THE IMPACT OF DISABILITY SUPPORT SERVICES ON THE SUCCESS OF STUDENT

VETERANS: A HERMENEUTIC PHENOMENOLOGY

by

Chanté Kimberly Burnell

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

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APPROVED BY:

Dr. David Vacchi, Ph.D., Committee Chair

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Abstract

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenology was to explore the lived experiences of student veterans using disability support services at postsecondary institutions. Disability support services for student veterans was generally defined as any resource or service providing accessibility and support to aid academic success. Therefore, the central research question focused on the experiences of student veterans when utilizing disability support services. The conceptual framework used to guide this study was Vacchi's (2017) Model of Student Veteran Support, as it establishes veteran-friendly propositions and suggests cornerstones needed to support the successful degree completion of student veterans. Data triangulation was used to gather real-life context from veteran students, identify patterns and themes, and determine the transferability of the findings. A questionnaire, interviews, and journal prompts were used as the data collection methods. Student veterans, from a four-year public institution, who have mobilization and deployment experiences, and who have or are currently using disability support services, were utilized as the sample. A questionnaire, using closed-ended questions, measured the participant's opinions. Semi-structured interviews consisted of open-ended questions regarding the participants' military and higher education experiences. Lastly, journal prompts were provided to participants to document their experiences using disability support services and their opinion of how these services have impacted their higher education experiences. Thematic analysis, using coding and category construction, was used to answer the research questions. The findings aligned with the conceptual framework of Vacchi's (2017) Model of Student Veteran Support, highlighting the support needed to impact the success of student veterans.

Keywords: Student veterans, postsecondary institutions, disability support services, success

Copyright Page

Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to Jehovah God and His son Jesus Christ. Jehovah gave His only begotten son, and Jesus Christ died, so our sins could be forgiven. God has continued to bless and protect me. He has given me grace, mercy, and peace that surpasses all understanding. He has carried my burdens and been my strength in times of weakness. He has taken me through life, including this dissertational journey. He gave me the desire of my heart to complete the highest level of education I could attain. I shall praise His name and serve Him always while remaining committed to the Great Commission.

This dissertation is also dedicated to my late father, Karl Burnell, who sadly passed away in 2020. He was my rock and greatest friend. His love, support, and encouragement will live on in my heart. He gave me the motivation to always keep my head up and press on.

My daughter Angela has been my strength and encouragement during this process. She willingly sacrificed to ensure that I completed my dissertation journey. She continuously encouraged and motivated me.

Lastly, special thanks and dedication to my family and friends who prayed for, believed in and supported me in various ways through this journey. I will forever be grateful.

A special appreciation and thank you to all the courageous Service Members that have honorably served and for those who sacrificed their lives to protect the American people.

Acknowledgements

I want to acknowledge my committee chair Dr. David Vacchi and my committee member, Dr. Rachel Hernandez., who has been a fantastic encouragement and source of knowledge. Thank you for supporting me while I endeavored to submit excellent work. Your guidance, wisdom, and honest feedback have been invaluable to me.

I would also like to thank Dr. Vacchi's cohort, who have all been such an instrumental blessing to me throughout my dissertation journey. Thank you for allowing the Lord to use you in such a fantastic capacity.

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List of Abbreviations

Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)

Americans with Disabilities Act Amendments Act (ADAAA)

Defense and Veterans Brain Injury Center (DVBIC)

General Anxiety Disorder (GAD)

Global War on Terrorism (GWOT)

National Council on Disability (NCD)

Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

Social Anxiety Disorder (SAD)

Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI)

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

Student veterans have unique needs based on their experiences and combat-related injuries. Disability support services are provided to student veterans in various forms to support them while pursuing higher education. Despite support being provided, there is inadequate knowledge concerning the utilization and impact of disability support services on the academic performance of student veterans. This study intends to present a basis of understanding for faculty, staff, and any other educational stakeholders seeking to increase progressive results for student veterans. To guide the study, a framework is provided, which includes background information, problem and purpose statements, the significance of the study, research questions, and definitions.

Background

The foundations essential to understanding the elements of this study are encompassed in the historical, social, and theoretical sections. The historical context explains how the Global War on Terrorism (GWOT) began and the increase in disabilities of veterans as a result. The social context reveals how student veterans have impacted institutions of higher education. Theoretical context is constructed of current literature written on student veterans.

Historical Context

On October 7, 2001, following the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, former President George W. Bush began military action in Afghanistan. In 2002, the United States started to exert pressure on Iraq to follow through on its commitments to improve human rights, release prisoners, break ties with terrorists, and destroy weapons of mass destruction (The U.S. National Archives and Records Administration, n.d.). Taking action to address conflicts between

Afghanistan and Iraq began the GWOT. This conflict would last for over two decades, making it the most prolonged conflict in American history.

