms include changes in concentration, attention, and retention (Covassin & Elbin, 2010). With veterans, a history of concussions is positively correlated to difficulties with mental functioning and mental health (MacGregor et al., 2011). U.S. Military service members deployed overseas in the Global War on Terrorism have sustained concussions. These may be impact-related concussions or blast-related concussions. In addition to concussions, they may be subject to psychological stress due to the trauma they have witnessed and experienced. Having been in combat zones and sustaining invisible, neuropsychological injuries had a significant impact on visuospatial function, attention, executive function, as well as learning and memory, but not on motor function and was a significant decrease in the functional domains of attention, executive function, visuospatial skills, and learning/memory for veterans (Janulewicz et al., 2017). Undoubtedly, this affects the post-deployment quality of life (QoL) and their re-integration into social and civilian life. If non-concussive injuries result in such adverse effects on QoL, then concussions and insults to the body's vestibular system may result in a much more significant loss in QoL. There is a need for informed treatment plans, particularly in specialized physical therapy, for the treatment of vestibular disorders and concussions concomitant with this population.

Firstly, there is a need to further investigate and test this population transitioning into the civilian sector and working with health professionals (Rigg & Mooney, 2011). Physical therapists specializing in vestibular and concussion rehabilitation are qualified to provide treatment at the theater and in the post-deployment phase to improve QoL for this population. Secondly, there appears to be a need to educate military service members and health professionals in the military as well as in academia about the role of a specialized physical
therapist in providing vestibular and concussion therapy immediately after an injury and well within the window of recovery when the brain is altered in a concussion (Bergsnider et al., 2000).

**Lack of Clinical Services to Support Student Veterans.** A significant thirty-four percent of veterans transitioning to civilian life experience health challenges that they categorized as mental or emotional (Perkins et al., 2020) and identified medical or psychiatric issues as deterrents to retention and persistence in their academic pursuits (Alschuler & Yarab, 2018). Moreover, some service members are less inclined to access needed healthcare due to bureaucratic procedures, barriers to accessing services, and a disinclination to seek help (Aronson et al., 2019; Fortney, 2016).

In one study, veteran referral sources and mental health services offered at 80 higher education institutions were examined (Niv & Bennett, 2017). Of the 80 higher education institutions, only one institution offered a TBI assessment and treatment, and none provided vestibular rehabilitation. The need for training clinical staff of campus mental health services is significant. To facilitate recovery and not hinder it, an environment strongly supportive in terms of social support and approachability is conducive to learning and recovery (Love et al., 2015). Studies have also shown that a lack of social support that is meaningful to veterans is a predictor of PTSD (Ozer et al., 2003). Some student veterans have encountered horrific experiences, and emotional peer support for student veterans should come primarily from their military peers and co-combatants. Higher education institutions must add support for student veterans that brings together their colleagues and peers, rather than only classmates (Love et al., 2015).

**Challenges of Injured Student Veterans in the Classroom.** There has been an increased number of student veterans on college campuses as veterans seek higher education to
prepare for a purposeful career and financial stability in civilian life (Borsari et al., 2017). Karr et al. (2019) suggested that cognitive changes in student veterans with blast-related mTBI are associated with chronic deficiencies in executive function that adversely affect educational outcomes. Executive function involves higher order thinking such as that required for goal setting, planning, time management, and organizational skills, causing deficits in executive function to affect educational outcomes adversely (Karr et al., 2019; Kennedy, 2017).

Veterans have unique challenges and difficulties with the transition from the combat-related military or active duty environments to the college campus environment, making it essential for colleges to have the right kind of support systems in place to ensure their academic success (Borsari et al., 2017; Mobley et al., 2019). There is a need for policies and programs tailored to address their unique needs (Borsari et al., 2017; Mobley et al., 2019). Campus efforts aimed to improve retention and academic outcomes in this demographic have not typically included training and education to faculty and staff about student veterans (Borsari et al., 2017). Recent research has indicated the need for the development of faculty and the redesigning of programs that support this demographic in such a way that they are more useful for student veterans (Mobley et al., 2019). The right teaching methods and supporting students can help student veterans succeed in college not only while they are pursuing their degrees but also with what they aim to grow into in the future (Mobley et al., 2019). Besides, what student veterans bring to the campus from their history in the military, cannot be ignored because they may have unseen injuries that affect learning.

The need for further research for student veterans in healthcare programs, who have been deployed in combat zones and are now transitioning into the higher education classroom, has been identified, along with the need for studies involving student veterans in community colleges.
Some student veterans who have been in combat may have difficulties that affect learning: decreased alertness and difficulty in studying due to insomnia (Schiavone & Gentry, 2014) and the hypervigilance and stress they experience when in large groups (Ackerman et al., 2009) are inhibitors of learning.

**Role of Faculty in Supporting Student Veterans**

Student veterans are characterized as nontraditional. One of the reasons for this characterization is that most of them commute to campus rather than living on campus, which has been considered a central characteristic (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Smart & Pascarella, 1987; Weidman, 1989) of nontraditional students. The fact that they commute to campus reduces the interactions that they have with faculty and other students. However, the interactions of student veterans and nontraditional students with faculty and other students lend to their persistence and success (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Weidman, 1989).

Personal and relational factors between student veterans and faculty, family members, and colleagues have motivated academic success (Norman et al., 2015; Williston & Roemer, 2017). Degree completion and perception of the higher education environment have been positively correlated with student veterans’ connection to advisors and faculty (Southwell et al., 2018). By their experiences during active duty or combat zones, student veterans could have certain invisible cognitive and psychological conditions. Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms have been positively correlated with social alienation on campus (Barry et al., 2014; Elliotta et al., 2011; Rumann & Hamrick, 2009). Combat student veterans face difficulties in academic learning in focusing, sustained attention, and concentration. They are at greater risk of experiencing PTSD symptoms that hinder learning (DiRamio et al., 2008; Rudd et al., 2011; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010). Programs and policies within higher education institutions should be
geared toward assisting student veterans with the transition into higher education. Niv & Bennett (2017) state that further research is needed to determine any lack of services on mental health that higher education institutions offer to student veterans. Clinical staff on campus need more education to serve student veterans effectively as they navigate learning processes after suffering invisible, cognitive, non-physical injuries.

The responsibility of faculty in supporting student veterans requires the understanding of the transition process of student veterans to civilian life in three categories: the adjustment of civilian life, the social and academic adaptation in higher education, and the adjustment to skills and relatedness in the classroom setting (Sportsman & Thomas, 2015). Sportsman & Thomas also (2015) assert that all faculty should educate themselves regarding the symptoms of post-traumatic stress and its sequelae, and at best, be trained to deal with students who have symptoms of these conditions. Colleges should develop student veteran-focused initiatives and campus-wide training in response to the incidence of post-traumatic stress and make this training a part of continuing professional development training to support student veterans (McDonough, 2013; Sportsman & Thomas, 2015). For student veterans, it is not lower standards but individual learning strategies that may be required.

Training Faculty to Facilitate Scholastic Achievement in Student Veterans

Higher education is an important goal for student veterans who seek to transition to civilian life and civilian jobs successfully. If their goals are met, then the social and academic value that student veterans bring is valuable. However, for this to happen, faculty need to understand and incorporate support into university curricula and provide a welcoming environment on campus that meets students' needs (Andrewartha & Harvey, 2019; Killam & Degges-White, 2018). Academic performance can be hindered by the difficulties that student
veterans face when transitioning to college. Leaders and policymakers in higher education institutions should provide students with the right resources to facilitate their academic success and social success. To do this effectively requires the training of individual faculty and a social effort by faculty to submit to acculturation so that they can build an inclusive campus (Arminio et al., 2018; Griffin & Gilbert, 2015). Similarly, the concept of integrating various components in the higher education setting, including a community-based context that facilitates interventions and participation, is helpful to student veterans and requires faculty involvement (Cogan, 2017; Morrison-Beedy & Rossiter, 2018).

A collaborative approach has also been recommended by Steury (2019). Quoting Rossman and Rallis (2012), Vacchi & Berger (2014) stated that non-military professionals and faculty in research roles in higher education who do not have experience with military socialization or immersion into the military culture need to collaborate with informed veterans and scholars when collecting and reporting data on student veterans. It is evident to student veterans and those who have undergone even basic military training that the higher education college environment is very different from the military culture and environment.

The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) have the necessary information and training materials for non-medical professionals to know when to refer to healthcare professionals when a concussion is suspected (CDC, n.d.). This necessary information can help faculty start learning about concussions and recognize its symptoms in students in their classrooms. This is particularly relevant as student veterans may not be likely to admit to their perceived weaknesses or initiate the use of resources or support services. While many disabilities are visible, many are invisible but just as disabling and impactful to a person’s QoL. Compounding this problem is that those with invisible injuries are not inclined to disclose their injury or disability. In the absence
of this knowledge, the disability is invisible to the onlooker. This two-fold problem requires a two-fold strategy. First, there should be an encouragement to disclose the invisible disability, and second, there should be a compassionate and fair response (O’Donnell, 2019). While universities cannot enforce any disclosures, they should create an open and welcoming environment to neurodiversity and varied learning methods in academia.

While the phrase “invisible disability” was initially used to describe the symptoms of shellshock among veterans of World War I (Invisible Disability Project, n.d.), the phrase is an umbrella term, including mental health disorders, brain injuries, chronic pain, hearing, and vision impairments and learning disabilities. One way to create an inclusive and supportive environment for these students is to avoid looking at them through a disability lens and instead view them through a strength-model. Promoting an initiative that frames their uniqueness and differences within neurodiversity helps lift them and create higher education awareness. Disability can have negative connotations, and shifting away from that stereotype to viewing them positively means that we focus on their strengths. Those with disabilities do have strengths such as “systematic thinking, attention to detail, perseverance, spontaneity and creativity, and visual-spatial abilities” (O’Donnell, 2019, p. 27). In universal design for learning, instead of teaching in a certain way to the mainstream student demographic and making changes for those with disabilities, faculty would consider all students as diverse learners and implement varied approaches to disseminating information and assessing learning. It is better to approach these students with curiosity and compassion rather than judgmentalism. It has been suggested that leaders should lead the way by choosing to disclose their own invisible injuries (O’Donnell, 2019). While there are risks associated with disclosure, the other side of the coin is that the more influential the leader’s position within higher education institutions, the more the influence for
positive change. Raising awareness and increasing training for faculty on recognizing silent disabilities and communicating with these students is necessary partly because interactions with faculty, peers, and the campus community are an integral part of students’ experience on campus. Universal design for learning is a good idea if we do not ignore or de-emphasize the mainstream student demographic. One disadvantage of universal design for learning is that having such a student in a class where a majority have no invisible or visible disabilities could prove unwise as it can hinder learning for the entire class. Students requiring a significant amount of support and services should access those supports and services, especially if avoiding access would either hinder their learning or that of other students. The delivery of teaching for the students can be tailored to individual needs if it does not disrupt the academic experience for all students. Faculty should be trained to connect students with all the available resources through the office of disability services found in higher education institutions.

Faculty at higher education institutions should be trained to dialogue appropriately with student veterans to not inadvertently isolate and misunderstand them. Making disapproving remarks of the military causes student veterans to disengage and feel unsupported and misunderstood. The National Survey of Student Engagement in 2010 reported lesser engagement and the perception of deficient support from the campus community, particularly amongst combat veterans (NSSE, 2010). Although one of the reasons for this difference was the increased family and financial obligations that student veterans had, compared to traditional college students, it only serves to reinforce the fact that the campus community: faculty, administrators, and staff, is positioned to influence the experience of student veterans positively.

Regardless of the reasons for the dissatisfaction that some student veterans may have for their college experience, the campus community plays a role in student veterans' educational
experience and in providing opportunities for meaningful interactions. Higher education institutions serve to educate and support student veterans, faculty and staff, and traditional students, and provide interventions to remediate and alleviate the psychological effects of combat that hinder learning (Love et al., 2015).

Summary

U.S. military veterans returning to higher education institutions to pursue postsecondary education following active duty military service face unique challenges. Some have suffered concussions and grapple with deficits in executive function. Universities can help student veterans to achieve academic success by understanding their difficulties and creating an environment where they have a sense of purpose, significance, and support. Vestibular rehabilitation is offered by physical therapists but is not yet an established protocol or mainstream idea in the treatment of concussions in the military. Delayed treatment for concussions affects students’ cognition, focus, memory, and executive function.

Researchers have examined the prevalence of the difficulties faced by student veterans. However, little is known about concrete steps that educators can take to improve academic outcomes in this student population. These students face unique challenges in learning, assimilating information, and degree completion. Higher education administrators and faculty can be better equipped to create and implement support and services to serve this student population.

Besides, it would serve this demographic well to have faculty in higher education to recognize the symptoms of a concussion, communicate with veteran students in a way that is tailored to their challenges, and make appropriate referrals to a healthcare professional. The goal is to ensure that these students succeed even though they have challenges integrating into higher
education classrooms (Norman et al., 2015; Rattray et al., 2019). Not only that they turn in assignments, but that they excel in their studies. Ultimately, veteran students should have a support structure in colleges that helps them succeed and have confidence.

While research on this student population has focused on issues from a deficit stance, further study is needed to understand what factors lend support to student veteran success. As stated succinctly by Vacchi (2014), “nascent empirical evidence about who student veterans are, and what this important population needs to succeed on campus remains lacking” (p. 119).

Support for student veterans in higher education should include academic support, financial support, disability services, social clubs, and clinical services. Accessing these services on campus for combat student veterans can help facilitate their transition from military service to higher education.
CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

The purpose of the present study was to understand the factors that support student veterans in a private institution of higher education. A case study approach was used to develop an in-depth understanding of the issues surrounding combat student veterans in higher education and the factors that lend to their support and success. This chapter outlines the research design, research questions, setting for the study, the research participants, replicable procedures for research, and the role of the researcher.

Research Design

This study used a case study approach to explore institutional factors, relational factors, peer factors, and internal factors supporting student veterans at a private institution of higher education. One definition of qualitative research states that it starts with assumptions, and by using conceptual or theoretical frameworks to inform the study of a particular research problem, outlined by the research questions, meaning is ascribed by an individual or a group to an identified problem in human society (Creswell, 2018). This research study was qualitative because it begins with assumptions and the use of interpretive and theoretical frameworks that inform the present study (Creswell, 2018), to address the meaning that student veterans ascribe to the social phenomenon that some student veterans struggle with transitions from the military to civilian life, the lack of an appropriate support system outside the military, and difficulties with integrating into college life. This study was qualitative also because the phenomena were studied in their natural settings. At the same time, I, as the researcher, attempted to interpret the phenomena considering the meaning ascribed to it by the participants (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005).

The case study design was appropriate for this study because it was not as much a
methodology as an intentional choice of what was studied: a case within a system that is bounded by time and place (Stake, 2005). This case study had its identity not so much in its methodology but in the methods that the researcher used to perform the study (Thomas, 2015).

A core feature of case study research is that it is case-based rather than variable-based. The researcher aims to understand the unit(s) of inquiry, the case(s). Understanding a case means understanding what it is, how it works and relates to its environment, and how the case behaves in that context. The case study method is described as one of the five methods of qualitative research (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Case study is described as a methodology as well as an approach in qualitative research. Case could refer to a person, a group, an organization, or a relationship. However, the researcher studies it in a bounded system or a multiple-bounded system over time by collecting detailed data by observing, interviewing, and studying documents, reports, and media. The goal is to understand, describe, and analyze the cases as they are bounded within parameters (Yin, 2018). Descriptions of the case are generated by noting themes and subthemes within the case, identifying similarities and dissimilarities, and deriving patterns and conclusions.

The difference between the various types of case studies is determined by the focus or intent of the case analysis. In this study, an embedded case study design was considered because embedded multiple units of analysis were used to demonstrate different perspectives within one case (Yin, 2018). The selection of my case is related to the theoretical assertions of Astin’s I-E-O model. This single case design authenticates and confirms Astin’s I-E-O model. This single-case study involved multiple units of analysis, including data not only from combat student veterans, but also from faculty, and staff of support services at the institution. The embedded case study design also served to maintain the focus on the study on the factors contributing to the success of
combat student veterans in higher education, while examining perspectives from those who interact with combat student veterans. I avoided the pitfall of focusing on subthemes by connecting all subthemes and subunits to the larger unit of analysis, in this case, the university.

The single case design with embedded units of analysis was selected for this study also because the combat student veteran participants, their experiences and perspectives, as well as staff participants and their experiences and perspectives, played a role in the success of combat student veterans. This goal required a study of the individual, a group of students, and staff, and a process. The study involved current, real-life cases while they are in progress so that the information obtained is relevant and current, and not “lost by time” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 97). Although this case study was conducted at one site, different departments were examined, and each participant was studied as part of the case (Mills et al., 2010). This research design was used to study units within the case that shared a common issue, and a common set of research questions was developed to structure the study of each case (Sage, 2010).

Case study as a qualitative research method for this study was appropriate because the research questions seek to explain a phenomenon. The research questions are: What are the institutional factors, academic interactions, personal characteristics, and relational and peer factors supporting student veterans? I wanted to “understand complex social phenomena” (Yin, 2018, p. 5) and focus in-depth on a case. This was done with multiple individuals in the context of universities and the campus community. I studied organizational processes related to student veterans by collecting and analyzing evidence. This study consisted of a single case with multiple embedded units of analysis. It was exploratory because the questions lent to survey methods or to analyze data (Yin, 2018). In case studies, the behaviors of participants should not be manipulated because the goal is to study a contemporary phenomenon. It is a dynamic and
fluid “interpretation of the recent past and present, not just the present” (Yin, 2018, p. 10).

The participants in this study were eight staff, as well as eight combat student veterans in residential or online programs, undergraduate or graduate programs, who were 18 years old or more, making this a case study design with multiple embedded units of analysis. One of the features of a case study is that it is bounded, being defined within parameters (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In this case, the parameters are the private institution of higher education, and combat student veterans 18 years of age and above, in any residential or online undergraduate and graduate programs from 2011 to 2021. According to Yin (2018), the choice of methodology in qualitative inquiry depends largely on the research questions, to the extent that the research questions aim to explain a circumstance, and to the extent that the research questions require a comprehensive explanation and description of a social phenomenon. Additionally, Yin explained the bent toward a case study method if the main research questions are exploratory, if the researcher has none to scant control over the behavioral events, and if the focus of the study is contemporary rather than historical.

The purpose of the research, the problem, and the questions all espoused the above three characteristics, lending further strength to this choice of qualitative inquiry. Moreover, this topic was about group behavior, organizational processes, and school performance, all of which are stated by Yin as a “distinctive need for case studies” (2018, p.5). Case studies are also the preferred method when the intent is to study contemporary events, and the reliance on direct observation and interviews as techniques is heavy (Yin, 2018).

**Research Questions**

**Central Research Question**

What are the factors that are supportive of combat student veterans at a private institution
of higher education?

**Sub-Question One**

What institutional services do combat student veterans perceive as supportive of their success in higher education?

**Sub-Question Two**

What are the academic interactions of combat student veterans in higher education?

**Sub-Question Three**

What personal characteristics of combat student veterans contribute to their success in higher education?

**Sub-Question Four**

How do combat student veterans’ support relationships affect their success in higher education?

**Setting and Participants**

This section details the setting and participants for this study. A brief description of the setting, and the inclusion criteria for the student and staff participants is described. Methods of sampling, and the parameters of the study are described.

**Setting**

I selected a single site for the study, a large university in Central Atlantic State, named Atlantic State University. This university was selected because of its reputation for being veteran-friendly. The university has veteran support services and is sufficiently large in number to yield the number of participants for this study. The student profile comprises residential and online students representing all 50 states and Washington, D.C., and over 80 countries, with a significant number of students having a military background. The university offers military
benefits, military degree plans, military scholarships, and military transfer credit, and is dedicated to serving military students. The university also boasts resources for military students in deployment, family resources, student resources, Veterans Support Services, tutoring for military students, and VetSuccess. (Atlantic State University, n.d.). Atlantic State University is a private, Christian organization with a commitment to the tradition of evangelical institutions of higher education. There is an emphasis on excellence in teaching and learning, and a commitment to the Christian life is espoused and encouraged.

Participants

Purposeful sampling and snowball sampling were used to select the participants for this study. I selected individuals and the site for study to contribute to the purpose and understanding of the research problem (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The sampling was at the site level and the participant level, lending to the rigor of the study, as Creswell and Poth (2018) state that “in a good plan for a qualitative study, one or more levels might be present” (p.158). The sample size was eight combat student veterans and eight staff participants, bringing the total to 16 participants. Faculty and staff from the Veterans Office, Veteran Support Services, Disability Support Services, and Academic Support Services participated in this study.

The criteria for student veteran participants were:

- The participant is at least 18 years of age.
- The participant was enrolled in online or residential, undergraduate or graduate programs, in or after 2016.
- The participant has served in a combat zone.
- The participant is willing to talk about their experiences as a student.
The criteria for staff participants were:

- The participant is currently employed at Atlantic State University and has had interactions with student veterans.
- The participant is willing to talk about their interactions, perceptions, and experiences with student veterans.
- The participant is willing to offer their opinions on facilitating success for student veterans.

**Researcher Positionality**

As a child, I grew up in a military family in India. My father was in the Education Corps of the Indian Army and served in Afghanistan in the 1970s. He sent my mother, sister, and me to India when the situation in Afghanistan became tumultuous, choosing to remain in Kabul in the late 1970s, even during the Russian invasion and resulting political unrest, to complete his tenure. For his distinguished work, he received a presidential award when he returned to India. He served in leadership at officers’ training academies and military schools and chose to continue in academic leadership even after retiring from the military. In recent decades, I realized how much his military identity and love of education influenced my studies, my work, and my career path. Creating environments in which students can thrive and develop was his forte.

**Biblical Worldview**

As a Christian with a biblical worldview, I believe my competencies are not the measure of my worth but given freely as gifts from God. To labor and serve others, is an outworking of God’s grace in my life and a way to express my gratitude to the Lord for the many blessings I have received. The opportunity to pursue higher education has been a blessing and I would like
to serve others in higher education as they pursue their education.

An important concept that undergirded this study was the concept of approaching a problem from a strength perspective rather than from a deficit perspective. Viewing a perceived problem with student veteran success through Tinto’s deficit model, which explains why students fail, does not serve combat student veterans or universities well. What is needed is to support students and ask what we can do outstandingly, to facilitate success. We must ask how successful combat student veterans are succeeding and what contributes to their success. It is not so much that darkness must be extinguished, but that light must illuminate. It is the light that shines in the darkness, and the darkness does not overcome it (John 1:5). The solution to the darkness is to shine the light, not to expend energy fighting the darkness. With this in mind, the study sought how combat student veterans succeed in college by keeping the voices of combat student veterans as a primary source of data.

**Interpretive Framework**

The paradigm and interpretive framework that guided this study was social constructivism as the goal was to rely on participants’ perspectives formed through interaction with others. Moreover, my questions were broad and general to guide participants in constructing meaning from their experiences through discussions and open-ended questions (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The approach is collaborative, and learning cannot be separated from the social context. Learning occurs in the context of social interactions. Learning is not merely the acquisition of knowledge but a process by which the individual learner integrates into a community of knowledge (Vygotsky, 1978).
Philosophical Assumptions

The philosophical assumptions I brought to this research study were epistemological, ontological, and axiological. These assumptions helped me frame the problem and research questions. The research questions were broad, and sought data in the form of participant quotes, to explain the various factors that contribute or detract from the experiences of student veterans experience in higher education.

Ontological Assumption

Ontological, as I reported varied perspectives through the views of multiple participants. From the qualitative data in the form of participant quotes, and the various perspectives of the student veterans, and staff, I gleaned three broad themes. Within the themes, subthemes were identified and developed. This assumption and approach yielded a kaleidoscopic view that allowed me as a researcher to share the voices of participants on both sides of an opinion, while attempting to reduce personal bias.

Epistemological Assumption

Epistemological, as I attempted to lessen the distance between myself and the understanding of participants’ perspectives by gaining subjective evidence from them (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The interviews and focus groups yielded subjective data in the form of participant quotes, opinions, and themes. This was counted as the evidence. Memoing was done (Appendix I), to capture written versions of an internal dialogue (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018), to better understand participants words and expressions, and to distance myself from the participants while simultaneously focusing my attention on them.
Axiological Assumption

Axiological because I discussed values that shape the narrative while including my interpretation along with those of the participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). As a non-veteran researching student veterans, the parental influence in my life about the value of the military, the respect offered to military families, and the role of higher education to change lives, all served to positively influence my own views. For this reason, outliers to the data were surprising to me and have been reported in Chapter 4.

Researcher’s Role

I served as the primary data collection instrument in this study. Student veteran participants in this study volunteered for this study and I did not have any authority over them. I recently became an adjunct faculty member in an online program at this university, however none of the participants were from my department. My own family background of my father having been in the military influenced my views of student veterans as nontraditional and mature students. A major difference was that my father was not in the U.S. military, but in the Indian Army until the early 90s. As such, my personal views of veterans were shaded by the difference in the military organization from one country to another.

Procedures

First, the Institutional Review Board (IRB) application was completed and submitted to Atlantic State University, and approval obtained from the University’s IRB (Appendix A). The research was conducted only after approval was obtained. I then posted and shared flyers (Appendix D) on campus after receiving permission from various departments. I contacted leadership of Disability Support Services, Academic Support Services, and the Veterans Support Services, and requested that the study recruitment flyers (Appendix E) be shared with students
and staff. I used the flyers to inform potential participants of the purpose of the study and shared the informed consent forms (Appendix B, and Appendix C) with those who volunteered to participate in this study. The informed consent form included information about the purpose and nature of the study, including the option to withdraw from the study at any time should they choose. Only after receiving consent verbally and in writing did I begin collecting data. I contacted the participants to schedule individual interviews and focus groups. Due to stipulations by the IRB, participants from the Veterans Office were not allowed to participate in the study in interviews or focus groups but only by providing written responses to questions. The Veterans Office assigned one representative to participate in this study.

Interviews (questions listed in Appendix F) were conducted at a time convenient for the participants. Considering the CoronaVirus-2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, the interviews and focus groups (questions listed in Appendix G, and Appendix H) were held remotely, and videoconferencing with Microsoft Teams was used for safety and to comply with governmental mandates and CDC recommendations during the pandemic. Interviews were semi-structured with open-ended questions to explore how participants perceived and used support systems in higher education, and what academic interactions, personal characteristics, and relationships contributed to their success in higher education.

In addition to individual interviews, data was collected from Atlantic State University. Documents such as institutional policies and procedures, and programming and execution of institutional, military-friendly initiatives were studied to determine the institution's operations for student veteran support. A focus group with combat student veterans, and one with service providers, was conducted to follow up on interview questions. Again, CDC guidelines were followed for social distancing, and videoconferencing with Microsoft Teams was used to comply
with the then-current governmental mandates and CDC recommendations for safety. Otter.ai was used as a recording and transcription application to facilitate recording and verbatim transcription of audio material. Notes were taken during the interviews and focus groups to record the researcher’s thoughts, and recommendations given by participants. Video recording by Microsoft Teams was useful in capturing visual data which was studied for non-verbal clues.

Permissions

I requested permission from Orthopedic Physical Therapy Organization, and Atlantic State University, to recruit volunteer participants for this study and flyers were disseminated after receiving permission. Purposeful sampling and snowball sampling were used, with inclusion criteria explained to the participants. The consent form was shared with all participants. The participants were recruited, and study conducted only after IRB approval was received. IRB approval was not granted for interviews or focus group participation for any participants from the Veterans Office. As a result, one staff member from the Veterans Office was assigned to participate in this study, by offering responses to questions only in written format.

Recruitment Plan

The sample pool included combat student veterans from Atlantic State University, and staff from the same university. Sample size was 16. Combat student veteran participants were over the age of 18 years, were online or residential students, undergraduate or graduate students, enrolled in the university in or after 2016. Criterion-based sampling, homogenous sampling, and snowball sampling were used to select and recruit participants for this study. Criterion-based sampling was used to ensure that participants met criteria and as a means of quality assurance. Homogenous sampling served to focus and facilitate group interviews and discussions. Snowball sampling enabled the identification of participants of interest from those who knew participants.
as information-rich sources of data.

All participants had the opportunity to peruse the informed consent form before signing it. Flyers (Appendix D) were posted on campus in adherence to IRB and departmental permissions at Atlantic State University. Recruitment efforts also included flyers (Appendix D) conveyed through a local healthcare organization: Orthopedic Physical Therapy Organization. However, no participants were recruited through Orthopedic Physical Therapy Organization.

Data Collection Plan

Data collection lasted approximately six weeks. Data for document analysis was collected at Atlantic State University. Documents were analyzed to determine the types and levels of institutional support for student veterans. Next, the participants were interviewed via Microsoft Teams, an audio-visual platform, and then, the focus groups were conducted via the same audio-visual platform.

Individual Interviews

Student veterans, service providers, and staff were interviewed in a semi-structured format using open-ended questions (Appendix F, Appendix G, and Appendix H) designed to elicit themes, expressions, and meaning in the various forms of student veteran support and experience. Interviews are insightful and provide depth in “person views, participant perceptions, attitudes, and meanings” (Yin, 2018, 114) and therefore provided data significantly contributing toward qualitative inquiry. Even with response bias and reflexivity, one-on-one interviews form the method of unfolding the participants’ point of view (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The advantage of interviews was that they could be structured such that they focus directly on the topic. Moreover, well-phrased questions can elicit not only explanations but also the participants’ attitudes and perspectives.
These were:

• Individual semi-structured interviews with each of the eight combat student veterans.

• Open-ended questions were asked to explore how participants perceive the institutional, relational and peer support systems available to them.

• Interviews were audio-video recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Due to disease prevention recommendations from the CDC, at the time of data collection, Microsoft Teams was used for audio and video recordings. Interviews and focus groups were conducted with student veteran participants and staff participants. Interview questions were raised again as a means of follow up and interactive discussions during focus groups.

*Semi-Structured Interview Questions for Combat Student Veterans*

1. Please tell me about yourself, where you are from, and what brings you to this university.

2. Please describe your goals as a student at this university.

3. What was your motivation for joining the military?

4. Describe your experiences in combat zones while in the military.

5. Describe any invisible injuries you may have sustained from your time in the military.

6. What are the medical/allied health/alternative treatments or therapies that you have used for the difficulties you described in response to question 5?

7. Describe any vestibular rehabilitation techniques (specialization of physical therapy) that were used for treating invisible health concerns such as the ones you describe?

8. What were the reasons for not pursuing medical/allied health/alternative treatments or therapies for your invisible injuries?

9. Why did you decide to pursue a degree in higher education?
10. What has been challenging or frustrating about the transition from the military into being a student in higher education?

11. What has been surprising or even pleasant, about the transition from the military into being a student in higher education?

12. From your perspective, what is the ideal faculty member for a combat student veteran?

13. What university services and support systems have you found helpful as a student veteran?

14. In what ways have interactions with faculty and staff, in the classroom and out of classroom influenced you, or helped you succeed academically?

15. What relationships and support systems, with family, peers, and colleagues, have you found helpful as a student?

16. What are the internal factors or personal characteristics that have facilitated success for you as a student?

17. What else would you like to add as addendums to any of the prior questions?

Questions 1 and 2 are knowledge questions (Patton, 2002), and were intentionally straightforward and non-threatening, and served to help develop rapport between the participant and me (Patton, 2002). Question 3 was designed to learn more about the participant’s initial journey into the military. Arkin and Dobrofsky (1978), Jackson et al. (2012), and Redmond et al. (2015) explain that initial military experiences serve to break down civilian status and forge a new identity as a military recruit; a process designed to enforce behavior change and socialize the recruit to the military.

Questions 4 through 6 elicited information about the etiology and onset of invisible injuries and any medical treatments they may have pursued as a result. Military personnel
deployed in combat zones often sustain injuries and trauma that are both psychological and invisible (Bhatnagar et al., 2019; Frain, et al., 2010).

The purpose of Question 7 was to determine if the participant is aware of the specialized treatment option for invisible, cognitive injuries. Vestibular symptoms are a significant source of disability in veterans and veterans with worse PTSD report increased symptoms related to vestibular dysfunction (Haber et al., 2016).

Question 8 required some vulnerability as it enquired deeper into the participant’s decisions and rationale for not pursuing treatment for certain invisible injuries. There is a need for reporting vestibular symptoms in veterans with PTSD (Haber et al., 2016) as there is a consensus among the American Veterans Health Administration and the Department of Defense that mTBI in veterans should be identified and treated early (Veterans Administration Task Force, 2007; Veterans of America, 2007; U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs & National Institute of Mental Health, 2006).

Question 9 served to gain information about the participant’s motivation for pursuing higher education and transitioning from the military into civilian life (Kato et al., 2016).

Questions 10, 11, and 13 sought to explore the institutional factors that support student veterans in higher education as colleges need to have policies and programs specifically for student veterans and targeted to address their unique needs to ensure their academic success (Borsari et al., 2017; Mobley et al., 2019).

Questions 12 and 14 served to determine the kind and levels of support given to student veterans by faculty, staff, and service providers at universities as personal and relational factors between student veterans and faculty, family members, and colleagues have motivated academic success (Norman et al., 2015; Williston & Roemer, 2017). Moreover, degree completion and
perception of the higher education environment correlate positively with student veterans’ connection to advisors and faculty (Southwell et al., 2018).

The purpose of Question 15 was to gain information about peer and relational supports that student veterans have, considering that a lack of meaningful social support is a predictor of PTSD (Ozer et al., 2003). Some student veterans had encountered horrific experiences, and emotional peer support for student veterans should come primarily from their military peers and co-combatants. Higher education institutions must add support for student veterans that brings together their colleagues and peers, rather than only classmates (Love et al., 2015).

These questions yielded information from the participants’ perspective about the processes, interactions, and people that have been contributing factors and hindering factors to their success in higher education.

Question 16 was included to elicit information about internal factors and explain the fluidity of identity concerning internal factors, as the study of student veteran identity with their uniqueness of experience as active duty military warrants a relevant ideological lens through which to explore this student population (Hammond, 2015).

Question number 17 was a single question (Patton, 2002), designed to give the participant one further opportunity to offer valuable insight. This single question also served as the closing question (Patton, 2002), giving the participant freedom to add to what has already been said, keeping him or her in the role of expert on his or her own life and story. These single, parting questions had the potential to yield valuable information when the interview or discussion could very easily have been otherwise shut down prematurely.
Individual Interview Data Analysis Plan

Audio-visual data from each interview was transcribed, and reviewed multiple times, with the goal of better understanding the content and familiarizing myself with it. I searched for “patterns, insights, or concepts” (Yin, 2018, p.167). As I familiarized myself with the data, themes and subthemes were identified and noted, and each participant quote was categorized into the themes and subthemes. NVivo was used to organize and manage data. Contrasting categories were identified and compared. Visual displays were created first on paper, and then electronically, to examine the data. The resultant Figures can be viewed in Figures 2-6. Frequency of subthemes were tabulated, and each participant’s voice was captured in the data. The information was organized into themes and the final theme development resulted in three broad themes with ten subthemes.

Document Analysis

Institutional policies and procedures, and programming and execution of institutional, military-friendly initiatives were studied to determine the institution's operations for student veteran support (Atlantic State University, Veterans Programs and Partnerships, n.d.). These documents included the Admissions Guide for military students, academics and programs offered to these students, the veterans programs and partnerships, and the military benefits guide. The veterans programs and partnerships include military transfer credit offered by the American Council on Education and the Air University Associate Baccalaureate Cooperative, which allow students to transfer credit hours from an associate degree from Air University toward the Bachelor of Science in Interdisciplinary Studies degree from Atlantic State University. The Chaplain Candidate Program and the College of the American Soldier are also included in military-friendly initiatives. Another document was the Department of Defense Memorandum of
Understanding, in which the University commits to standards of excellence. The GoArmyEd is another program designed to help students request tuition assistance. VetSuccess on Campus is a collaborative effort between the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs and the university. It facilitates student veterans’ transition in colleges to help them reach their academic and professional goals. Finally, the Yellow Ribbon Program allows eligible students to have their tuition covered 100%.

These data are stable in that they “can be reviewed repeatedly,” they exist outside the results of the case study, they are objective and specific as they contain information and references that are used as manuals in institutions, and they have the ability to “cover various events,” over time, at the site (Yin, 2018, 114). Analyzing documents focusing on student veteran support yielded important information that formed an understanding of the site and the support services available to student veterans. These documents were explored, and then program leaders and staff, and other participants were interviewed. The advantage of this type of data collection was that it could be viewed as often as needed. Documents were used not as primary data but to round out data and to strengthen and “augment evidence from other sources” (Yin, 2018, p. 115).