Over 2.8 million service members have been deployed to Iraq, Afghanistan, and beyond during the GWOT (Parker et al., 2019). Many service members returned from the GWOT with physical and mental illnesses. One-in-five combat veterans stated that while performing military duties, they were seriously injured (Mackovich-Rodriguez & Gersema, 2021). Approximately 47% of post-9/11 combat veterans say they had emotionally traumatic or distressing experiences related to their military service (Mackovich-Rodriguez & Gersema, 2021). Fifty percent of combat veterans say it was very or somewhat difficult for them to readjust to civilian life after their military service (Igielnik, 2019). As a result of combat, 4.7 million veterans, or 25 percent of Service Members who served in combat during the GWOT, have a service-connected disability (Sisk, 2019).

Social Context

After transitioning out of the military, over 50% of GWOT veterans have chosen to enroll at postsecondary institutions using their G.I. Bill, which covers tuition and expenses for trade schools or college (Sisk, 2019). Obtaining higher education is a necessity because military occupation specialties do not often translate into civilian skills. One-in-four student veterans stated they enrolled in college or university classes to change their career, while one in five wanted to be more competitive in the job market (Student Veterans of America, 2021).

The transition from military to student veteran can be challenging for this non-traditional student group, due to disabilities sustained during war. According to the Student Veterans of America (2021) Census Survey, nearly two-in-three student veterans state they have a Veterans Affairs disability rating. Of the student veterans who shared that their disability impacts their

academics, one in ten say the impact is severe (Student Veterans of America, 2021). Student

veterans' disabilities can severely impact their learning capabilities. In addition to the disabilities

they have sustained, student veterans have difficulties transitioning into their new lives as both

civilians and students. They can have strained relationships with faculty, staff, and peers, due to

age differences, variations in life experiences, and expectations (Dean, Sorgen, & Zinskie, 2020).

The increase in student veterans, since 2008, has produced more attention and emphasis

on the student veteran population (Vacchi & Berger, 2014). The recognition of student veterans'

specific issues justifies institutions of higher education ensuring they are implementing the

correct methods of support for these students. Many institutions of higher education have begun

providing the necessary support services specific to student veterans. They have taken on the role

of assisting student veterans in adapting not only to college and universities, but also to integrate

into the community.

Theoretical Context

The theoretical context of this research problem is based on the current literature on

student veterans. Literature on student veterans is frequently associated with traditional models

focusing on traditional students rather than non-traditional students. For example, Tinto's student

departure theory (1975, 1993) addresses the importance of social integration as it relates to

academic success. However, this theory fails to consider psychometrically valid measures

(Smart, 2005) by suggesting students need only to adjust and participate socially on campus.

In addition, Schlossberg's (1981) transition theory 4S model has been used to focus on

understanding adults undergoing transitional periods. However, this model fails to address the

unique encounters exclusive to student veterans.

Both models created by Tinto and Schlossberg normalize the academic experience of

students. Other student models have evolved from Tinto's theory (Bean & Metzer, 1985; DiRamio et al., 2008) and Schlossberg's theory (Rumann & Hamrick, 2010) which continue to be unsuccessful in considering the distinctive experiences and needs of student veterans. Although these models were created to efficiently analyze and explain student veterans' experiences, they neglect to enhance literary knowledge of student veterans' experiences. Student veterans' experiences differ significantly from the experiences of traditional students. Therefore, traditional models should not be used to explain the experiences or lack of academic success encountered by student veterans.

Problem Statement

The problem is that too many veterans with disabilities do not use campus disability services, potentially limiting their potential to earn a college degree. Since 2005, the student veteran population at postsecondary institutions has increased significantly, prompting a rise in scholarly interest and exploration of this non-traditional student population. Much of the previously conducted research (DiRamio et al., 2008; Livingston et al., 2011; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010) illustrates the significant need for proper support for student veterans at postsecondary institutions. Understanding the support needed by student veterans, many postsecondary institutions have implemented various forms of disability support services for them. However, there exists a lack of understanding of why student veterans choose not to use these services, as well as any positive influence these services may have on the academic performance of student veterans. Therefore, it is essential to determine how impactful using disability support services may be and methods to increase student veterans' utilization of disability support services.