**Document Analysis Data Analysis Plan**

Document analysis was used to supplement and round out the primary sources of data: interviews and focus groups. The policies and procedures from the Veterans Office, Atlantic State University Veterans Programs and Partnerships, VetSuccess, GoArmyEd and the Yellow Ribbon Program were perused and compared with the experiences of combat student veterans, and the perspectives of staff. By using a “pattern-matching logic” (Yin, 2018, p. 175). I compared the policies and procedures, with the predicted and perceived patterns as outlined by
staff and combat student veterans. In this way, I focused “on the processes and outcomes” (Yin, 2018, p. 175) in this case study as an explanatory technique.

Focus Groups

One focus group meeting was held with four combat student veterans, and one focus group with six staff. This involved open-ended questions, and questions that followed up on the one-on-one interview questions. Responses to these questions were insightful as they provided further information that may not have been elicited in one-on-one interviews, providing insight into interpersonal behavior and motives (Yin, 2018, p.114). In this method, as a researcher, I interacted with multiple participants concurrently. This allowed me to explore the mosaic of multi-layered concepts from the participants’ point of view. For the focus groups, I recruited and convened staff participants and facilitated a discussion about support for student veterans in higher education. I also convened combat student veteran participants, and facilitated a discussion from their perspective, about the support systems for student veterans in higher education.

Focus Group Questions for Combat Student Veterans

To solicit the views of the various participants, I asked the following questions:

1. What has been frustrating about the transition from the military into being a student in higher education?

2. What has been relatively easy about the transition from the military into being a student in higher education?

3. From your perspective, what is the ideal faculty member for a combat student veteran?

4. What university services and support systems were helpful to you as a student veteran?

5. In what ways have interactions with faculty and staff helped you succeed academically?
6. What has been your experience when relating with other students in college?

7. What has been your experience when relating with other student veterans in college?

8. Have there been specific relationships with family and friends, that have motivated and encouraged you in college?

9. What do you think are some personal and internal characteristics that have facilitated success for you as a student?

10. Is there any other information you would like to provide that may help me understand your experience as a student veteran in college?

The purpose of questions 1 and 2 was to gain information about participants’ motivation for pursuing higher education and transitioning from the military into civilian life (Kato et al., 2016). Questions 3 and 5 served to determine the kind and levels of support given to student veterans by faculty and staff at universities as personal and relational factors between student veterans and faculty, family members, and colleagues have motivated academic success (Norman et al., 2015; Williston & Roemer, 2017). Moreover, degree completion and perception of the higher education environment correlate positively with student veterans’ connection to advisors and faculty (Southwell et al., 2018).

Questions 4, 6, and 7 were designed to elicit information about institutional factors that support student veterans in higher education as colleges need to have policies and programs specifically for student veterans and targeted to address their unique needs to ensure their academic success (Borsari et al., 2017; Mobley et al., 2019).

The purpose of Question 8 was to gain information about peer and relational supports that student veterans have, as the lack of meaningful social support is a predictor of PTSD (Ozer et al., 2003), and higher education institutions must add support for student veterans that brings...
together their colleagues and peers, rather than only classmates (Love et al., 2015). Some student veterans have encountered horrific experiences, and emotional peer support for student veterans should come primarily from their military peers and co-combatants.

Question 9 served to gain information about the participant’s motivation for pursuing higher education and transitioning from the military into civilian life (Kato et al., 2016). Question number 10 was a single question (Patton, 2002), designed to give the group a further opportunity to offer valuable insight. This single question also served as the closing question (Patton, 2002), giving the participants of the group freedom to add to what has already been said, while keeping each individual in the role of expert on his or her own life and story. These single, parting questions had the potential to yield valuable information when the discussion could very easily have been otherwise shut down prematurely.

**Focus Group Questions for Faculty and Staff**

Icebreaker question: In your role, would you share your thoughts as you compare working with veterans, versus working with non-veterans?

1. What words would you use to describe military veterans?

2. What do you think is the impact of military culture on student veterans in college?

3. What have been some challenges in communicating with nontraditional students?

4. What are some strategies you have used to interact with student veterans in meaningful ways?

5. What would be some next steps if you notice that nontraditional students are struggling academically?

6. Could you suggest ways in which the university could better equip you to support student veterans?

7. What is your understanding of the role of military support services in the university?
8. What is your understanding of invisible injuries in students and ways to assist students who have such challenges?

9. What are some ways in which you would guide a student to clinical, academic or disability services?

10. What are some of the needs of student veterans that you have identified in your position in the military student support roles in this institution?

11. How has administration been supportive in facilitating success for students who may have invisible injuries?

12. What have been some challenges in communicating with nontraditional students and how have you overcome those challenges?

Questions 1 and 2 aimed to explore the perceptions of staff, about and toward student veterans. Rossman and Rallis (2012) stated that non-military professionals and faculty in research roles in higher education who do not have experience with military socialization or immersion into the military culture need to collaborate with informed veterans and scholars when collecting and reporting data on student veterans. Although not all staff in universities are researchers, it is evident to student veterans and those who have undergone even basic military training that the higher education college environment is very different from the military culture and environment. Knowing this difference and accounting for it during interactions with student veterans, could help create improved interactions for student veterans in higher education.

Questions 3, 4 and 5 were designed to gain information about the understanding of faculty and staff in matters related to supporting student veterans and incorporating support into university curricula, and in providing a welcoming environment on campus that meets students' needs (Andrewartha & Harvey, 2019; Killam & Degges-White, 2018). Academic performance
can be hindered by the difficulties that student veterans face when transitioning to college. Leaders and policymakers in higher education institutions should provide students with the right resources to facilitate their academic success and social success. To do this effectively requires the training of individual faculty and a social effort by faculty to submit to acculturation to build an inclusive campus (Arminio et al., 2015; Griffin & Gilbert, 2015). Similarly, the concept of integrating various components in the higher education setting, including a community-based context that facilitates interventions and participation, is helpful to student veterans and requires faculty involvement (Cogan, 2017; Morrison-Beedy & Rossiter, 2018).

The purpose of Questions 6 and 7 was to determine the role of universities in improving retention and scholastic outcomes for student veterans, and to determine if there has been meaningful training and education to faculty and staff about the experiences of student veterans (Borsari et al., 2017). It was also, to determine if universities have equipped them to support student veterans from the service providers’ perspective. Research has indicated the need for the development of faculty and the redesigning of programs that support this demographic in such a way that they are more effective for student veterans (Mobley et al., 2019). The purpose of Questions 8 and 9 was to determine the extent to which faculty, and staff providers of support services understand invisible injuries that can affect cognitive learning. The cognitive and neurological challenges of learning, studying, memorizing, applying learned content can be immensely challenging to a brain that has suffered a functional injury such as a concussion, even though all may seem to be well (Covassin & Elbin, 2010).

Questions 10, 11, and 12 were designed to gain information about how faculty identify student veterans’ issues and how they interact with student veterans, especially when there are challenges for these students. Faculty should be trained in interacting with student veterans
meaningfully. An initiative by the Departments of Education, Veterans Affairs, and Defense has identified eight keys to veteran success, one of which is to “provide comprehensive professional development for faculty and staff on issues and challenges unique to veterans” (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.). An effective infrastructure of support services for student veterans is needed for appropriate academic functioning and the service satisfaction of student veterans who use the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) health services on a college campus (O’Connor et al., 2018).

Interviews and focus groups were both critical to this study because “what people say is a major source of qualitative data” (Patton, 2002, p. 21). The verbal reports and expressions of the participants were significant even though what could be gleaned from this type of data had limitations in that it requires the researcher’s understanding. Describing the collected data must be distinguished from interpreting the collected data. In this context, the description precedes the interpretation. Qualitative research is about “thick, rich description(s)” (Patton, 2002, p. 437), robust interpretations, and careful analysis.

Data was transcribed into documents that I could search using Evernote and NVivo. Handwritten notes, scanned documents, and any data can be handled by Evernote with its optical character recognition. After transcribing and scanning notes into Evernote, and NVivo, I gave the transcription to the respective participants to verify the clarity of capturing their responses with accurate tone and content. I also gave the participants information about the themes and subthemes gleaned from the data.

**Focus Group Data Analysis Plan**

Audio-visual data from each focus group was transcribed, and reviewed multiple times, with the goal of better understanding the content and familiarizing myself with it. I searched for
“patterns, insights, or concepts” (Yin, 2018, p.167). Each participant quote was categorized into the themes and subthemes. NVivo was used to organize and manage data. Contrasting categories were identified and compared. Visual displays were created first on paper, and then electronically, to examine the data. The resultant Figures can be viewed in Figures 2-6. Frequency of subthemes were tabulated, and each participant’s voice was captured in the data. The information was organized into themes and the final theme development resulted in three broad themes with ten subthemes. These were matched with data which was collected and analyzed from individual interviews. As I familiarized myself with the data, the data was categorized into themes and subthemes which were initially identified following the individual interviews. Data from focus groups substantiated data collected from individual interviews, but also yielded outlier information and additional subthemes unique to the perspectives of staff participants.

**Data Synthesis**

Data analysis lasted approximately eight weeks. The process of analyzing data began with returning to the questions and identifying a connection between the data collected, the evidence, and then seeing how that connects to the question. Then I drew conclusions based on the weight of the evidence; this was a tentative and not a definite conclusion. This was done repeatedly with all the questions and all the data until the main research questions had been addressed (Yin, 2018, p. 166). NVivo software for qualitative data analysis was used primarily to manage, sort, and organize data. There was no substitute for the usefulness of manual procedures and the process of inputting data into the software, critically analyzing it, determining the connections, and interpreting the results. The analysis and interpretation of qualitative data was the sole responsibility and purview of the researcher.
The data generated by qualitative research was voluminous, therefore the data was organized as it was collected. Managing and organizing it efficiently, helped with the detection of emerging themes, and with classifying the data. Making interpretations by visualizing and studying the data, was less overwhelming and more cogent. The data was managed and organized using NVivo software as a qualitative data analysis tool. I used memoing as a technique to capture emergent ideas (Appendix I). I read through the transcribed text, made annotations, and formed initial codes. These initial codes were described and classified into themes while describing the case and its context. Themes, sub-themes, and patterns were established by using categorical aggregation, to develop and assess interpretations. I used within-case analysis to generate themes and subthemes to discern and gain an understanding of issues intrinsic to the case. With each interview and focus group, the data was compared and contrasted segmentally, and categorized. This was not a mechanical, linear, algorithmic process but one that considered the conceptualization and theoretical underpinnings of this study (Schwandt, 2007).

The data collected was accumulated into categories and then narrowed into three themes and ten subthemes (Figure 3). I determined the similarities or general themes in the participants, and information on how they could be compared along a common thread or common finding (Yin, 2018). Showing not only the similarities but also the differences helped to build an argument about the similarities. In this qualitative study, the patterns were based on interpreting the themes and not a tally of numbers or data points. When discussing dissimilarities, these are reported and especially those that seem to reduce the validity of “the findings from the synthesis” (Yin, 2018, p. 199). This is further delineated in the section on Outliers. Finally, the data was represented visually and diagrammatically by direct interpretation, and by developing naturalistic generalizations of what was learned through the study.
To analyze data in this case study, as a researcher, I organized and displayed data grouped according to emerging themes and meanings while watching for insights and concepts that emerged. I had a strategy for the general analysis and took note of contrasting interpretations and outlier data (Yin, 2018).

To follow the data analysis spiral explained by Creswell and Poth (2018), following data collection, it was necessary to organize the data, memo ideas that emerged, classify codes into themes, develop interpretations and visualize the data before finally making an account of the findings into a cogent document. This was a laborious but necessary part of the data analysis to triangulate findings and lend rigor to the process of inquiry. Data was synthesized to yield results that yielded meaning.

**Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness in qualitative research is measured by four criteria: credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability. Credibility refers to internal validity, transferability to external validity or generalizability, dependability to reliability, and confirmability to objectivity (Shenton, 2004). Triangulation pertains not only to data triangulation, which refers to varied sources of data, but also to triangulation from various evaluators (investigator triangulation), triangulation of varied perspectives on the same set of data (theory triangulation), and triangulation of methods – methodological triangulation (Yin, 2018). A brief discussion of each criterion of trustworthiness is given below.

**Credibility**

Credibility refers to the extent to which the findings accurately describe reality. Credibility depends on the richness, depth, and veracity of the information gathered and on the analytical abilities of the researcher. Data was triangulated with member-checking, the study of
documents, one-on-one interviews, and focus group interviews. In particular, member-checking was important as it gave participants ownership of their expressions, in tone and content, and disallowed the researcher to inadvertently insert her own meaning upon the interviewee’s words, however well-intentioned. In addition to transcribed interviews and focus groups, themes and Subthemes generated from interviews and focus groups were also shared with each participant. In other words, the participants ensured that the data was expressed through their lens (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

**Transferability**

This case study was performed at a private institution of higher education, thereby limiting the generalizability of findings to public institutions. However, given the significantly large student enrollment at this university, the veteran-friendly services on campus, and the significant numbers of student veterans, the results of this study may be transferable to other private institutions in North America. This researcher can only create the conditions for transferability but cannot assure transferability, as that would be the purview of a reader of this research report.

**Dependability**

Dependability is showing that the findings are consistent and could be repeated (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), which can be demonstrated through an effective description of the procedures undertaken for the study. Dependability relates to the consistency of the researcher through the process of this qualitative study. The researcher must track and document the research process in a logical and traceable way. This lends to the stability and consistency of data over time and ensures that the data is answering the research questions set forth in this study. The quantitative parallel to dependability is reliability which is assessed in quantitative studies through statistical
procedures (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). An audit trail (Appendix J) documents this research process. Although the subthemes were weighted differently by some participants depending on whether they were residential or online students, and whether they were undergraduate or graduate students, the findings in broad themes were consistent between combat student veteran participants. Even while the few outliers were significant, they did not detract from the strength of the consistency of data across the various participants. This was noteworthy considering that the age of participants ranged from the 20s to the 70s. Dependability is also accomplished through an inquiry audit, which at Liberty University occurred with a thorough review of the process and the products of the research by the dissertation committee and the Qualitative Research Director.

**Confirmability**

Multiple sources of evidence were used in this study, lending to the strength of triangulation (Yin, 2018). Varied perspectives from the individual combat student veterans, staff, focus groups, and document analysis were used in the data analysis. Data collected from the various methods lent consistency and provided richer detail about the phenomena studied: factors that support student veterans in higher education. Data from documents, interviews, and focus groups were examined to understand the perspectives of faculty, staff, and student veterans. In the peer review process, a content expert was used as an external check on the research process. In this study, it was the dissertation chair, and a committee member who is also a research methodologist.

In addition to transcripts being checked by the researcher and participants, findings were shared and discussed with the Dissertation Committee. This debriefing strengthened validity of the findings.
Ethical Considerations

IRB Approval was imperative to ensure that the study did not violate any ethical guidelines. The anonymity of participants was assured to facilitate full participation. The medical history and condition of research participants was kept confidential. Participants were also notified of the pseudonym used, and identifying information was removed from following chapters in this study. Considering that I developed a measure of rapport with some participants, I was aware of this, and more careful to avoid assigning a certain tone or intent to their words. I assured them that what they shared would be kept anonymous to protect their anonymity.

Collected data was not stored on any unprotected public storage site, digital or otherwise. It was stored on a double-password-protected laptop, and two-factor authentication was required for access to my personal laptop, which only I have access to and handle. Some details pertaining to participants were altered to protect identities.

Summary

With the influx of student veterans in higher education, institutions of higher education are exploring ways to integrate this student demographic. While most studies take a deficit model and seek to either fill in the blanks or fix what is wrong, there is a need for qualitative research that explores the role of student veterans and their perspectives on what has helped them succeed on campus. With this case study, I hope to help stakeholders in higher education view this from a strength and accountability perspective that places the impetus for change upon higher education institutions to create a culture and climate that is conducive to student veteran success, while also helping student veterans understand their role in facilitating their success.
CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

The purpose of this study was to gain a deeper understanding of the factors supporting the success of combat student veterans in higher education, primarily from the perspective of combat student veterans and secondarily from the perspectives of university personnel that serve this nontraditional student population. Some prior research on student veterans in higher education explores student veteran success from the perspective of scholars with an untenable vantage point of determining that student veterans are not succeeding in higher education (e.g., DiRamio, et al., 2008; Ackerman et al., 2009). Following this overview, the chapter commences with participant descriptions in tabular form, the findings in the form of narrative themes and subthemes, outliers identified in the data, and finally with responses to the research questions. A summary concludes the chapter.