Despite the need for disability services, veterans are hesitant to find the appropriate

resources and services, reluctant to disclose information about their existing disabilities, underreport their needs, and participate in treatment at lower levels (Kranke et al., 2017; Shackelford, 2009). Therefore, for institutions of higher education seeking to provide adequate disability services for their student veterans, they must be aware of the perceptions held by veterans for seeking help. This greatly influences the strategies institutions need to use for student veterans to receive appropriate resources and services. It is also imperative for postsecondary institutions to create an accountability system to track the academic performance of student veterans using disability support services. In monitoring academic performance, postsecondary institutions can confirm the efficiency of services and make any needed changes found necessary for student veterans to be supported to the best of their ability.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenology is to explore the lived experiences of student veterans using disability support services at postsecondary institutions. At this stage in the research, disability support services for student veterans will be generally defined as any resource or service providing accessibility and support to aid academic success. This study plans to present a basis for understanding what disability support services were used and deemed most influential on the grades, graduation, and retention of student veterans. The conceptual framework guiding this study is Vacchi's (2017) model for student veteran support. This model allows researchers the ability to determine both which and how disability support services positively impact the academic performance of student veterans.

As asserted by Alexander Astin, due to student veterans having unique needs, a cookie-cutter solution should not be sought by educational professionals and researchers serving them (Vacchi et al., 2017, p. 36). The unique needs of student veterans are comprised of events in the

transitional process from military to and through postsecondary education, as well as specific

support needed based on their combat experiences. Failing to acknowledge student veterans'

needs, by believing they are culturally similar to traditional students, hinders attempts by faculty,

staff, researchers, and students to provide the support needed for veteran success (Vacchi et al.,

2017; Weidman, 1989). Therefore, the model is used to provide a holistic perspective on the key

areas most impactful for student veterans. The intent of using this model is to allow the

researcher to establish the specific challenges and needs of student veterans, determine what

services are offered by disability support service offices at postsecondary institutions, decide

what and how to enable student veterans to seek help, and establish what services best support

this non-traditional group of students.

Significance of the Study

The significance of the study lies in its potential to add to the empirical knowledge of

how to aid student veterans in maximizing their success while enrolled at postsecondary

institutions. This study is significant to faculty, staff, and other educational stakeholders invested

in the welfare and success of student veterans. The importance of these findings grew based on

college enrollment increasing with the expanded educational benefits and increased use of the

Post-9/11 G.I. Bill (Cook & Kim, 2009; Vacchi, 2012). The influx of student veterans enrolling

in institutions of higher education requires a better understanding of this nontraditional group of

students to meet their needs most effectively.

This study is also imperative in addressing student veterans' actions of avoiding help-

seeking activities. Due to this reason, various services and resources needed for veterans are

being underutilized. According to research, lower treatment utilization for veterans was

significantly related to the higher perceived public stigma of treatment-seeking (Corrigan et al.,

2015). Many veterans seem to be concerned about the negative perceptions of seeking treatment. Therefore, by choosing to target the perceived public stigma of treatment-seeking through perceived norm interventions, institutions may be able to narrow the gap between the need and received assistance provided to student veterans (Corrigan et al., 2015).

Theoretical Significance

The theoretical significance of this study is its utilization of Vacchi's (2017) model for student veteran support, which will continue to test this model for practical utility to the field. This research may pinpoint which critical areas of the model are most helpful in supporting student veterans during their pursuit of higher education. The study may also serve to support Diamond's (2012) adaptive military transition theory and Hammond's (2016) combat veteran conceptual identity model. The findings of this study can clarify individual student veteran experiences, through the negotiation of their identities, while transitioning. Understanding these factors will allow postsecondary institutions to gain a better understanding of how student veterans adapt and succeed.

Empirical Significance

Previously conducted research identified physical and mental health issues possessed by student veterans (Church, 2009; 10Borsari et al., 2017; Hammond, 2016; Rattray et al., 2019), their reluctance to disclose their disabilities (Kranke et al., 2017), and the significance of services and resources available to them (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011). This study plans to include related studies to present a basis of understanding for postsecondary educational stakeholders on how to best support student veterans. Student veterans' lived experiences as narrated by them, as well as the staff who have worked with them, will be analyzed for the purpose of drawing beneficial conclusions. From these conclusions, policies and procedures can help inform efforts to ensure

student veterans are aware of disability support services. Furthermore, confirmation can be provided that the services themselves effectively support the academic performance of student veterans.

Practical Significance

According to research, non-military students are more likely to use disability services than student veterans (Church 2009). Reluctance factors to use these services include beliefs that the accommodations available are only for civilian students, utilizing services will be a hassle, and disability services will not address their needs (Kranke et al., 2017; Morris et al., 2019). The perceptions and experiences provided be research participants can illustrate the reality of the student veterans using disability support services. The data will also determine whether the impact of disability support services on student veterans' academic performance is significant enough to be considered essential for institutions of higher education to continue using them and what changes, if any, are necessary to ensure the academic success of student veterans using disability support services. "Having a deeper understanding of student veterans' experiences with accommodations (e.g. how they learn about services, the unique impacts of accommodations, and what is lacking) can aid in providing more effective tailored accommodations and interventions" (Morris et al., 2022, p. 199).

<div align="center">

Research Questions

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This study uses a hermeneutic phenomenological research design to examine the perceptions and lived experiences of student veterans using disability support services. Vacchi's (2017) model for student veteran support will be used as the conceptual framework guiding this study. The research will be collected and analyzed from student veterans, as well as from postsecondary education staff. The central research question and sub-questions serve to provide

answers to determine if the utilization of disability support services by student veterans positively impacts their academic performance. The research questions will also seek to determine how positive impact is acknowledged, and how each disability support service provides that effect on student veterans.

Central Research Question

What are the experiences of student veterans using disability support services at postsecondary institutions?

This question serves as the primary focus of the study, aimed at understanding the larger contextual issues needed to solve the problem (Palmer et al., 2018). Participants are allowed to tell their stories (Ohman, 2005) using open-ended questions. Exploration of participants' experiences will be explored through individual interviews, focus groups, and letter-writing prompts. Overall, this question provides insight into a student veteran's election to use disability support services and the result of that decision.

Sub-Question One

What are the academic learning experiences of student veterans with disabilities? This question is imperative to understanding the challenges faced by student veterans with disabilities when pursuing higher education. Student veterans report difficulties with physical and sensory limitations, rigor (Terry et al., 2017), studying, and learning (Burke, 2021). Approximately less than half of student veterans are willing to seek assistance at postsecondary institutions for their disabilities (Borsari et al., 2017). Despite reluctance to seek assistance, experiencing these obstacles compel student veterans to seek help through disability support services. The question also creates a basis to explain how student veterans with disabilities best learn, which can improve accommodations and strategies to enhance their academic success.

Sub-Question Two

How do student veterans with disabilities describe the support provided by disability support services?

This question addresses a gap in the literature and the research problem on the utilization and positive impact of disability support services on the academic performance of student veterans. Postsecondary institutions are responsible for providing appropriate academic aid and support to students with disabilities. Student veterans' persistence in higher education is linked to various factors, including support provided through their postsecondary institution (Nyer et al., 2014). Therefore, this question clarifies the efficiency of support student veterans obtain and what role that support plays in their academic performance.

Sub-Question Three

How do personal and academic relationships affect the academic performance of student veterans who use disability support services?

Literature indicates that student veterans are more likely to be affected by non-academic factors (Klaw et al., 2021). Academic and personal relationships serve as non-academic factors impacting the academic success of student veterans. Pascarella (1980) states that informal interactions improve the social aspect of the student's academic life, which in turn contributes to their commitment to the institution and their decision to persist. Tinto's theory (1993) reinforces this claim, verifying with integration into informal (peer-group interactions) social systems are needed to retain students.

Definitions

1. *Combat Veteran:* A combat veteran has a military record indicating they received Hostile Fire Pay or were deployed to and served in a combat zone. This can include service in Vietnam,

the Persian Gulf, and specific areas of Iraq and Afghanistan, among other locations (Department of Veteran Affairs, 2011).

2. *Disabled veteran*: An official term referring to a former member of any branch of the military who has become permanently disabled due to an injury, illness, or trauma incurred or aggravated during active military service, including the National Guard and Reserve Forces (Department of Veteran Affairs, 2011).

3. *Disability:* A physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more of the individual's major life activities (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2022).

4. *Disability Support Services:* Disability Support Services (DSS) provides academic and physical accessibility to students who have disabilities in compliance with Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Americans with Disabilities Act (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). For this research, disability support services also include student veteran-specific services provided by postsecondary institutions.

5. *Global War on Terrorism*: The Global War on Terror is an international, American-led military campaign launched following the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks (The U.S. National Archives and Records Administration, n.d.).

6. *Post 9/11 GI BILL*: The Post- 9/11 GI Bill is an education benefit program for individuals who served on active duty after September 10, 2001. It can be used at colleges, universities, trade schools, and for on-the-job training, apprenticeships, and flight schools. (Department of Veteran Affairs, 2011).

7. *Student Veteran*: A student veteran is any student who is a current or former member of the active-duty military, the National Guard, or Reserves regardless of deployment status, combat experience or legal veteran status (Vacchi, 2012).

8. *Transition*: Event or process requiring a change in roles, relationships, behavior, routines, and assumptions that are perceived by the person involved as a transition (Ackerman et al., 2009; Schlossberg, 1981).