Participants

Some details pertaining to participants have been altered to protect identities. IRB approval to recruit participants was granted with limitations on recruitment from and through the Veterans Office. Recruitment materials were used in criterion-based and snowball sampling as the primary method of gaining participants, yielding four graduate and four undergraduate combat student veterans and staff participants from the Academic Support Services, Disability Support Services, and Veteran Support Services. The Veterans Office assigned one representative to participate in this study, with IRB stipulation that participation by this department would only be by written answers to questions. While this was not in complete alignment with the plan outlined in Chapter Three for the proposal of this study, the resulting participants and their means of participation nevertheless contributed to the diversity of the
participants. The variations in military background and educational pursuits of the combat student veterans developed a complex concept of the student veteran experience (McCaffery, 2019) even while bringing into sharp focus the factors supporting their student experiences in higher education. The COVID-19 pandemic changed the delivery of a majority of the participants’ coursework from in-person to online for all residential students. As a result, their programs were de facto hybrid formats.
## Table 2

### Combat Student Veteran Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Combat Student Veteran</th>
<th>Military Branch</th>
<th>Years of Study</th>
<th>School/ Degree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alfred (Undergraduate)</td>
<td>Navy</td>
<td>2019-2023</td>
<td>School of Aeronautics/ Unmanned Aerial Systems</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Benjamin (Graduate)</td>
<td>Marine Corps</td>
<td>2017-2020</td>
<td>School of Business Doctor of Business Administration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charles (Graduate)</td>
<td>Navy</td>
<td>2018-2021</td>
<td>School of Education Ed.D., Education Leadership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Derek (Graduate)</td>
<td>Air Force</td>
<td>2017-2020</td>
<td>School of Business Doctor of Business Administration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Edward (Graduate)</td>
<td>Air Force</td>
<td>2020-2023</td>
<td>College of Arts &amp; Sciences / Ph.D. in History</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frederick (Undergraduate)</td>
<td>Army</td>
<td>2020-2024</td>
<td>School of Business Cybersecurity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gregory (Undergraduate)</td>
<td>Army</td>
<td>2020-2023</td>
<td>School of Aeronautics/ Unmanned Aircraft Operations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Henry (Undergraduate)</td>
<td>Army</td>
<td>2018-2021</td>
<td>College of Arts &amp; Sciences / History</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Table 3

**Staff Participants**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Staff</th>
<th>Department/Office</th>
<th>Position</th>
<th>Method of Participation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ian</td>
<td>Veterans Office &amp; Veteran Support Services</td>
<td>Senior Supervisor</td>
<td>Written responses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joanna</td>
<td>Disability Support Services</td>
<td>Director</td>
<td>Interview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kendrick</td>
<td>College of Arts and Sciences</td>
<td>Director of Interdisciplinary Studies</td>
<td>Focus Group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lawrence</td>
<td>College of Arts and Sciences</td>
<td>Associate Dean</td>
<td>Focus Group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Matthew</td>
<td>Academic Support Services</td>
<td>Senior Director</td>
<td>Focus Group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nathan</td>
<td>Academic Support Services</td>
<td>Senior Director</td>
<td>Focus Group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oliver</td>
<td>Academic Support Services</td>
<td>Associate Dean</td>
<td>Focus Group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peter</td>
<td>Academic Support Services</td>
<td>Executive Director</td>
<td>Focus Group</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Results

Each theme below is presented from the vantage point of the combat student veteran first, with the intention that the voices of the students remain uppermost as the data is presented.

Before the chapter concludes, the perspectives of university personnel are shared, along with document analysis to round out the credibility of the data. A diagrammatic representation of the data is presented to visualize the narrative form of the data.
Figure 3

*Themes in Combat Student Veteran Support: Environment in Higher Education*

*Note:* Diagrammatic representation of themes and subthemes.

**Quality of Support Services**

More important than having departments and support services for student veterans, is having efficacious services offered by well-informed departments that student veterans find supportive. Services targeted specifically with the background of combat student veterans in mind, and addressing their needs promptly, while undergirded by a Christian worldview, made a positive difference for this nontraditional student population. The Veterans Support Services
Center was affirmed by undergraduate residential students as a positive contribution when they needed assistance and a sense of camaraderie and community with their peers. Services related to academic performance were mentioned with recommendations for improvement, and services for health-related concerns were mentioned sparsely, only when specifically prompted.

**Military-Friendly**

All participants acknowledged that Atlantic State University is a military friendly university, although the extent of that military-friendliness differed according to their individual perspectives. The undergraduate students adopted a linear perspective tied directly to their experience on campus, while the graduate and online students favored the financial and accessibility aspects of the benefits. Derek was convinced of the authenticity of the military friendliness of this university, “They genuinely are a military friendly college…A lot of [other] universities say they’re military friendly based on what they’ve done 10 to 20 years ago. You’ve got to keep moving forward,” implying that supporting student veterans in the current socio-economic climate is what makes the difference. While the financial considerations for student veterans were significant and evident at Atlantic State, he admitted, “not that the dollars-and-cents makes all the difference but it’s very important.” Alfred marveled that after years in the military where his role was to supply services, on campus he found that he was now the customer and was “actually getting the stuff that I want to see change or that I need help with.” As an online student, Derek identified the military friendliness of the university by the “great rate because it’s a military rate, it’s the best rate and unheard of, not just lip service. It’s a ridiculously low tuition, and the Veterans Office and Veteran Support Services were very welcoming, ready, willing, and able to do anything to support you.” Derek also found social and peer support within a social media group for students, while also using the university library
resources for research and writing. He readily acknowledged the role of the Veterans Office as “doing great things for students, everything they’re doing for student veterans, honestly, it’s the right thing.” Derek also reflected that if his positive experience of support services on campus as an online student was so good, he could “only imagine how wonderful of an experience it would have been” as a residential student. He looked back on his residential undergraduate experience and recognized that his involvement with “university services and academic systems kept [him] accountable” by sheer virtue of the amount of interaction with the honor society and student clubs. Gregory found that volunteering in a leadership role within the Student Veterans Association gave him the drive to apply himself academically and the sense of purpose to help other student veterans. Moreover, even though in the military he had written to battalion commanders and brigade commanders, writing an academic paper was something with which he needed help, so he “…used the Writing Center, the Tutoring Center, I've tried all this stuff. It was amazing to me.” Each time he used a support service and found his confidence bolstered by the success, it encouraged him to use other services offered; “Atlantic State has so many ways to help you succeed.”
Nathan, a Senior Director at Academic Support Services explained the path to increased engagement with support services by explaining that once a student veteran approaches a support service needing “a little bit more assistance and a little bit more understanding and once they find someone that will help them get over hurdles, they will consistently come back when they need help.” This was confirmed by combat student veterans in this study. Gregory admitted feeling frustrated during the first semester before he found out about Veterans Support Services Center, as he “was not feeling like I was really truly a part of anything…I didn’t know what to do and where to go and I didn’t know where to ask for help for being a vet [sic].” Once he got involved with the Veterans’ Center, he found an inner stability and confidence that helped him feel part of the campus community, he “became more vocal, more assertive” and even attributed progression through the academic program to his connections at the Veterans Support Services Center, admitting he was “able to get through my classes.” He ended emphatically stating he loved the
university campus, what it provides and how the university exceeded expectations of what a military-friendly university should be like and what they would require of their faculty and students. Interestingly, although Henry did not use support services, he recognized, “There’s definitely a system for it and whoever’s taking it on are doing a good job.”

Benjamin emphasized that good leadership at the university included those who served in the military and patriotic leadership and those who understand the value of military training and background and what veterans bring to institutions of higher education institutions. Student veterans understand that leadership qualities are channeled in higher education to support other veterans, which is embraced by senior leadership.

From the perspective of most staff, all residential and online students have access to support services such as the Academic Support Services, the library, and Veterans Office, and Veteran Support Services, with staff available for tutoring and mentoring. How students utilize support services is the student's responsibility and can vary widely between residential and online students. Ian, a Senior Supervisor at Veteran Support Services, stated that educating student veterans on available resources and guiding them to understand how using support services can lend to successful academic performance is part of his role. He pointed to Disability Support Services as a stellar department within the university, equipped to “assess the action plans and work with a student’s professor for a positive outcome.” Oliver, Associate Dean of Academic Support Services, stated that the military office on campus is “phenomenal” in assisting student veterans and providing faculty training to understand veterans better.

Atlantic University also hosts seminars for faculty by individual departments such as Disability Support Services, and Academic Support Services, each of which presents to faculty the support and resources available to them. Joanne suggested that merely having services is
insufficient, but that interdepartmental communication is the key to identifying contact points for each department, should the need to provide services to a student arise. For example, it was evident that granting special permissions and extensions to military students is demonstrative of the patience and leniency required when working with military students: “I know that we are encouraged to not be lenient, but more patient as far as them turning in assignments because they have other concerns and commitments… to let them have extensions, out of respect and appreciation.” In addition, the University’s participation in the Yellow Ribbon Program, and assistance offered by the Registrar’s Office and Veterans Office, all serve to ensure that military students receive financial support, credit for their experience, and credit for courses.

The university also has clinical and health services on campus and Joanne astutely suggested that while students may not take progressive steps toward addressing health concerns, faculty at support service departments could talk to students about the benefits of pursuing these healthcare related services, the alternative being that students will either disregard what they perceive as minor problems or take their health concerns off campus. “We either have to refer them to the counseling service, …if they don't have the time to invest because they're so busy, they will find …somebody who would be better equipped.”

**Christian Faith-Based**

Military friendliness was tied to a Christian worldview by more than one participant. Joanne at Disability Support Services stated that the university appreciates the military for volunteering their lives for our freedom. Edward chose the university to further his education not only because of its military friendliness but also due to the “faith-based piece to their education so I thought, well, this is the best of both worlds.” Focusing on the Christian faith of individual faculty, Derek said that his “dissertation chair, [was] very religious, walks with God, and I
appreciated that.” Frederick said that while the camaraderie with other student veterans was valuable to him, it was more meaningful “especially because it was at a Christian university. We would also come together to help each other and bring each other up.” He also identified relational supports in the Veteran Support Services Center as meaningful because they were “helping with the Bible and religious view which is kind of nice actually.”

Gregory had been baptized as a Christian the previous year and identified the Christian environment on campus as contributing positively to his educational and personal journey. Gregory also described a senior staff member at the Veteran Support Services Center as “a great guy, great guy, and he's the one that we have moments where we pray for each other and attributed the Christian atmosphere on campus to his sense of hopefulness when looking to the future, “It’s because of the people [at this university] that allow you to see what the future’s gonna look like for you, how is that going to progress in the future.”

Limited Efficacy of Support Services

While the combat student veteran participants had suffered invisible injuries in combat, the prevailing mindset was that this was a relatively minor problem in the larger context of accomplishing the mission of degree completion in higher education. Case in point: Benjamin admitted that he didn’t need to pursue any treatment for any injuries any further, but it wasn’t so much for lack of knowledge about it. Derek endorsed this approach, stating that admitting to invisible injuries that one is already coping with is unnecessary. “It just it doesn't look good. Your leadership, they could lose trust in your ability to do your job. For 20 something years, I think I had PTSD. I looked up the symptoms, and I had [nine of the ten symptoms].” He admitted that you do have veterans struggling with severe, real, psychological problems who are not seeking help.
Edward explained that while student veterans may not reveal that they need help, it does help if faculty understand that combat student veterans may have underlying problems that could impact success. A faculty member who knows this, and is trained to recognize, and sensitively approach a struggling student, can make a positive difference: “Yeah, just, just a faculty member that understands the things that veterans may go through. Yeah, just understanding that the types of challenges that confront veterans and their learning.” He warned against a cookie-cutter approach stating that faculty should not draw erroneous conclusions with generalizations and assumptions about combat student veterans. A counterpoint offered by Ian, a senior staff member at the Veteran Support Services Center, was that “There is a high value in meritocracy (age, military experience, military specialty). If someone does not meet certain criteria, they may be assigned less credibility by the veteran. Which in turn can make it more difficult for that service provider to assist the veteran.” This was stated as a challenge in communicating with student veterans. While it was surprising to hear that staff could assign less credibility to the student veteran and that the student veteran could be part of the problem, this is clearly a situation where staff at the university have difficulty assisting the student veteran partly because of the student veteran’s failure to meet certain criteria.

**The Use of Disability Services**

Interestingly, Frederick stated he had never heard of Disability Support Services, although through his older brother’s influence, he was pursuing medical treatment off-campus for mTBI. Considering the comment by Ian, a Senior Supervisor at Veteran Support Services, that Disability Support Services is a “fantastic” resource and “can help assess the action plans and work with a student’s professor for a positive outcome,” Frederick’s experience was unfortunate. However, Joanna’s perspective as Director of Disability Support Services, aligned
with Ian’s (Senior Supervisor at Veteran Support Services). Both explained that all the steps that support services could offer are galvanized into action only once the student has asked for help.

Six of eight participants had not pursued any specific treatment for invisible injuries, and none had approached Disability Support Services for accommodations. The two student veterans who were seeking medical treatment were doing so in parallel with their studies while considering degree attainment a primary goal and their health concerns a distant secondary goal. This aligned with Joanna’s comments about military students and Disability Support Services, “Once they go through [military] training, [they think] they're…indestructible. When things happen, they just go on instead of taking that time to heal or take the therapy that would be healthy and helpful for them. An inherent problem is that invisible injuries are only brought to light by the student’s choice which first requires admission of a deficit, which goes against the grain of all that military training inculcates. Joanna stated that once Disability Support Services has information on who needs accommodations, this support service liaises with faculty to ensure that the student has all they need to facilitate their participation and success in academics. In addition, they follow up with students to facilitate medical assessments and treatments and liaise between the students and health services. Even while these instances are few, she sees that online and graduate students don’t usually access services for invisible injuries such as mTBI, PTSD, and concussions. “I think maybe because the online and grad students are more mature, they don’t feel they need those resources, or they may just be too busy to use them. I’m not sure.” The self-sustaining tension between a strong desire for independence, disinclination to reveal they have invisible injuries, and their commitment to succeed without being treated differently drives student veterans to spearhead their path by completing a college degree. While Joanne mused that Disability Support Services has much to offer students who have invisible
Injuries, she admitted that military students may not proactively pursue this line of seeking and accepting help; “…with the military students it's like they do not want to be treated different, they just don’t, and I don't, I don't blame them either.”

**Student Veterans Who Do Not Disclose a Need.** Staff at Academic Support Services held a similar view; the consensus was that much could be done for the student if they knew of a student’s need for assistance. Peter, a professor and Executive Director of Academic Support Services, suggested that combat student veterans could increase their success if they would take “advantage of accommodations they could be receiving. If they self-disclose, they would, they would be given certain accommodations that would benefit them greatly in extra time.”

Lawrence, an Associate Dean with an extensive military background explained, “we get notification if the student has gone ahead and asked for that accommodation through the Disability Support Services. Otherwise, we don't know if you sense that there's some issue. Obviously, you can, and it's sensitive.” Kendrick, Director of Interdisciplinary Studies, stated that while revealing physical injuries jeopardizes your acceptance into the military, the university could send the message that “there's no negative effects to admitting that you're going through something, it's only positive. We have to work on the messaging, and we have to try to counter a lot of what they are used to hearing.”

**Timeliness of Support Services**

A detractor from the quality of support services was the timeliness of the service. Often, a student veteran would find that when contacting Academic Support Services or the Writing Center for assistance, the earliest available appointment was for days later, when the assignment they were working on was due long before the availability of support needed. In addition, the times offered did not work with their personal and work schedule. Even when a well-meaning
faculty member advised the student to seek tutoring, the student found that the tutoring services did not meet his needs promptly. As a result, the student struggled on his own when the faculty member could have helped him with the math problem.

Alfred was frustrated with the process of trying to set up an online appointment for Math tutoring. “The only times that were available were either a week or two ahead. They didn’t have hours that would have worked for me at that point, I’m past the material that I need help with now.” Moreover, while the expanded hours of night tutoring seemed helpful, it did not work for him because “That's too late. I’m home with my girls and my family. I can't stay here till like seven or eight or nine at night.” Fred, too, had difficulty when attempting to locate a math tutor and found the experience awkward when paired with a tutor who was younger than he. Fred explained, “That was kind of, like, man, I’m too old for this and I’m only twenty-three.”

Charles mentioned that maximizing the accessibility of IT support for online students would have been helpful, particularly for students whose entire program of study is online, which added to the complexity of juggling academic work with his work and family commitments. He also found that the process of finding a chair for his online doctoral program was cumbersome and ineffective and that it was only by repeated frustrated attempts that he finally connected with a Chair whom he described as “ideal, and a godsend.”

**Combat Student Veterans Who Did Not Use Support Services.** For Benjamin, Charles, Derek and Henry, the common denominator was their confidence in their ability to go through the academic program without a need for academic support services. Henry was the only undergraduate residential student who did not feel the need to access support services. Charles echoed what other participants expressed, that he focused on and enjoyed his studies, “I’m embarrassed to say I don't even know what special veteran services are there because I never
really sought him out or anything like that.” Benjamin even sought permission to accelerate his pace through the program. He summed up the academic rigor and his abilities with humble confidence:

I thought the academic rigor was pretty easy. I’m a little bit of an island. I don't need pats on the back. I don't need somebody cheering for me. I'm old enough to know that anything that I’ve done well is because of God's grace. So, I know that there are people out there to support me, if need be, but I didn't find it particularly challenging. Nor did I need someone to motivate me. I'm pretty much a self-starter.

**Characteristics of Faculty and Staff**

The qualities of faculty were judged as strong contributors to the student experience of combat student veterans. This included the personal characteristics of faculty, their military background, and their skill in teaching. Student veterans highly regarded the faculty who chose to take the initiative in interacting with students, fostering a sense of belonging, and providing thoughtful feedback on assignments. Faculty who set high, rigorous academic standards were respected by student veterans.

**Military Background**

Military background was deemed a significant contributor to a positive student experience, although participants recognized that even faculty with non-military backgrounds contribute powerfully to the positive experience of combat student veterans. Charles agreed that not only did having a faculty member with a military background make a significant difference for him in relating to the professor, it even served as a launchpad for the dissertation phase of his studies as the dissertation chair became a role model for him. “My tempo of progress went from
like flatline to like, [gesturing upward swing] Oh yeah, just being under Dr. Victor [as my Chair].” Derek, Frederick, and Gregory reinforced this concept by highlighting the commonality of shared experience that ensured understanding. Derek emphatically stated that the ideal faculty member for a combat student veteran is “someone that has served in the military, in some capacity, way, shape, or form, or has family member that has, because they tend to be more sensitive, they tend to be more aware of some of the issues we may have.” Frederick suggested that faculty with non-military backgrounds could get to know combat student veterans better to “see the world through our eyes. That would be very, very good.”

While Gregory recognized that approachability was important, “regardless of veteran or nonveteran, just to be there to answer questions” was critical, he went on to describe the ideal faculty member as one who had been in the military, admitting that “I gravitate towards that because I know what it took to get there. I know what you have seen, what you have done. I feel like we were on the same page.” Although Henry was clear that he has had “really good experiences with professors that don’t have a military background,” he reminisced that having faculty with military background “has definitely been pleasant and makes for personal relationships.” Derek recognized the discerning approach of the professors at Atlantic State University stating that when faculty recognized a student as a veteran, “they never came out and tried to say, did you encounter any PTSD, but they were trying to make sure that you were okay. The support that I received from them. Nothing short of outstanding.”

From the staff perspective, Lawrence, an Associate Dean, and Matthew, Senior Director in Academic Support Services, both of whom have a military background recognized that with student veterans they were able to recognize the challenges of being
a nontraditional student. They had each worked with student veterans to accommodate individual requests for altered deadlines due to deployments. If anything, the student veteran in these cases would aim to submit their academic assignments early rather than late, so the accommodation being requested was not a delay or postponement of a deadline. Oliver, Associate Dean of Academic Support Services, added that with military students, when they approach faculty for accommodations, “you know you're not being taken advantage of and that you know that you have that heart for it and want to help.” Matthew spoke of the tacit trust that exists when working with a military student, the kind of trust that exists “right from the start. There’s connection, there's a trust, there's a respect between the faculty member and the military students that I think facilitates working through these situations.”