Summary

This hermeneutic phenomenological study focuses on the perceptions of student veterans using disability support services at postsecondary institutions. Currently, there exists a gap in the literature on the utilization and positive impact of disability support services on the academic performance of student veterans. Vacchi's (2017) model of student veteran support will be used to examine which services are provided to student veterans and what role those services play in the positive impact on academic performance. With college enrollment of student veterans having significantly increased and continuing to rise, institutions need to be equipped to address their specific challenges and needs most effectively. This study can be used to inform institutions of the challenges and support needed by student veterans, so they can ensure they provide the appropriate resources and services.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

An analytical review of the literature was conducted to determine the challenges faced by student veterans and whether disability support services impact their academic success. Exploring the literature relating to the experiences of student veterans utilizing disability support services is vital due to the existing gap in the literature, presenting a need for the study. Although postsecondary institutions have made strides in effectively implementing measures to support student veterans, this research will reveal if disability support services being provided successfully assist this nontraditional student population. The literature review includes an evaluation of Vacchi's (2017) model for student veteran support, results of combat experiences, veterans transitioning into civilian life, challenges in higher education, disability laws, and disability support services for student veterans.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework used is Vacchi's (2017) model for student veteran support is derived from the adaption of theories belonging to various scholars. Vacchi's (2017) model of student veteran support expands on the services, transition support, academic interactions, and support needed based on the experiences of student veterans. This model signifies a vertical axis that theorizes the detailed and exclusive services a student veteran may need during their transition from military to higher education. The model also denotes a horizontal axis based on Bean & Metzner's (1985) conceptual model of nontraditional undergraduate student attrition and Weidman's (1989) model of student retention in postsecondary education. Due to the area relating to academic and social experiences, the horizontal axis is more likely substantial to student veteran success (Vacchi et al., 2017).

Student Veteran Support

In the past two decades, combat veterans have utilized their G.I. Bill benefits to obtain higher education. However, increases in student veterans suggested a need for creating a more prominent conceptual model seeking to analyze and understand the student veteran experiences more holistically (Vacchi et al., 2017). Recognizing that some veterans had many challenges when attending institutions of higher education due to enrolling too soon after transitioning out of the military, Vacchi determined the need to develop new concepts that did not focus solely on the transition process from the military to higher education (Vacchi et al., 2017). Vacchi then created his model using an extended period, representing a more explicit conceptualization of student veteran experiences.

In creating the model for student veteran support, Bean and Metzner's (1985) conceptual model was used to emphasize the importance of academic interactions for nontraditional students while deemphasizing the need for student veterans to adapt while pursuing higher education socially. This model emphasizes the role of faculty while connecting to Weidman's (1985) model, which highlights the significance of peer and faculty relationships for undergraduate students. The primary relevance of Weidman's model, as it relates to student veterans, is the connection between faculty and student interactions and the influence of socialization (Vacchi et al., 2017). Vacchi's (2017) conceptual model encompasses those models by employing veteran-friendly proposals concentrating on the individual student veteran (Vacchi & Berger, 2014). From this model, four cornerstones are recommended to support student veterans in completing their degrees.

Services

The first area focuses on the various areas in which higher education institutions can be

more helpful to student veterans is services. Services are divided into those that are general and unique. Those areas include the following: Credit for military service, processing G.I. Bill benefits, and accommodations in the classroom based on disabilities (Cook & Kim, 2009, DiRamio et al., 2008; McBain et al., 2012; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010; Vacchi et al., 2017). Two key variables to consider when researching student veterans are timeliness and quality of service (Vacchi et al., 2017).

Transition Support

According to the model, the second key area pertains to aiding student veterans in navigating through challenges experienced during their transition. A study by Pascarella et al. (1986) found practical orientation to be significant to the success and persistence of students. Cook and Kim (2009) suggest that institutions could better support student veterans by creating transition courses specifically for them. A transition course would help student veterans become more comfortable with their new reality. Another recommendation provided by DiRamio et al. (2008) suggests providing a transition coach to serve as a peer mentor or sponsor to assist new student veterans in navigating the campus (Vacchi et al., 2017).

Academic Interactions

The third key area focuses on the academic interactions of student veterans. Academic interactions involve the frequency and intimacy of contact with faculty and peers, both inside and outside the classroom. Adverse classroom environments are a recurring theme for student veterans participating in qualitative research, suggesting that student veterans are accommodated through academic interactions. Most qualitative research on contemporary student veterans (DiRamio et al., 2008; Hammond, 2016; Vacchi, 2013) indicates that academic interactions are essential to creating accommodating environments for veterans (Vacchi et al., 2017). Previously

analyzed literature reveals that inconsistent or ineffective advising and faculty interactions can negatively affect the success of student veterans (Vacchi et al., 2017). To this point, Weidman (1985) found that having contact with faculty outside of the classroom has a lasting impact on college attendance.

Academic interactions are crucial to accommodating student veterans at higher education institutions. According to Vacchi and Berger (2014), military socialization extends into student veterans' lives after military service, and external support significantly aids student veterans. Interactions are aided based on the connection between student veterans' success, and the relationship between non-college reference groups is found to be twice as great (Vacchi & Berger, 2014). The quality of interactions student veterans have with their peers and faculty directly affects their academic experiences resulting in increased academic success (Jones, 2020; Vacchi, 2020). This academic success has a lasting impact on college attendance and the persistence of student veterans (Vacchi et al., 2017).

Support

Personal support is an important area of emphasis for the success of student veterans. A component of this personal support is provided through peer support. Student veterans can be strongly influenced by their peers, substantially impacting their success and persistence (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto, 1975; Weidman, 1989, Vacchi et al., 2017). Peer support represents a successful pathway for veterans to autonomously discover how to circumnavigate their institution of higher education (Vacchi et al., 2017). The most important aspect of this key area is the support from off-campus resources available to student veterans. The significance of these programs on the success of student veterans should be acknowledged to avoid hindering efforts by institution personnel and students to create a culturally inclusive environment for

student veterans (Vacchi et al., 2017).

Figure 1

Vacchi's Model for Student Veteran Support (2017)
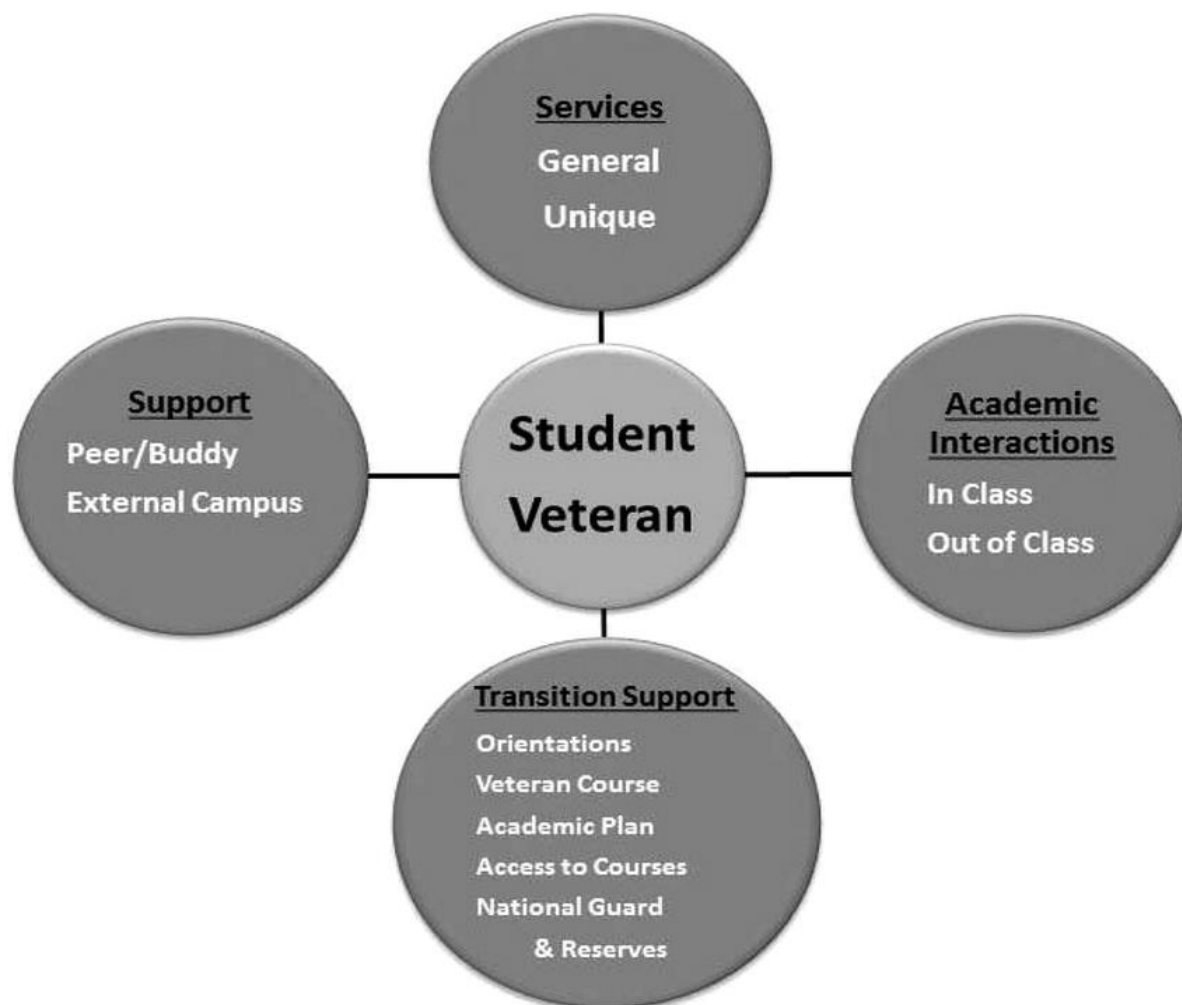
Vacchi's model for student veteran support frames the research for determining if disability support services impact student veterans' success. The conceptual framework does so by outlining the research problem, explaining how the research problem is analyzed, providing the intent and direction of the research, and uncovering the relationship between variables (Grant & Osanloo, 2014). Vacchi's model defines interconnected fundamental concepts while explaining the phenomenon being studied using discovered facts (Camp, 2001). The model for