**Contextualized Course Content**

A minor theme with important implications was revealed by some participants as lending academic rigor to coursework and credibility to faculty: the ability to contextualize coursework to real life. Alfred described an ideal faculty member as one who “would be taking inputs throughout the semester and refining the way that he is presenting information for the students.” Benjamin supported this view and observed astutely that practical experience and application was missing in faculty who seemed to have “all academic experience.” So, when teachers rendered an over-simplified example in the business curriculum, it was evident that they had not been in business. They discussed theories without the nuances and practicalities of how those examples revealed

The personal relationships, the dynamics of interacting with different types of people, and understanding people's capabilities, their limitations, those are skills
you learn in the military, you know very well, you learn those in real life. And I think it's hard for some professors to understand the importance of those or to stress them properly when they're teaching curriculum without experiencing it themselves, and they have a hard time making it real. Yeah. So, you rely on yourself to interpret and infer the theories into how they applied in your own life in the past.

While it is not necessary for all faculty to have military backgrounds, faculty who have “life experiences in the job market” could lend relevance to the course content by sharing their experiences. Benjamin held the view that “students want to hear personal experiences.” Not contextualizing course content with real life examples and experiences struck a discordant note for combat student veterans in their otherwise neutral or pleasant experience in higher education.

Frederick and Gregory explained how the Veteran Support Services Center could be a place not only for veterans but also for faculty who want to learn more about military culture and what drives student veterans. Frederick explained that if faculty knew that in the military, graphs and mapping were familiar to some student veterans, they could implement that knowledge into the delivery of course content by finding connections between military experience and application of course content. Gregory explained that it comes naturally to some student veterans to take the structure of their courses and “apply it to your new future career and structure because businesses like structure.” Even being connected with a tutor at Academic Support Services who has a military concept in mind while breaking down math for a student can be very helpful. Ultimately, in Benjamin’s words,

It was most helpful when the faculty would provide specificity or clarity into what the expectations were. I think that comes from a military background, you know
how important it is for there to be very, to understand specific tasks, how they relate to the overall mission or the intent. So, if a faculty can translate that into being very specific about what is behind what we're trying to accomplish, in their response, to me, it not only shows respect, it shows that they're actually trying to help you understand the concept, in addition to the task. I mean that was always helpful if you could get a professor that was willing to do that.

**Faculty and Staff Characteristics**

Specific deterrents to success were identified in some faculty who might benefit from additional training. Alfred expressed frustration with professors who deviated from the syllabus and instructions given to students. This was in stark contrast to systems in the military where detailed and accurate instructions in writing were considered authoritative. “You have to follow and abide by your own syllabus and instructions. Especially when it’s something in writing in the syllabus that’s posted in Canvas or Blackboard.” He further identified that some faculty treated students as a homogenous group. A nontraditional student who has a family and needed to stay home to take care of a sick child did not seem to have it in their frame of reference to allow for absence from class for such reasons.

The lack of engagement by adjunct faculty was identified as another area that would benefit from additional training. There were arguably fair indictments against faculty engagement with students. Derek admitted he had low expectations from his professors in his online coursework, “and by that, I mean "here's your assignments – do them, and I'm going to grade them. There was very limited interaction.” Edward agreed; his interaction with adjunct faculty was close to negligible. For the 10-to-15-page papers he was required to write if their response was as terse as “Good job,” he had to wonder if they were just checking word count. He
was concerned about the lack of engagement by adjunct faculty. He did not want the university to become a diploma mill, which would adversely affect its reputation, and the ability of students to secure employment. He wondered if faculty were even reading discussion board posts:

> They may jump on and say hey great post, but besides grading, I'm not really sure what the adjunct faculty does. The interaction is just not there. It's like you're a master of your own destiny in the program and if you aren't putting the work in to just read, write and regurgitate it on paper. You're not going to be successful, there's no coaching, there’s no, ‘I'm checking in with you.’

For Edward, it also seemed that the bar could be set higher for expectations and accountability on both sides. It seemed that the reduced accountability structure afforded by online methods of instruction and learning worked against not only the students who could easily submit an assignment that was not only late, but also less than their best work, but also against faculty who may easily accept late work which was also ‘less than the best’, based on a simple request for an extension by a student. “There’s not much accountability you know. If I can skim the book and just get through it, I don’t have to go to somebody and say something. It’s just an email.”

Nathan, a Senior Director at Academic Support Services understood that student veterans “have a lower tolerance for non-substantive answers”, suggesting that it behooves faculty to engage with students meaningfully and with intentionality.

Faculty on campus who would not hold students accountable, or demand timeliness served to disrupt learning for student veterans even if they intended to be more friendly and gracious to everyone. Gregory explained that he would show up for a class at least 15 minutes early, which was his perception of punctuality. He was confounded by the nonchalance of students being late to class and a faculty member doing nothing to address that. Furthermore, a
faculty member in class chose not to address students talking between themselves and distracting other students. When Gregory approached the faculty member after class about the distractions, he was told that “the simple fact” is that those students were paying for their education too. Therefore there’s “nothing we can do to address it.” Gregory was astonished at such a response; “That kind of blew my mind and anyways. Why can't she well you know [do something about it]? They’re a little lax on the standards. It’s just respect for everyone else, not only for the person speaking.”

Henry’s experience aligned with Gregory’s when he admitted that due to his having a full-time job, and being a full-time student, with a family and other responsibilities, he once submitted an assignment just in time to meet the deadline. “I’m not particularly proud of it. It was not my best work. Then I get like a decent grade and I'm like okay well that wasn't so bad.” He had to wonder if “they're kind of taking it easy because it's an online course, you know, whatever.”

From the perspective of staff who had military experience, Ian, the Senior Supervisor at Veteran Support Services recognized that the combat student veterans’ prior training in the military means that the military provides many “pre-approved solutions that service members use as guidelines for their daily routine. This structured environment is removed after separation from the military and may take time to adjust to setting up one’s own independent structures.” Ian, the Senior Supervisor at Veteran Support Services described this as a two-way street and a self-fulfilling phenomenon in that the student veteran can make it harder for the faculty member to assist. “Since the military values meritocracy highly, [things like] age, military experience, military specialty” are valued. If someone does not meet certain criteria, they may be assigned
less creditability by the veteran. This can make it more difficult for that service provider to assist the veteran.”

**Distinctive Personal Factors**

Personal factors with which combat student veterans come to higher education served to drive them through to academic success and degree completion. Their military training, deeply ingrained values, faith, and a strong sense of purpose and independence served as synergistic forces in the higher education environment. Many of the participants took rightful pride in serving their country and being identified as veterans. They had developed a sense of responsibility, a strong work-ethic and matured because of their military background.

**Military-Ingained Values**

Combat student veterans had the bar set high for them in the military, incentivizing high performance and having consequences for not meeting expectations. As Alfred explained, the bar was set high with “everything we did.” The stress and tension served to spur him on to give of his utmost, so while it created some tension, “It was also a situation that invigorated you and caused you to want to do your best. If I didn’t, they would probably have reassigned me to working in the kitchen I'm just like, I don't want that.” The experience served to make him stronger, identify his limitations and enable him to push against personal boundaries and increase his fortitude. Not only was he expected to do his part, but the near-constant awareness of being part of a team solidified for him the reality that he could not “drop the ball.” The desire to avoid being the weak link in a chain kept him from succumbing to the weakness of failing to do his part. This mindset carried over into student life; he found himself being early for classes, avoiding procrastination with assignments, preparing thoroughly for tests, and doing the best he could at his studies. He recognized that compared to life in the military, being on a college
campus was easy; “the amount of stress that anyone has to handle in the military is so much higher than what we will experience here that it’s almost refreshing.” Benjamin tied the strong sense of service in the military to the value combat student veterans bring to higher education. The altruism is a sign of honor, “It's actually a metric for saying that what I'm doing is honorable. And to, and to me, that's very important. That's more important than financial riches or power or anything. It's knowing that you have honor.” While Alfred stated that stress in the military can result in good qualities, Benjamin expounded the same idea by tying combat situations to the revealing of true strength of character”

[Combat] is a great revealer of who we are. It quantifies those qualitative qualities in your life. You find out how you really react, you find out who's loyal, you find out who has a sense of service when you're in combat. It's like the fire burns and what's left, you find the true character of a man, in combat.

Traits learned in training: resiliency, adaptability, mental agility, discipline, and a strong work ethic combined to help Benjamin face sudden changes or anything that might interfere with studying or an assignment.

In combat, Charles was trained to remain focused on the current task while keeping an eye on next steps, and all this while being extremely busy, working through the lack of sleep and fatigue. This was the norm when he was deployed and “doing a lot of night operations and going on missions. Over, and over again for a year straight, fatigue and not having time to sleep a lot, things like eating when you can and trying to stay busy and focused.” The same inner drive motivated Derek to “be the best I could be to get the best grades; I wouldn’t settle for anything but the best for myself.” His experiences in the military taught him self-discipline, self-confidence, and the courage to experience incredibly tough experiences while emerging “a better
person.” He explained the result of combat experiences was his “commitment to excellence, because I lived 26 years with that,” a strong sense of camaraderie borne out of being part of a team under life-threatening conditions “with that great danger comes the potential for tremendous brotherhood, a camaraderie that you just don’t find out here.” He pointed out that combat and a military background affect how students perform in college, “It’s not your traditional job. The military is 24-7-365.” This same approach to academics was applied by Edward who excelled in academics by applying himself with military discipline and focus “just like the military you know, you don't, you know, excuse my language but [half-a] anything. And so, I did the same. I applied those lessons that I learned in the military, and I did that through my program and through my academic experience.” Although he had more distractions and responsibilities while pursuing his graduate degree, motivation was vital in his successful pursuit of an undergraduate degree. The ability to successfully prioritize tasks was key in pursuing a graduate degree. Both qualities had been instilled in him in the military and served him well in college. Frederick hit the nail on the head for other participants too when he explained that all that had been drilled into him in the military, was now being focused into academics. So, while some traditional students’ problems may be in the realm of “my room-mate ate my mac and cheese,” the combat student veteran is dealing with a “whole different set of problems as a full-time father, husband, student and with work; yet our mission is that we succeed in what we do. The commitment and the drive that we have from the military is carried over into academics.”

A common theme for combat student veterans was the extent to which they had been given responsibilities when in the military. The reality and conviction that they were responsible for issues directly and indirectly pertaining to life and death bore heavily on them. They could not let the team down, and they had to succeed. The mindset of persistence, endurance and never
giving up, all applied to academics and helped them toward success in higher education, whether measured by grades or degree completion.

**Faith and Social Support**

Most participants attributed some aspect of their success in higher education to the invisible and sure presence of God, and their faith as Christians, in addition to the support and encouragement they received from a spouse, parents, or immediate family members. Their humble acknowledgment of these factors was sincerely and gratefully stated. Derek, for instance, credited much of his success in higher education to God and his family. “I would like to tell you it's because I'm great. I'm so intelligent. I'm so wise. No, it's God, looking out for me. I actually believe that. I accepted that it's His will, His way in His time.” He mentioned his wife also marveled that as opportunities presented themselves to him, the doors opened, “It's just, oh God, yeah, because I'm sitting here like I told you going through life and opportunities just dropped in my lap, not that I'm looking for them.” Speaking of his mother, who persuaded and ‘saw to it’ that he joined the military, he acknowledged that his “entire family is reaping benefits from that time in the military. [It was the] best decision I ever made, and I thank my mother every day for it.” He considered it a blessing that his dissertation chair was also “very religious, walks with God, and I appreciated that.”

Edward considered the “faith-based piece” of his education important enough to make it one of the primary reasons for selecting this university. A Christian significantly impacted Frederick at the Veterans Support Services Center who helped him with understanding a biblical mindset and worldview “She's very friendly, the best person, she’s a Marine, yeah, greatest person I ever talked to, and she helps me like understand the Bible and stuff. That's awesome. I really appreciate it. Yeah.” Gregory found that his persistence and enjoyment of being in higher
education was tied to his Christian faith, “I just got baptized as a Christian and I’m even seeing how it actually kind of evolved and this is actually part of the healing process for myself.” He used his faith in God to address difficult situations in the military, and he finds himself using his faith again to persist through his degree program. “I dealt with my experiences the way God allowed me to deal with my experiences. Whether or not it was something hard that you're about to do, something that you have to force yourself to continue to do.”

The views of faculty and staff participants were congruent with combat student veterans’ views on their approach to academics. Kendrick found military students to be “more focused [and] very direct and to the point, they don’t mess around, they don’t waste time.” Peter, a professor and Executive Director of Academic Support Services, agreed that these students are “very assertive and aggressive and good about turning things in early and wanting to do very well.” Oliver, Associate Dean of Academic Support Services, took this point further with the example that when a military student cannot submit an assignment due to a deployment, or lack of internet access due to location, they plan to be proactive and submit it early rather than ask for an extension. This same mindset applied to their financial means as related to academics, indicates that military students are more focused on completing their degree program because the tuition assistance they have through the GI Bill is finite. Traditional students may tend to add another student loan to their program and be more inclined to change majors frequently. Instead, the military student’s mindset is “I want this covered within my tuition assistance or my GI Bill, so I have to either get the grade or stay on track and not change my major five times because I'll run out of funds.” Joanna, Director of Disability Support Services agreed that for military students, being told once is enough to set a plan in motion as they understand that there are
repercussions to not obeying a command. As a result, they are less likely to need repeated reminder emails about assignments.

**Motivation and Purpose**

Combat student veterans approached their role as students with a strong desire to have the mission accomplished, along with their value system, and a supportive family. Alfred’s motivation was “To be able to graduate and get the degree. I don’t care if I’m Magna Cum Laude.” His desire to serve his country and say that he did so “with pride,” along with his wife’s support and encouragement, spurred him to persist through college. Participants had very supportive family, spouse, and children. Charles recognized that the understanding of his wife and family meant a lot to him because pursuing a degree “can be pretty demanding about time and commitments.” Frederick attributed his persistence to his mother’s insistence that he persist and was utterly grateful and respectful of how she motivated him while also describing his wife’s support as “nothing short of amazing, outstanding.” Ryan mentioned his father’s example as a role model and inspiration, along with the unwavering support of his wife. Frederick’s sense of loyalty and love for his parents, his brother’s encouragement and mentorship, and his desire to be financially independent all gave him the sense of purpose and direction to join the military and pursue a college degree. Both Gregory’s parents motivated him to join the military and then pursue higher education. With one of his parent’s roles as a MedEvac pilot, he found his own passion for a similar career in the military and the reason to pursue a degree in Aviation. Speaking of his success in college after his time in the military, he said his proudest moment was when his mother told him he was excelling “in ways that sometimes even we as your parents would never have thought possible.”
Benjamin took ownership of his professional and academic journey and had a strong desire to excel. His comments exhibited his motivation, drive to excel, desire to serve others, and a well-thought-out strategy to reach his goals. His words encapsulated the honorable motivations of a combat veteran in the military and academia:

I didn’t want to be average. I wanted to learn. My personal value system is that you must set goals for yourself all the time. Spiritual goals, academic goals, financial goals. So, when I saw the opportunity to be able to get a doctorate, it was a natural fit to achieve a personal goal. And I thought, if perhaps I can gain more knowledge, then I can contribute more to others.

**Limited Social Integration and Limited Vulnerability**

The identity of combat student veterans as a factor of military socialization was evident in the responses of combat student veterans to questions related to their interactions with others in college. The harsh and hardening experience of being a combat student veteran was life-altering and enforced personal change. Injuries that civilians would consider an emergency were often downplayed by combat student veterans as an obstacle to face and a challenge to rise above. Participants who sustained invisible injuries reported having dealt with symptoms by sheer force of doggedness, and the awareness that they were part of a team and did not want to be the weak link. After initial symptoms wore off, Benjamin stated that he “didn’t see any negative effect” and didn’t need to pursue any treatment, not so much for lack of knowledge about it but rather the conviction and subsequent proof that he was able to rise above that challenge. Derek echoed a similar belief, stating that in retrospect, he realized he probably had PTSD and other invisible injuries but had learned to deal with it on his own. This came easy to him as he was taught in the military to be independent, show strength, and do well in any
assigned tasks; “it’s the furthest thing [on their mind, to ask for help].” Gregory too stated, “The hardest part for any vet [sic] is to say ‘help,’” and Henry said he did not believe he needed help and did not seek any help for any invisible injuries he may have sustained. The participants had put the issue of invisible injuries on the back burner to prioritize their education. As Joanna at Disability Support Services rightly pointed out, military training teaches them to push through incredible pain and difficulty, and so perceived inconveniences are not given much attention.

For the few participants who pursued medical treatment, that pursuit was always relegated to a position secondary to their academic work and family life. As Derek pointed out, education was not the priority when he was in the military and may have taken a backseat. However, once he entered college, the mission was to complete the degree and so anything like an invisible injury naturally took a backseat. Even Gregory, who struggled with medical problems and was honorably discharged due to a medical condition considered his medical problems secondary to the primary mission of being successful in college. To help other student veterans to seek and find academic help actively became his secondary mission on the college campus. Alfred explained his attitude, “you're aware of it, you're dealing with it, and it’s something that you face but people around you just may not know it at all, and that's simply because it's not so obvious.” The injury enabled him to recognize his limitations and strengthened his resolve to succeed, which was a greater reward than anything he may have achieved by pursuing medical treatment.

Moreover, not only did he stay strong for the rest of the team, but as he pragmatically stated, “I didn't think was a big deal.” All combat student veteran participants validated Ian’s statement that as a staff member who works closely with student veterans, the biggest challenge is “having the student self-identify when they need assistance. Much of the time, I learn after the
fact a particular struggle the student may have been encountering (if I am informed at all).”

Nathan, a Director of Academic Support Services elucidated this concept by pragmatically by stating, “If they come to you and they’re looking for help, then chances are that they’ve already exhausted everything that they already knew was available to them to find the path on their own.”

**Outlier Data and Findings**

Combat student veterans are not a homogenous group. The group had participants in online programs, residential programs, undergraduate and graduate students, and varied military backgrounds. The uniqueness of each participant inevitably yielded outlier data.