student veteran support is also essential to the research problem because it captures the experiences of student veterans while in the higher education setting.

<div align="center">**Related Literature**</div>

As combat veterans transition into civilian life and choose to become students at postsecondary institutions, several factors must be identified and analyzed to determine how to support them successfully. These factors include focusing on the results of their combat experiences, their access to educational benefits, their challenges in higher education settings, and the support provided by postsecondary institutions. All factors determine the methodologies which can be used to most effectively address support needed for student veterans. The factors identified also assist in identifying any gaps in the literature that should be researched to ensure student veterans' maximum success at postsecondary institutions.

Global War on Terror

On September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks were committed against the United States. The assailants were from Al-Queda, a known terrorist group from Afghanistan (Caruso, 2001). Including the 19 assailants, 2,996 people were killed during these attacks (Bergen, 2022). The Global War on Terror (GWOT) was then launched on October 7, 2001, as an American-led, international military campaign, in response to these terrorist attacks (Reese & Lewis, 2009). After 20 years, the GWOT is still ongoing, with service members still being deployed to maintain security in Afghanistan, Iraq, and surrounding countries. Over 2.8 million service members have been deployed in the GWOT (Parker et al., 2019). Unfortunately, for many returning service members and their families, transitioning back into civilian life has proven to be challenging due to their combat experiences.

Results of Combat Experience

The effects of war can be permanent and enduring. It can take years for veterans to overcome the death and destruction resulting from war (Faust, n.d.). While everyone experiences war differently, many commonalities exist among veterans (Gregg et al., 2016). In addition, the experience is physically demanding and exacerbated by extreme weather conditions, heavy gear, unfamiliar locations, sleep deprivation, and more (Zhang et al., 2007). These demands increase stress levels, negatively impacting the emotional and mental functioning of the service members (Murthy & Lakshminarayana, 2006).

Following the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, 2.8 million service members have engaged in war through deployments to Iraq, Afghanistan, and beyond (Parker et al., 2019). This conflict has been the longest in American history (Hoffman, 2021). There is no empirical evidence focusing on veterans who yielded no negative impact because of combat. However, various sources confirm combat has resulted in multiple generations of veterans suffering from various physical and mental health disabilities. According to data published by the Pew Research Center, 23% of combat veterans claim deployments hurt their physical health, and an identical amount says being deployed impacted their mental health negatively (Parker et al., 2019).

Additional statistics provide more insight into the effects of deployment on combat veterans. One-in-five combat veterans stated that while performing military duties, they were seriously injured (Mackovich-Rodriguez & Gersema, 2021). Six-in-ten veterans say they witnessed someone else being injured or killed during combat (Tripp et al., 2016). Approximately 47% of post-9/11 combat veterans say they had emotionally traumatic or distressing experiences related to their military service (Mackovich-Rodriguez & Gersema, 2021). Fifty percent of combat veterans say it was very or somewhat difficult for them to

readjust to civilian life after their military service due to their injuries (Igielnik, 2019).

Injuries Sustained from Combat

For veterans reporting injuries after combat, physical and mental health injuries can present formidable obstacles. Many of the injuries sustained can cause severe impairments and can even be life-threatening. Common physical injuries include lost limbs, strains and sprains, hearing loss and tinnitus, shrapnel, head, and brain injuries, gunshot wounds, limited range of motion, and more (National Library of Medicine, n.d.). Mental health disabilities consist of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI), anxiety, and depression (Inoue et al., 2021). Physical and mental health injuries sustained during combat pose significant threats to achieving a positive life after war (Kinney et al., 2021).