**Non-military Faculty as an Advantage**

An unexpected insight from Henry was that a faculty member who did not have a military background could potentially be a better faculty member for combat students. His rationale being that that faculty member would be more inclined to offer an unbiased approach while also ensuring that the expectations for all students are on the same level. He did not want to be treated as special or different, and when talking to a professor, he would not want a professor to wonder if he had to speak differently to the combat student veteran. Henry felt that as a student, he should adapt to the norm and not encourage any bias. Edward expressed belief in the fact that while discounted tuition for student veterans as an expression of gratitude by the university is good, giving student veterans extra time to complete assignments simply because they are student veterans is not appropriate even if students take advantage of a “protected veteran status.”
Lack of Awareness About Disability Support Services

Frederick stated he had “never heard of Disability Support Services.” He offered that he would have used the services provided by Disability Support Services had he known about it. Considering that Frederick pursued assessments and treatments off campus for his invisible injuries, the lack of awareness about Disability Support Services is suggestive of the disconnect in communication between a military-friendly university and the student veteran who could have found out about Disability Support Services through his involvement at the Veteran Support Services Center and a veteran-specific orientation. This could be a compelling reason to make an orientation course mandatory for all student veterans. In this case, a student who could have benefitted from Disability Support Services on campus, did not, due to lack of awareness.

A Misguided Prerogative

Kendrick, the Director of Interdisciplinary Studies, explained that while social integration can be problematic for nontraditional students, and the university, faculty, and staff have their role in bridging the gap, student veterans also have a responsibility to recognize the norms on a college campus and seek to integrate socially. Kendrick explained that the harsh reality for some student veterans might be that while they were in the military, they were part of an elite fighting force while on a college campus they are “a civilian like everybody else.” A student could be disgruntled about this and have a “sense of entitlement,” acting out in frustration and giving “off this general air of being sort of above what’s happening in class because of being deployed and doing serious things. Not whatever we’re studying in this class.” In these situations, faculty could benefit from training in how best to communicate the importance of community, assignments, and to encourage inclusion. However, feelings that result from a combat student veteran feeling out of place need to be addressed not only by faculty but also by the student. A
misguided sense of privilege and entitlement creates a tension for the student veteran who resists academic integration. Such a student would be disadvantaged because academic integration is conducive to academic success, even when social integration is disregarded.

**Research Question Responses**

The sixteen participants provided a kaleidoscopic view of factors that support combat student veterans in higher education. Combat student veterans, faculty, and staff gave their perspectives on the institutional, academic, personal, and relational factors that influence the combat student veteran within the higher education environment.

**Central Research Question**

The central research question was, “What are the factors that are supportive of combat student veterans at a private institution of higher education?” The main themes identified were the quality of support services, the caliber and characteristics of faculty, and distinctive personal characteristics of combat student veterans. Within each of these categories, the prominent factor revolved around the military. These prominent factors were the military friendliness of support services, the military background of faculty and staff, and the military ingrained values of combat student veterans. All other subthemes were secondary to this salient factor. The quality of support services was tied to the efficacy of support services and the Christian culture at the university. The quality of faculty was associated with their expertise, excellence in teaching, and ability to connect with and engage students. The personal characteristics of combat student veterans comprised their faith, motivation, sense of purpose, and the single-minded perseverance that the military instilled in them.
Sub-Question One

The first research sub-question was, “What institutional services do combat student veterans perceive as supportive of their success in higher education?” The benefits of the GI Bill, and how efficiently this was processed by the university was a military-friendly service that made a difference for combat student veterans. Not only did the tuition rate for military students speak to the respect and appreciation for their service, but interactions with staff at the Veterans Office and Veteran Support Services gave participants a positive experience of an institutional service at the start of their involvement with the university. A majority of undergraduate, residential participants considered that the quality of support services on campus helped with their progression through the degree programs. The Veteran Support Service Center served as a source of support for them as it was centrally located, an inviting space that fostered camaraderie between student veterans. It was a place to congregate and socialize with other students with military backgrounds. Gregory explained that the Veteran Support Service Center was not just a place, but it became his social connection to his past and future. “I mean, being able to go there and just being with other people who have had military experience and being able to talk to them in the way that military people talk is nice because I can feel more relaxed. I'm not just going to school.” Frederick too found friends and friendly staff at the Veteran Support Service Center. It became an outlet for him to engage in volunteerism and serve other student veterans and a place to connect with other like-minded people. “The people there, they have similar experiences, they have the same mindset, but we try to also help each other. The people in there helped me all the time. They're great to hang out there.” Both Gregory and Frederick were undergraduate residential students who were succeeding academically and volunteering to assist other student veterans, despite invisible injuries sustained in the field. The Veteran Support Services Center
became a hub of activity, and a meaningful place to use their interests and skills to develop friendships and serve other student veterans. Having had an initial positive experience in this place, they were apt to return to this support service office, more likely to recommend support services to others, and to volunteer in this area.

Military-friendliness and the university's Christian-faith-based characteristics helped provide a generally engaging student experience, while academic support services for tutoring and writing were helpful to some. However, with academic support services, the lack of availability of prompt appointments for tutoring and writing assistance was a detractor. So were the jarring experiences of adult combat veterans being tutored by traditional-aged students. After initial neutral to detracting experiences, participants chose not to continue pursuing these academic support services. Disability Support Services were not used by any of the combat student veteran participants.

**Sub-Question Two**

What are the academic interactions of combat student veterans in higher education? The approachability and friendly attitude of faculty were deemed a significant factor contributing to veterans’ enjoyment in academics. Faculty and staff with military backgrounds were found to be outstanding and remarkable in the way in which they engaged with student veterans. Not only was there a camaraderie between them, but a sense of mentorship which was valued highly by combat student veterans. Charles mentioned in talking to his professor and Dissertation Chair, Dr. Victor, over the phone, they developed a rapport. He appreciated that this professor was approachable and would often take the initiative to reach out and help him develop his prospectus. This kind of exemplary initiative by a professor was “just more efficient because I can ask questions and he can give me recommendations. It worked better over the phone than
just email.” Derek too described his professor Dr. Victor as “a wonderful person, he does a great job not just for veterans but for all students. He prepares us for success and is really looking out for us. Great guy.” This kind of teaching, mentorship, and frequent, semi-structured interactions between combat student veterans and their professors, was considered of immeasurable value, and as Benjamin put it, “not just gold, but platinum.”

Faculty who applied their own practical experience to their teaching, connected well with these students, rather than faculty with only academic experience who depended solely on theoretical, textbook examples to illustrate concepts. As Frederick pointed out, “If they talk to us that would be perfect because then they’d see we mapped graphs in the military, and they’d have found the connections and explained how we can implement this with math.” Gregory expressed the same idea, “If I can get a tutor who not only understands numbers like the back of their hand but also has that military concept of life, to break down math in a military structured environment.” Benjamin unraveled this idea further by stating that it was most helpful when faculty “would provide specificity or clarity into what the expectations were” and how specific tasks “relate to the overall mission or the intent.” Without this, there was a frustrating ambiguity and lack of purpose about some of the coursework. On the other hand, a faculty member who conveyed the intent and purpose of coursework specifically demonstrates respect, and demonstrates that “They’re actually trying to help you understand the concept, in addition to the task.”

**Sub-Question Three**

What personal characteristics of combat student veterans contribute to their success in higher education? A strong sense of discipline, integrity, honor, and focus, coupled with the desire to accomplish the mission of getting a college degree, served to exponentially increase
their success. This concept was borne out not only in participant responses to questions about personal factors, but in questions about their transition from the military to higher education, their desire for a high standard of academics, delivery of support services, the demeanor with which they interacted with others, as well as their motivations and characteristics when joining the military and higher education. Benjamin and Frank agreed, “I don't know if you ever really leave the military, or your identity, part of the type of people you value in life because you know that there's some commonality in how you look at life.”

**Sub-Question Four**

How do combat student veteran support relationships affect their success in higher education? Combat student veterans identified supportive families as a blessing, attributed their ability to progress through to degree completion to their support, and acknowledged that their spouse took care of everything else to provide the time and space for them to focus on their studies. The role models provided by the parents of some combat student veterans was identified as a factor for which combat student veterans were grateful. The camaraderie with peer student veterans and faculty with military backgrounds was identified as a significant socialization area and peer support.

**Summary**

With the influx of student veterans in higher education, institutions of higher education are exploring ways to integrate this student demographic. As an alternative to taking a deficit model and seeking to either fill in the blanks or fix what is wrong, this qualitative study explored the perspectives of combat student veterans on what has helped them succeed in college.

Combat student veterans in higher education espouse core values contributing to their success as students in higher education. These military- ingrained and foundational values serve
as a taproot from which they thrive in college. While support services can be helpful, if they are found to be neutral or detractors, combat veterans have the resiliency to overcome detracting factors and meet their goal of pursuing a college degree. Whether their student experience is positive or not, they will emerge with their mission accomplished. Universities that take the initiative and make changes to enhance their services for this population may find that their military-friendliness rises more than the success of student veterans which may be independent of the university’s support services available to them. While this may not be true for all student veterans, this was reportedly true in the representative sample of combat student veterans with invisible injuries. As evident in Astin’s I-E-O model (1984), the student combat veteran who enters college with a solid “input,” has within them the force multipliers for success in the higher education “environment,” and can emerge with the “output” of successful degree completion.
CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Overview

The purpose of this case study was to gain a deeper understanding of the factors that support the success of combat student veterans in higher education, viewed through the lens of these students’ experiences. After laying the groundwork on the summary of findings, and answers to research questions, the notional link between the results of this study and the empirical and theoretical literature is presented. This is followed by a discussion on how this study authenticates prior research on student veterans in higher education, along with outliers that diverge from the extant literature. This chapter also explores findings that reinforce Astin’s I-E-O model (Astin, 1970), and Vacchi’s conceptual model of student veteran support (Vacchi & Berger, 2014). Methodological and practical implications are discussed, with a list of limitations and delimitations imposed by this study. Considering that this study was by no means exhaustive, the chapter ends with recommendations for future research involving combat student veterans.

Discussion

The answer to the question, “What are the factors supportive of combat student veterans at a private institution of higher education?” was broadly categorized into three primary sections: the quality of support services, the caliber and characteristics of faculty and staff, and distinctive personal factors of combat student veterans. Of these, the first two lie within the purview of the environment component of Astin’s I-E-O model, and within Vacchi’s conceptual model of student veteran college experiences. The third theme lies squarely in the input component of Astin’s I-E-O model. The military sub-theme emerged as prominent within each theme.
Institutional factors supportive of combat student veterans included the prompt response and delivery of support services without which the students continued to progress through their education programs but with almost no engagement with support services. The Veteran Support Services Center was a meaningful place and means of support for residential, undergraduate students for whom the college environment was difficult to navigate and appreciate without continued military socialization. Academic interactions of combat student veterans were highly positive when it involved faculty with a military background and faculty who were adept in contextualizing course content for student veterans. Faculty who seemed unaware of the experiences of combat student veterans and who did not require or expect a particularly high standard academically struck a discordant note for student veteran participants of this study. By far, it was the personal factors and internal characteristics that served as an impetus for combat student veterans to progress through higher education successfully. Even their relational support system of spouse, parents, siblings, and camaraderie with other student veterans was a solid but secondary factor contributing to their success.

**Interpretation of Findings**

The findings of this study corroborated and expanded upon some of the empirical and theoretical literature reviewed in Chapter Two. Some findings dissociated from previous research. A summary is provided here, followed by the findings as related to the theoretical literature, and implications for policy and practice.

**Summary of Thematic Findings**

The thematic findings were related to the literature and had empirical implications. There were also implications for policy and practice as related to staff and student veterans in higher education. The three major themes affecting combat student veteran success in higher education
were the quality of support services, the caliber and characteristics of university personnel and
campus community, and distinctive personal factors. Support services that were veteran-friendly,
Christian-faith based, and prompt in responding to the needs combat student veterans facilitated
their success, and also increased their repeated engagement with support services. It also
increased their desire to volunteer in these areas, spread the word to other student veterans, and
potentially solidified their loyalty and involvement as future alumni. University personnel who
had a military background, or an understanding of military culture were more approachable by
combat student veterans. Faculty who contextualized course content for these students were
valued as having real-world experience, and combat student veterans considered them to be of
high caliber. Faculty and staff who seemed to do the bare minimum in their teaching and
responses to combat student veterans, who did not promptly respond with substantive feedback
or assistance, were a detractor in the academic experiences of combat student veterans.
Distinctive personal factors served as powerful drivers of success for combat student veterans
and these factors were – military-ingrained values, their Christian faith, social support, inner
motivation and drive, and a strong sense of independence. The staff and faculty considered
limited social integration and limited vulnerability as a detractor for the combat student veteran
in their academic integration and experience. However, this personal factor was perceived as a
positive trait by combat student veterans. For them, the need to prioritize socialization, or be
vulnerable in asking for assistance was not in the forefront of their thinking or academic
experience.

The Findings and Theoretical Literature. Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) noted that
the students’ demographic characteristics, family background, and the combination of past
academic and social experiences that they bring to the college environment all help shape their
college experience. However, in combat student veterans, it seemed that the college experience was secondary to their primary goal of securing a college degree and gainful employment after that. Their background and training had matured them to a degree where they keenly perceived the gap in maturity and life experience between themselves and traditional college students. They did not seem to choose to immerse themselves into the college culture, and their “resultant values, skillset, and behavior” (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005) was produced not so much by their college experience but by the input within them before they came to college.

Astin’s Theory of Student Involvement for higher education (Astin 1984; 1991) was validated in this study with an emphasis on the input which combat student veterans bring with them to the college environment. Astin described student involvement as concrete initiative and acts, and the student’s physical and psychological input into their academic experience (Astin, 1991). Vacchi’s conceptual framework of student veteran support was authenticated. Student veteran participants explained that in their undergraduate college experience, targeted support services, combined with positive academic interactions, peer support, socialization with other student veterans, and faculty and staff with military experience, all served to facilitate their progression through college. Vacchi’s model elucidated student veterans’ college experiences as related to support services, academic interactions and transitions and this study validated his model of student veteran support. This study also authenticated Vacchi and Berger’s (2014) argument that for student veterans, the link between non-college reference groups and veteran success in college is doubly significant because military socialization extends into their college lives after they leave the military. This concept was further corroborated by combat student veterans Benjamin and Frank who mused that one doesn’t ever leave the military because the impact the military has on your identity is almost indelible. Another concept validated in this
study was that the identity of student veterans is not nullified or reduced by their entrance into college because they bring with them inherent military culture (Vacchi & Berger, 2014). Student veterans are succeeding in college even when support systems are not optimal, and this is primarily due to the inputs that student veterans bring with them to college.

**The Findings and Empirical Literature.** The combat student veterans interviewed for this study had all been exposed to an increased risk for adverse mental and physical health outcomes, had sustained some degree of invisible injuries along the continuum of mTBI, or a wide range of levels of frequency of mTBI or PTSD. While most had been exposed to blast waves and blast-induced concussions, the majority had considered this inconsequential and unimpactful to their daily functioning. Those who were pursuing treatment for this were doing so off-campus through the Veterans Administration and admitted that access to this kind of clinical care on campus would be helpful as it would eliminate the need for them to engage off-campus.

A finding that was corroborated was that many combat student veterans are not using healthcare and some of those with PTSD are not engaged in VHA care (Friedman, 2004; Kim et al., 2010; Sharp et al., 2015). One of the findings that dissociated from previous research is that PTSD or TBI-related cognitive symptoms did not seem to hinder learning or affect academic outcomes due to the adverse impact on memory and concentration. While it was not within the scope of this study to evaluate cognitive and executive function in combat student veterans, none of the combat student veteran participants reported time away from school or work due to any invisible injuries. This was another dissociated finding.

Of the seven themes that emerged in the qualitative study by Kato et al, (2016), I am not sure that student veterans need a support system outside the military, that readapting to the culture of civilian life was a shock, and that they need to find meaning in a new life to give them
perspective and purpose to move forward (Kato et al., 2016). The dissociated findings from my study suggested that the strength of student veterans’ internal drive, coupled with the maturing effect of military training, carried them through college despite difficulties that they face with social integration in college. In veterans with mTBI in their medical history, they were able to pursue academic and professional achievements, and find purpose and meaning in society even without a strong sense of being supported by the university as Karr et al (2019) and IVMF (2017) suggested were necessary. In fact, as Zalaznick (2019) suggested, student veterans’ life experiences and mindset toward service and sacrifice is largely unknown to traditional students.

None of the combat student veterans interviewed in this study identified themselves primarily as disabled. On the contrary, any injuries they sustained in combat took a firm backseat to their primary goal of securing a college degree and preparing for employment. They exhibited a strong sense of commitment to higher education, and with their superior perseverance, they seemed to be an asset to higher education (IVMF, 2017). The premise that student veterans in higher education are struggling, and that they have difficulty with transitions from the military to being a college student, or that they have problems with persistence, was unfounded in this study. They did not seem to be struggling in academics. In fact, they were excelling in academics despite challenges some of them experienced in college due to existing and possible invisible injuries. As for social integration, they did not seem to give this concept serious attention or consideration. Making changes in how they do things to be socially acceptable or liked did not seem to be at the forefront of their thinking. The results of this study also aligned with Hammond’s (2015) study in which the complex self-identity of combat student veterans as adults and veterans was used to study their college experience. The fluidity of their identity in the context of higher education and the uniqueness of their experience as active duty military is
better served by studying this student population through a relevant ideological lens (Hammond, 2015). Vacchi’s findings (2017, 2018) that the transition of student veterans through higher education is facilitated to the extent that universities adapt strategies specifically for this nontraditional student population, was also corroborated in this study and voiced by most combat student veteran participants. For example, combat student veterans Alfred, Benjamin, Frederick, and Gregory all suggested that the way faculty present course content to students, avoiding oversimplifications and generalizations and providing real-world examples and contexts, would make for the most suitable faculty member.

Additionally, combat student veterans Alfred, Charles, Edward, and Frederick all suggested that quality and immediacy was lacking in the responsiveness of support services, and as a result, they were less inclined to approach support services again. In adapting strategies for combat student veterans, responding promptly with individualized support, and providing distinctive services that are not generalized would facilitate greater engagement of combat student veterans with support services. This study validated prior research that suggested that organizations should first understand the needs of student veterans before improving efforts to reduce any barriers they face in accessing services (Morgan et al., 2020). Griffin & Gilbert (2015) also found that university services geared toward student veterans’ specific needs and concerns were more accessible to these students.

A few combat student veteran participants were engaged minimally in accessing clinical services off-campus for the after-effects of invisible injuries. They were seemingly unaware of Disability Support Services and did not have access to specialized clinical health services on campus. This aligned with prior research that not only are programs and policies related to clinical services for student veterans lacking in higher education, but this matter is further
compounded by the fact that student veterans do not have a propensity for seeking help (Fortney et al., 2016; Killam & Degges-White, 2018).

While it may be true that student veterans have difficulties integrating into their communities and higher education classrooms (Norman et al., 2015; Rattray et al., 2019), integrating into the college environment was not perceived as a need by the combat student veteran participants. From the perspective of student veterans, this was not seen as a problem, and from Kendrick’s perspective as a staff and faculty member, this was astutely noted as a problem only when the attitude and behavior of the student veteran was discourteous.

Undergraduate students Alfred, Frederick, Henry, and Gregory, all expressed that they wanted to be perceived as “normal” and sought to socialize with traditional student groups even while most of them found the Veteran Support Services Center conducive to their college experience. This aligned with the suggestion that the presence of a Veterans Support Services Center on campus is not what ultimately supports student veteran success (Cook & Kim, 2009; Radford, 2009) because student veterans may want to be perceived as normal and may seek to socialize with traditional student groups. This also validated that student veterans are generally self-sufficient, and many student veterans do not connect with student veteran organizations on campus (SVA, 2011).

**Implications for Policy or Practice**

The results of this study have implications for higher education policy and practice. Administrators, staff at university support services, including faculty in various departments all have a role to play in student veteran success. Student veterans must engage with support services and be aware of all that universities offer for student success. Some implications require individual intentionality to implement, while others are directed to setting policies, and making
changes that require multiple levels of leadership and multiple departments. A guiding principle is offered by Vacchi & Berger (2014) in this definition of a veteran-friendly campus; “A veteran friendly campus identifies and removes barriers to the educational goals of veterans, creates a smooth transition from military life to college life, provides information to veterans about available benefits and services, creates campus awareness of the student veteran population, and creates proactive support programs for student veterans based on their needs” (Vacchi & Berger, 2014, p.124).

Implications for Policy

This study yielded data that institutions can use to create the environment that is most conducive to the success of combat student veterans. Universities must work on the messaging when communicating to student veterans, that there are no negative effects to admitting a need for assistance; the effects in colleges are only positive. This means that the university personnel must counter what student veterans may have heard in the military, that admitting a perceived weakness, or a physical ailment, is a sign of weakness and can have unwanted repercussions. Derek and Gregory stressed that an orientation course, merged with a veteran transitions course, taught by and for veterans, should be made obligatory for incoming student veterans. This could be offered as a 1-credit course and made mandatory, serving as a launchpad to enable student veterans to familiarize themselves with the various support services available to them, including resources for academic services, disability services, tuition assistance, assistance related to information technology, Veterans Affairs and GI Bill Benefits, military scholarships and transfer credit, residential and online military benefits, deployment guide, and VetSuccess on Campus, career services and professional advising. This study revealed that often the student participants
stumbled upon some of these resources accidentally rather than intentionally. Not having some type of orientation led to an unfortunate lack of knowledge about the many available resources.

**Implications for Practice**

Faculty taking the initiative to connect with, build a rapport with, and follow up with students made a significant difference in the college experience for students. As some students were not aware of Disability Support Services and their accommodations, this too should be part of the veterans’ transitions and orientation course. Students who do not wish to disclose any injuries or the need for accommodations should be reassured that the requested accommodations are communicated to the faculty but the reason for the accommodation is not. In fact, as stated by Joanna at Disability Support Services, the information submitted by students is not conveyed by Disability Support Services to the registrar’s office or any of the professors. Joanna also suggested that knowing this may help students take advantage of the opportunity to engage with Disability Support Services. This should be mentioned during a veterans transitions course or orientation course and may make a difference in whether student veterans approach Disability Support Services for accommodations.

Faculty will benefit from training for working with nontraditional student groups such as combat student veterans. This could be provided by the Department for Faculty Professional Development. Joanna also suggested that promotional items related to recruitment would need to be approved by the Office of the Dean of Students, so the Veterans Office could disseminate this information to student veterans, particularly because this office is often one of the initial places that student veterans interface with. Derek agreed that having clinical health services on campus for combat student veterans with invisible injuries would be helpful to facilitate access to medical care and specialized physical therapy for this population, although this could be used by
traditional students on campus too. Combat student veterans Edward, Frederick, Gregory, and staff members Lawrence (Associate Dean) and Kendrick (Director of Interdisciplinary Studies) stated that a training course for faculty would help provide an understanding of what combat student veterans have experienced in combat, how to communicate with them especially when they may be feeling out of place and struggling with social integration, how to recognize their unique challenges, how to encourage inclusion and a sense of community. This training could include workshops from faculty who are veterans themselves. Considering that combat student veterans struggle with socialization, faculty should be trained in helping them find a sense of belonging and show combat student veterans how to value a sense of community in college. Kendrick also pointed out that university faculty should work on the messaging to combat student veterans that there is no negative effect and only positives to admitting that they are going through something that requires support. Faculty must take the initiative in trying “to counter a lot of what they are used to hearing from large organizations,” meaning that in the military, they’re encouraged to hide physical ailments because admitting to a problem may result in being reassigned. Whereas, in universities, admitting to a problem should only have positive benefits. Ian, the Senior Supervisor at Veteran Support Services validated this and suggested that while combat student veterans may not “self-identify when they need assistance,” part of the solution is to “be better known and more widely available to the veteran population as this will help reduce this limitation as will targeted outreach opportunities.” Ian made the discerning statement that to help combat student veterans to access support services, “it can be helpful to guide them into understanding what outcomes will be affected based on academic performance. When the prize is easily understood, the work is easier to put in.” The implication is that letting combat student veterans know that not accessing support services can reduce their academic
performance may encourage them to consider engaging with support services to understand that it will result in increased outcomes.

Peter, a professor and Executive Director of Academic Support Services, suggested that the orientation for combat student veterans should include all services and combat student veterans should be “encouraged and reminded over, and over again of the importance of taking the orientation course. Peter also suggested that just as international students on campus are supported even by student leadership in residence halls, military students on campus can be supported by the Veterans Office liaising with faculty. One of the reasons for this is that more and more students are returning to college (online and residential) to take classes. These students are harder to identify as they may be in their early twenties or visibly older. Oliver, Associate Dean of Academic Support Services, suggested that recurring faculty training with Faculty Professional Development should include all nontraditional students because combat student veterans would not want to be singled out as a group needing special assistance. Referring to online students, Matthew, a Senior Director at Academic Support Services said that it could be “as simple as ensuring that university staff and faculty “understand that military members may be deployed, that they may be working odd hours, and have to deal with unexpected events and may not be able to access the internet for weeks.”

Combat student veteran Alfred suggested that when a student veteran approaches a faculty member for help with an assignment, the faculty member should work with the student to resolve the issue. Immediately deflecting the student to the Writing Center or Tutoring Center sends the clear message to the student that “it’s not your job, and you don’t have time and so the student feels like they are being palmed off to another department.” If the student veteran chooses to then “still go to this other department and then discovers that the appointments are
two weeks out, by then they are two weeks further in the course and don’t need that help!” This cogent argument reinforces the need for faculty training and the need to provide prompt assistance to student veterans.

Benjamin elaborated that while faculty do not need to have military backgrounds to be effective with combat student veterans, they do need to bring their real-life experiences to add relevance, credibility, and excellence to their teaching methods. Benjamin also made the insightful observation that “there is a gulf in the value system of veterans that are typically more of the combat arms nature than others.” As a result, not all veterans are equal in what they consider important as “it depends on the branch and occupational skill they possess.” Moreover, he observed that:

A combat arms veteran may not have their loyalty divided between civilian pursuits and has seen the need for loyalty, trust, integrity, more so than the veterans that may be serving in an administrative billet. The intangible qualities somehow become more important, because those are the ones that one had to rely on to ensure that they survived. The loyalty, the knowing that they’ve got your back, the integrity, those things became a lot more important to the combat veteran who saw combat on a regular basis.

One of the implications of this observation is that combat student veterans are not a homogenous group for whom a uniform method of teaching, or a uniform strategy to engage with support services will be effective. This data can be used to relate to student veterans with more emotional intelligence (Love et al., 2015).

Benjamin also provided a perspective that may help student veterans as they prepare for employment. Employers do not often recognize valuable qualitative characteristics and strengths
that combat student veterans bring to the table. He explained that because “the military is really a cross section of our country,” military personnel have an innate ability to understand racial equality and this “creates a valuable individual who can assimilate better in the corporate world.” Moreover, the combat student veteran “already knows how to respect authority” and “it is the norm for combat student veterans to put “corporate needs above their own.” The intangibles such as “seeing value in hard work, seeing a project to completion, and understanding the value of discipline” may be difficult to measure but are invaluable to their journey through college and to future employers.

Charles’ other recommendations for combat student veterans included immediate assistance with access to information technology resources for completing online coursework. This becomes more important when combat student veterans prepare for deployment and complete coursework ahead of time. For doctoral students, finding a dissertation chair should be streamlined so that students can proceed through coursework efficiently. Teaming students with a dissertation chair and committee member(s) with common interests earlier in the regular process would be helpful.

**Theoretical and Empirical Implications**

This study validated Astin’s Theory of Student Involvement (Astin, 1984, 1991; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005) by demonstrating that student outcomes are the functions of their characteristics or inputs, and the college environment, understood as their experience in college. In the case of combat student veterans in this study, the inputs overrode the environment significantly. Therefore, while the environment served as an analyst and lent to a successful student experience, it was the inputs that were the primary factor which served as a catalyst for the success of combat student veterans in higher education. Even within their distinctive personal
factors (See Figure 3), the subtheme of limited social integration and limited vulnerability may have affected the quality of their student experience but did not deter them from succeeding in higher education. Indeed, it revealed a need for faculty training. Obstacles that might cause a traditional student to drop out or fail did not deter combat student veterans who were prepared to invest an exorbitant amount of effort to overcome seemingly routine obstacles and reach the goal of degree completion.

**Figure 5**

*Application of Astin’s I-E-O Model for Combat Student Veterans in this Study*

![Diagram](attachment:image.png)

*Note: For combat student veterans, inputs were weighted much more heavily than the environment as a contributing factor, in their success in higher education.*

This study also reinforces the validity of Vacchi’s model for student veteran success (Vacchi, 2011, 2013), particularly the horizontal axis, which is based on prior work by Bean & Metzner (1985), and Weidman (1985). This study supports Vacchi’s model of student veteran support, while reinforcing the need for transition support for combat student veterans by orientation and veteran transition courses. This study also demonstrates that focusing on the student veteran experience in college from a strengths’ perspective yields data to assist not only combat student veterans but also universities seeking to be military-friendly and to increase their effectiveness in engaging nontraditional students. The inputs that combat student veterans bring to their pursuit of a higher education degree (Figure 6) are powerful enough to drive the combat
student veterans toward degree completion, even in the face of past and existing invisible injuries, and even with neutral and detracting experiences with academic, peer, and support service interactions in college.

**Figure 6**

*Fazzina’s Model for Combat Student Veterans’ Distinctive Personal Factors*

Note: The factors and themes that comprise the inputs for combat student veterans, in Astin’s I-E-O model.

This study also demonstrated the authenticity of Astin’s I-E-O model, by elucidating that the powerful inputs combat student veterans bring to higher education, combined with Vacchi’s recommended student support systems, can be used effectively in higher education to effect outcomes that spell success for combat student veterans and for benchmarks in higher education institutions (Figure 7).
Figure 7

Astin’s I-E-O Model with Adaptations for Combat Student Veterans

Note: The factors and themes that comprise the inputs for combat student veterans, and Vacchi’s conceptual model for student veteran support illustrating the environment, in Astin’s I-E-O model.
Furthermore, the experiences of most combat student veterans when pursuing their undergraduate degree lent validity to Diamond's Adaptive Military Transition Theory (2012). The Adaptive Military Transition Theory explains the transition from military to civilian life, which demonstrated the three conceptual elements of the transition to and through college: Adaptation, Passage, and Arrival. Adaptation refers to how student veterans familiarize themselves to the college environment which is new to them. Passage refers to their trajectory and how they experience the transition. Arrival refers to their exit from this transitional period and their forward movement after college.

**Limitations and Delimitations**

This qualitative study had limitations. Vacchi’s conceptual model for student veteran support was conceived for undergraduate residential student veterans but was used for both graduate and undergraduate students and online and residential students in this study. However, the graduate combat student veterans were able to reflect on their undergraduate experience, and compare and contrast their undergraduate experience with their graduate experience at Atlantic State University.

Two combat student veterans were unable to participate in the study after having expressed interest, as they were preparing for final examinations and were on vacation soon after the week of examinations. This brought the number of combat student veteran participants to eight.

Few combat student veterans were not using Disability Support Services but were pursuing treatment for invisible injuries off campus with the VA; details and veracity of these facts could not be verified because of operational and legal protections by Disability Support Services and the American with Disabilities Act regarding confidentiality and privacy. In
addition, the propensity of combat student veterans to avoid disclosing injuries may have been a factor which caused them to downplay the seriousness of their injuries. This study focused on combat student veterans, and is susceptible to a lack of generalizability to all student veterans, or to all nontraditional students. The COVID-19 pandemic caused all interviews to be held virtually and resulted in residential students taking most of their classes online; this may have altered their perceptions of support services. The staff participant from the Veterans Office and Veteran Support Services participated by providing answers only in writing, per IRB restrictions. An interview was not allowed, and the individual was assigned by the Veterans Office to participate, thereby reducing the interpretation and practical relevance of the data collected.

This study focused on combat student veterans who had invisible injuries and mTBI of a severity that did not deter them from active learning in the classroom or from pursuing a higher education degree. This delimitation was chosen to demonstrate that while combat student veterans may have had invisible injuries such as blast-induced concussions or vestibular injuries, they may have residual symptoms, but by sheer force of true grit, these invisible injuries were not considered as deterrents to their pursuit of a higher education degree. As the study demonstrated, these types of invisible injuries were perceived by combat student veterans to be relatively minor and not problematic. In fact, it seemed that they had compartmentalized their invisible injuries to the point where they were not using Disability Support Services. The combat student veteran participants included those who were students at this university from 2016 onwards. The rationale for this was to identify potential detractors and contributors to the success of combat student veterans as they may relate to similar support services with presumably similar staff, and current teaching methods by current faculty. Another delimitation was the use of Disability Support Services, Veterans Office, and Academic Support Services as the primary
support services. The rationale for using Disability Support Services in this study, was that it was relevant for students with invisible injuries. The extent to which combat student veterans used Disability Support Services as a support service was explored. However, the finding was that these students did not use Disability Support Services. The Veteran Support Services Center served as a hub for support services and a central location for student veteran support and camaraderie. Most faculty participants were from Academic Support Services, which has multiple departments for advising, tutoring, writing, and academic success services, all of which served to reveal the approach and expectations of these services by combat student veterans. This single-site study was conducted at a private university, with a significant student veteran population. The university was selected for its military-friendliness, which was an influencing factor mentioned by all combat student veterans without exception. The rationale for selecting a single site for this study was to define the study’s scope and sharpen the researcher’s understanding of factors in the environment of combat student veterans, all of whom attended this same university. In addition, using a single site for this study enabled the researcher to access staff who had interdepartmental access and interactions, which was valuable to an understanding of the complexity of combat student veteran success in higher education. Both graduate and undergraduate students in online and residential programs were participants in this study. This yielded valuable insight because the graduate students reflected on their undergraduate experience and compared it to their graduate experience at this university. The study was conducted at a Christian University. The faith-based nature of the university was mentioned as influential in their college choice.
**Recommendations for Future Research**

A study focusing solely on undergraduate students may help determine more accurately the challenges that combat student veterans have as they transition to higher education because graduate students have often developed strategies to overcome similar challenges. A study on combat student veterans with increased severity of invisible injuries may yield valuable data on their need and tendency to use disability services in college. Moreover, including details of the medical problems that combat student veterans have had, and which may easily affect their executive function, may be useful in a study designed to explore the use of Disability Services by students with a medical history of concussions or other forms of TBI. The findings of a multi-site study may be more generalizable to larger populations. A study involving public universities may capture student veterans from more varied socio-economic and faith backgrounds, thereby increasing generalizability and reducing bias. Another possible study would be a quantitative analysis to quantify the relative strength of the inputs in Astin’s I-E-O with combat student veterans over traditional students to understand the relative impact of inputs and the environment to the output. A phenomenological study may be helpful in capturing the essence of the distinctive factors of combat student veterans in higher education while yielding information on the uniqueness of combat student veterans in higher education. A life-history narrative of a single participant, with multiple types of data collected longitudinally and with a narrative approach, would yield data that could be viewed as a video versus a snapshot in time. This collaborative approach may yield a rich understanding of the subject within a larger social and institutional dimension. A study in which staff at integral departments such as the Veterans Office can participate in a face-to-face interview and focus group would help create a multi-
dimensional understanding of the research problem, rather than a two-dimensional perspective allowed by written responses, which does not allow for conversational follow-up.

**Conclusion**

The success of combat student veterans was studied with the voice of combat student veterans as a primary data source and other data as secondary sources. With input from graduate and undergraduate students in online and in residential programs, this case study shed light on factors contributing to their success while also revealing neutral and detracting factors. Neutral and detracting factors were not so much with people as with processes, and not so much with intentions as with methods and strategies. Approaching this study from a strengths’ perspective rather than a deficit model of the understanding of the college student’s experience helped reveal the strengths and weaknesses in a higher education institution, one that each combat student veteran agreed was military-friendly. By including the perspectives of faculty, and staff at Academic Support Services, Veteran Support Services Center, Veterans Office, and Disability Support Services, detractors and contributors to the success of combat student veterans were identified in the context of departments seeking to excel with nontraditional students, while recognizing that the process could be improved to serve combat student veterans. Raising the bar of academic rigor for combat student veterans will also raise the bar for all students and that is a way to integrate the solution by helping all students succeed. Having a mandatory veterans transitions session for combat student veterans and having a mandatory training course for staff and faculty to serve nontraditional students effectively, can allay the impact of detractors, particularly in a university with a notable student veteran presence. Keeping transitional courses and training courses optional does not serve to disseminate critical information to students, staff, and faculty. Making these courses mandatory and the norm, ensures that the information is
spread across departments and to students, faculty, and staff while conveying that this is the norm in higher education, considering the rapidly increasing numbers of student veterans in higher education.

As Benjamin stated when considering his identity as a combat veteran in higher education, “I don’t know if you ever really leave the military!” His words offer a rationale for institutions of higher education to adopt veteran-friendly policies, considering that this is a growing nontraditional demographic in universities. This case study provided relevant information with actionable items that are designed to sculpt strategies and processes in higher education, thereby supporting the success of nontraditional students.
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Acknowledgments


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March 19, 2021

Mona Fazzina
David Vacchi

Re: IRB Exemption - IRB-FY20-21-567 THE SUCCESS OF COMBAT STUDENT VETERANS IN HIGHER EDUCATION: A QUALITATIVE STUDY

Dear Mona Fazzina, David Vacchi:

The Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB) has reviewed your application in accordance with the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP) and Food and Drug Administration (FDA) regulations and finds your study to be exempt from further IRB review. This means you may begin your research with the data safeguarding methods mentioned in your approved application, and no further IRB oversight is required.

Your study falls under the following exemption category, which identifies specific situations in which human participants research is exempt from the policy set forth in 45 CFR 46.101(b):

Category 2.(iii). Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording) if at least one of the following criteria is met:
The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects can readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects, and an IRB conducts a limited IRB review to make the determination required by §46.111(a)(7).

Your stamped consent form(s) and final versions of your study documents can be found under the Attachments tab within the Submission Details section of your study on Cayuse IRB. Your stamped consent form(s) should be copied and used to gain the consent of your research participants. If you plan to provide your consent information electronically, the contents of the attached consent document(s) should be made available without alteration.

Please note that this exemption only applies to your current research application, and any modifications to your protocol must be reported to the Liberty University IRB for verification of continued exemption status. You may report these changes by completing a modification submission through your Cayuse IRB account.

If you have any questions about this exemption or need assistance in determining whether possible modifications to your protocol would change your exemption status, please email us at irb@liberty.edu.

Sincerely,

G. Michele Baker, MA, CIP
Administrative Chair of Institutional Research
Research Ethics Office
APPENDIX B: CONSENT FORM FOR STUDENT PARTICIPANTS

Consent Form for Group A Participants

Title of the Project: The Success of Combat Student Veterans in Higher Education: A Qualitative Study
Principal Investigator: Mona Fazzina, Doctoral Candidate, School of Education, Liberty University.

Invitation to be Part of a Research Study
You are invited to participate in a research study. In order to participate, you must be over the age of 18 years, a student veteran who graduated from completing your college degree, and be willing to talk about your experiences. Taking part in this research project is voluntary. Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this research project.

What is the study about and why is it being done?
The purpose of the study is to explore the influences that contribute to the success of combat student veterans in higher education.

What will happen if you take part in this study?
If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to do the following things:

1. You will be interviewed individually, with audio and video recording for approximately 60 minutes. Due to restrictions imposed by the pandemic, this can also be done remotely, using a smartphone or computer. You will be asked questions about your military and student experiences, institutional influences, academic interactions, relational factors, and internal factors such as grit, motivation, and integrity. You will be asked for your opinion on what was helpful and what was unhelpful to your success.

2. Focus Group. Approximately 60 minutes. You will be asked to participate in a group discussion with up to 10 student veterans. This will be done with audio and video recording. Due to restrictions imposed by the pandemic, this can also be done remotely, using a smartphone or computer. You will be asked questions about your military and college experiences, institutional influences, academic interactions, relational factors, and internal factors such as grit, motivation, and integrity. You will be asked for your opinion on what was helpful to your success, and about your transition from the military to the higher education environment.

How could you or others benefit from this study?
Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study. Benefits to society may include:
1. Highlighting the value of student veterans in higher education.
2. Improving universities’ understanding of factors that contribute to the success of student veterans.
3. Having a voice in contributing to higher education policies and procedures, in order to serve student veterans in effective and meaningful ways.

**What risks might you experience from being in this study?**
The risks involved in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.

**How will personal information be protected?**
The records of this study will be kept private. Published reports will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records.

- Participant responses will be kept confidential through the use of pseudonyms. Interviews will be conducted in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation.
- Data will be stored on a password-locked personal computer and may be used in future presentations. Only the researcher will have access to the personal computer.
- Interviews and focus group discussions will be recorded and transcribed. Recordings will be stored on a password-locked. Only the researcher will have access to these recordings.
- Confidentiality cannot be guaranteed in focus group settings. While discouraged, other members of the focus group may share what was discussed with persons outside of the group.

**Does the researcher have any conflicts of interest?**
The researcher does not have any conflicts of interest.

**Is study participation voluntary?**
Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether to participate will not affect your current or future relations with If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

**What should you do if you decide to withdraw from the study?**
If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address/phone number included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you, apart from focus group discussion data, will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study. Focus group data will not be destroyed, but your contributions to the focus group will not be included in the study if you choose to withdraw.

**Whom do you contact if you have questions or concerns about the study?**
The researcher conducting this study is Mona Fazzina. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you are encouraged to contact her at or . You may also contact the researcher’s faculty sponsor, Dr. David Vacchi at

**Whom do you contact if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?**
If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, you are encouraged to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at irb@liberty.edu

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**Your Consent**

By signing this document, you are agreeing to be in this study. Make sure you understand what the study is about before you sign. You will be given a copy of this document for your records. The researcher will keep a copy with the study records. If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the study team using the information provided above.

*I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.*

☐ The researcher has my permission to audio-record and video-record me as part of my participation in this study.

Printed Subject Name __________________________ Signature & Date __________________________
APPENDIX C: CONSENT FORM FOR STAFF PARTICIPANTS

Consent Form for Group B Participants

Title of the Project: The Success of Combat Student Veterans in Higher Education: A Qualitative Study

Principal Investigator: Mona Fazzina, Doctoral Candidate, School of Education, Liberty University.

Invitation to be Part of a Research Study
You are invited to participate in a research study. In order to participate, you must be a staff or faculty member at who has worked with student veterans, and be willing to talk about your experiences. Taking part in this research project is voluntary. Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this research project.

What is the study about and why is it being done?
The purpose of the study is to explore the influences that contribute to the success of combat student veterans in higher education.

What will happen if you take part in this study?
If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to do the following things:
1. You will be asked to participate in a focus group with up to 5 staff or faculty, for approximately 60 minutes. This will be done with audio and video recording. Due to restrictions imposed by the pandemic, this can also be done remotely, using a smartphone or computer. You will be asked questions about your impressions and experiences with student veterans. You will be asked for your opinions on facilitating success for student veterans.

How could you or others benefit from this study?
Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study. Benefits to society may include:
1. Highlighting the value of student veterans in higher education.
2. Improving universities’ understanding of factors that contribute to the success of student veterans.
3. Having a voice in contributing to higher education policies and procedures, in order to serve student veterans in effective and meaningful ways.

What risks might you experience from being in this study?
The risks involved in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.

How will personal information be protected?
The records of this study will be kept private. Published reports will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records.
- Participant responses will be kept confidential through the use of pseudonyms. Focus groups will be conducted in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation.
• Data will be stored on a password-locked personal computer and may be used in future presentations. Only the researcher will have access to the personal computer.
• The focus group discussions will be recorded and transcribed. Recordings will be stored on a password locked. Only the researcher will have access to these recordings.
• Confidentiality cannot be guaranteed in focus group settings. While discouraged, other members of the group may share what was discussed with persons outside the group.

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I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

☐ The researcher has my permission to audio-record and video-record me as part of my participation in this study.

Printed Subject Name __________________________ Signature & Date __________________________

Liberty University
IRB:FY20-21-567
Approved on 3-18-2021
APPENDIX D: RESEARCH FLYER

Research Participants Needed

The Success of Combat Student Veterans in Higher Education: A Qualitative Study

- Are you a veteran who graduated from [blank]?
- Have you served in a combat zone?
- Are you willing to talk about your experiences as a student?

If you answered ‘yes’, you may be eligible to participate in this qualitative research study.

The purpose of this research study is to explore the influences that contribute to the success of combat student veterans in higher education.

These influences may include personal experiences, institutional influences, academic and peer, and relational influences interactions, and internal factors such as grit, motivation, and integrity.

You will be asked questions about the influence of these factors on your success in college. Information will be gathered through individual interviews and focus groups.

Benefits include:

- Highlighting the value of student veterans in higher education.
- Improving the understanding of universities regarding factors that contribute to the successful degree completion of student veterans.
- Contributing to policies and procedures to serve student veterans in effective and meaningful ways.

The study is being conducted at:

By:
Mona Fazzina
Doctoral candidate, School of Education
Liberty University, VA

Please contact Mona Fazzina at [blank] or [blank] for more information.
APPENDIX E: RECRUITMENT EMAIL FOR STAFF PARTICIPANTS

RECRUITMENT EMAIL FOR GROUP B PARTICIPANTS

Email to each Department Head, of each of the following departments:

Date

Dear ‘Name and title of the Department Head’

I am a graduate student in the School of Education at Liberty University, and as part of the requirements for a Ph.D. in Higher Education Administration, I am conducting research to better understand factors that are supportive of combat student veterans in higher education. The title of my research project is: Factors supportive of combat student veterans in higher education: A qualitative study.

I am writing to request volunteer staff and volunteer faculty from your department/office, who have worked with student veterans. I would like to invite them to participate in my research study.

Participants will be given the attached consent form to complete, and return to me via email, and then I will contact them to schedule a focus group. Taking part in this study is completely voluntary, and participants are welcome to discontinue participation at any time.

Sincerely,

Mona Fazzina
Graduate student
School of Education
Liberty University
1971 University Blvd
Lynchburg, VA
APPENDIX F: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR STUDENT PARTICIPANTS

Standardized Semi-structured Questions for Interviews with Student Veterans

1. Please tell me about yourself, where you are from, and what brings you to this university.
2. Please describe your goals as a student at this university.
3. What was your motivation for joining the military?
4. Describe your experiences in combat zones while in the military.
5. Describe any invisible injuries you may have sustained from your time in the military.
6. What are the medical/allied health/alternative treatments or therapies that you have used for the difficulties you described in response to question 5?
7. Describe any vestibular rehabilitation techniques (specialization of physical therapy) that were used for treating invisible health concerns such as the ones you describe?
8. What were the reasons for not pursuing medical/allied health/alternative treatments or therapies for your invisible injuries?
9. Why did you decide to pursue a degree in higher education?
10. What has been challenging or frustrating about the transition from the military into being a student in higher education?
11. What has been surprising or even pleasant, about the transition from the military into being a student in higher education?
12. From your perspective, what is the ideal faculty member for a combat student veteran?
13. What university services and support systems have you found helpful as a student veteran?
14. In what ways have interactions with faculty and staff, in the classroom and out of classroom influenced you, or helped you succeed academically?
15. What relationships and support systems, with family, peers, and colleagues, have you found helpful as a student?

16. What are the internal factors or personal characteristics that have facilitated success for you as a student?

17. What else would you like to add as addendums to any of the prior questions?
APPENDIX G: FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS FOR STUDENT PARTICIPANTS

Focus Group Questions for Combat Student Veterans

1. What has been frustrating about the transition from the military into being a student in higher education?

2. What has been relatively easy about the transition from the military into being a student in higher education?

3. From your perspective, what is the ideal faculty member for a combat student veteran?

4. What university services and support systems were helpful to you as a student veteran?

5. In what ways have interactions with faculty and staff helped you succeed academically?

6. What has been your experience when relating with other students in college?

7. What has been your experience when relating with other student veterans in college?

8. Have there been specific relationships with family and friends, that have motivated and encouraged you in college?

9. What do you think are some personal and internal characteristics that have facilitated success for you as a student?

10. Is there any other information you would like to provide that may help me understand your experience as a student veteran in college?
APPENDIX H: FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS FOR STAFF PARTICIPANTS

Focus Group Questions for Faculty and Staff

1. What words would you use to describe military veterans?
2. What do you think is the impact of military culture on student veterans in college?
3. What have been some challenges in communicating with nontraditional students?
4. What are some strategies you have used to interact with student veterans in meaningful ways?
5. What would be some next steps if you notice that nontraditional students are struggling academically?
6. Could you suggest ways in which the university could better equip you to support student veterans?
7. What is your understanding of the role of military support services in the university?
8. What is your understanding of invisible injuries in students and ways to assist students who have such challenges?
9. What are some ways in which you would guide a student to clinical, academic or disability services?
10. What are some of the needs of student veterans that you have identified in your position in the military student support roles in this institution?
11. How has administration been supportive in facilitating success for students who may have invisible injuries?
12. What have been some challenges in communicating with nontraditional students and how have you overcome those challenges?
APPENDIX I: MEMOS

April 12th, 2021. While interviewing Benjamin:

His comment about faculty being platinum, not just gold! The way in which he compared it to the military hierarchy was amazing. Nicely put.

April 20th, 2021. While interviewing Derek:

It's amazing how much influence his mother had in getting him to join the military. She persuaded and pushed and didn't let her son fail in any way. It's amazing how much his mother influenced him - to join the military.

It's wonderful to see how grateful he is to God, to his wife, for all his blessings.

As an online student, he felt tremendous support from the university and marveled that he could only imagine how much more wonderful that would be if he were a residential student.

He acknowledged that a health-care center on campus that enabled combat student veterans to get treated for PTSD etc. could be extremely helpful.

April 20th, 2021. While interviewing Gregory:

At the end of the interview, he said that he was glad to have participated and share all his opinions and insights. He initially thought it was going to be like a 'psych-session' and almost didn't participate but now he's so glad that he did!

He also used Veterans Support Services to the hilt! Not only did he use the resources and connect with the staff and other students at Veterans Support Services, but he also sought to prepare and develop himself so that he could help other student veterans. Such drive, enthusiasm and desire to help others!
April 21st, 2021. While interviewing Edward:

He has such a high sense of accountability and responsibility.

He felt that the university could train faculty better to contextualize content, raise the bar for students, and he made it clear that he did not want special provisions just because he was a student veteran. If he needed something, he'd like to be understood, but otherwise, he doesn't want to be treated differently and doesn't want to take advantage of the system.

April 27th, 2021. While interviewing Frederick:

I was surprised he had never heard Disability Support Services. Here is someone who would have used the services offered by Disability Support Services had he known about it. This could be a compelling reason to make orientation courses mandatory for student veterans and all nontraditional students. He also expressed how civilian/students should walk into Veterans Support Services and ask about student veterans’ experiences and show interest in what their life was like before they came to the campus. I had not thought of that.

It was also interesting how driven he was by his desire to honor his parents, his brother, his country. This fueled his pursuit of higher education. He was so humble about all he had experienced in the army, the invisible injuries he had sustained and although he would be easily excused for any feelings of entitlement; he seemed to have none.

April 30th, 2021. During the staff focus group:

I had not thought that there could be a problem with the military students so hearing that there is a side to their lack of social integration that contributes to this problem was an eye-opener to me.
May 03rd, 2021. While interviewing Henry:

One of the most unexpected insights from this participant was that he considered how a faculty member who did not have a military background could be a better faculty member for a combat student veteran.

He also said he did not want to be treated special/different. He confessed he once submitted what was certainly not his best work, and was surprised that it was good enough for the professor. It was a disappointment of sorts.

May 07th, 2021. Staff member Ian:

In reviewing Ian’s response about challenges in communicating with nontraditional students, it was surprising to hear that faculty could assign less credibility to the student veteran and that the student veteran could have something to do with this. This is a situation where staff/faculty at the university have difficulty assisting the student veteran partly because of the student veteran’s failure to meet certain criteria. I would love to ask this staff member a follow up question: or to elaborate on this comment, however per IRB stipulation, this was a staff member that was only allowed to participate by providing answers in written format.

May 14th, 2021. During the student veteran focus group:

I had been asking about the transition from the military to civilian student life and asked about 'leaving the military'. I was told that one never really leaves the military! It reminded me to be careful about assuming that student veterans have left the military in the sense of having left everything behind them. Well, it sounds like they have a different role now but as the military person, in the civilian sector, or higher education campus. There is a vast difference between leaving the military and forgetting all that the military inculcates in you. The latter seems almost impossible, given the military initiation and bootcamp experiences.
## APPENDIX J: AUDIT TRAIL

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research problem identification</th>
<th>How combat student veterans succeed in higher education.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Research problem development</td>
<td>Research proposal to explore factors contributing to the success of combat student veterans in higher education.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Literature Review</td>
<td>Systematic literature review conducted on the seminal theories of nontraditional student involvement in higher education, combat student veterans, conceptual models of student veteran support, and related areas.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theoretical and conceptual frameworks underpinning this study</td>
<td>Astin’s I-E-O theory of student involvement in higher education. Vacchi’s Model for Student Veteran Support.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methodology</td>
<td>Single case study design with embedded multiple units of analysis</td>
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<tr>
<td>Development of research questions</td>
<td>Questions were developed and examined by expert review. Sub-questions explored institutional factors, academic interactions, personal characteristics, and relationships that had an impact on the success of combat student veterans in higher education.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Interview and focus group protocol development</td>
<td>Semi-structured questions were developed and examined by expert review.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant Selection</td>
<td>Criterion-based purposeful, and snowball sampling.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval and oversight</td>
<td>IRB approval was obtained. IRB stamped consent forms are included in the appendices.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data collection, organization and management, and storage</td>
<td>Data from participants was recorded, transcribed, and stored. NVivo (Qualitative data analysis software) was used for storing data. Otter was used for transcriptions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Raw Data</td>
<td>Captured via MS Teams recordings, and Otter.ai: interviews, focus groups, written responses.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partially processed data</td>
<td>Stored, managed, and organized in NVivo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trustworthiness</td>
<td>Triangulation of data, member checking by dissertation committee, expert review, memoing, audit trail.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coding</td>
<td>Themes and subthemes extracted from NVivo, coded manually, and organized in NVivo.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Report</td>
<td>Introduction, literature review, descriptions of context, methodology, research design, data collection and analysis, findings: answers to research questions, diagrammatic representations of research findings, recommendations for future research, references, and appendices.</td>
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