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

PTSD is one of the most distressing psychological consequences for veterans returning from war (Jasbi et al., 2018). Veterans could suffer from the diagnosed condition for 30 or more years (Reisman, 2016). Despite these facts, the actual incidence and prevalence of PTSD are challenging to establish in veterans (Hines et al., 2014). Symptoms of PTSD overlap with other psychological disorders. Additionally, the influence of cultural or sociopolitical factors can significantly affect the accuracy of PTSD diagnoses (Reisman, 2016). Despite limitations posed by varying factors, survey data found that 83% of all veterans have experienced PTSD symptoms since the GWOT began (Elflein, 2021).

Symptoms of PTSD have specific triggers, such as stressful events (Lazarov et al., 2020). These events include the service member's life being directly in danger or observing another person's life being in direct danger (Reisman, 2016). Immediate symptoms of PTSD may include numbness, anxiety, fear, and confusion (Hines et al., 2014). Delayed symptoms of the disorder can

consist of intrusive throughs, grief, withdrawal, or apathy (Hines et al., 2014).

Additional symptoms of PTSD include flashbacks, anxiety and depression, irritability, maladaptive schemas, loss of personal interests, impairments in autobiographical memory, impairments in concentration, and working and long-term memory (Akbarian et al., 2015). Symptoms can also include social withdrawal and feelings of isolation, increased autonomic system (Foa & McLean, 2016), higher threat sensitivity, poor sleep, and frequent nightmares (Ahmadpanah et al., 2016; Khazaie et al., 2016; O'Donovan et al., 2017). Patients with PTSD show deteriorations at cognitive, emotional, social, psychophysiological, and behavioral levels (Akbarian et al., 2015). Ultimately, PTSD can affect behavioral, psychological, and biological processes resulting in reduced quality of life, severe functional impairment, and high comorbidity with other medical disorders (Lawson, 2014).

Depression

According to the American Psychiatric Association (2020), depression is a common, serious medical illness that negatively impacts how a person acts, feels, or thinks. Although limited studies report the trends of depression among U.S. veterans, military medical facilities report a baseline increase from 11.4% to 15% after GWOT deployments (Inoue et al., 2021). Depression among veterans increased due to combat stressors, separation from loved ones, and being in harm's way (Inoue et al., 2021). It is considered the most common comorbidity of PTSD in veterans and is associated with high morbidity and mortality rates (Liua et al., 2019).

Symptoms of depression include loss of interest in activities, suicidal ideations, loss of sleep, weight gain or loss, difficulty concentrating, and hopelessness (RAND Corporation, n.d.). Depression can manifest itself in the form of physical problems as well. Those problems include gastrointestinal issues, chronic pain, fatigue, and headaches (Reisman, 2016). Depression can

interfere with veterans' ability to enjoy daily activities, work, eat, sleep, and interact with others (Inoue et al., 2021). The long-term effects of depression can make it difficult for veterans to function in civilian life upon returning from combat.

Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI)

A bump, jolt, blow, or penetration to the head that disrupts normal brain function is a Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2022). The Defense and Veterans Brain Injury Center (DVBIC) reports approximately 414,000 veterans were diagnosed with TBI between 2000 and 2019 (U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs, n.d.). Conditions from the condition range from vision and hearing problems, irritability, loss of memory, sleep disorders, seizures, drainage, nausea, loss of consciousness, headaches, and depression (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2020). TBIs can lead to long-term mental and physical health issues, such as an increased risk of epilepsy, dementia, suicidal ideations, tinnitus, and hearing loss (U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs, n.d.). In addition, the conditions associated with TBIs can significantly impact veterans' employment, relationships, and reintegration.

Anxiety

Some veterans develop anxiety following a life-threatening experience or trauma caused by combat (Milanak et al., 2013). Transitioning out of the military is another stressful life event that can cause anxiety disorders. Anxiety disorders include General Anxiety Disorder (GAD), Panic Disorder, Social Anxiety Disorder (SAD), and phobias. All forms of anxiety can show up as emotional and physical symptoms.

Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD)

General Anxiety Disorder (GAD) is characterized by persistent and uncontrollable worry

(Kroenke, 2007). Although there have been high rates of GAD among veteran samples, minimal research has been conducted by the Department of Veteran Affairs (Milanak et al., 2013). Therefore, no empirical data can determine how many GWOT veterans have been diagnosed with GAD. However, despite this lack of research, veterans are often diagnosed with General Anxiety Disorder (GAD) when they cannot control their feelings of worry (Forge Health, 2020).

GAD symptoms include restlessness, irritability, difficulty concentrating, sleep disturbances, tiring quickly, and inability to relax (U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs, 2022). The disorder can result in the following increase of significant impairments to the veteran: Social, occupational, and social and physical health (Wittchen & Hoyer, 2001; Roemer et al., 2002; Milanak et al., 2013). A study of veterans diagnosed with GAD in the Department of Veteran Affairs primary care settings reveals these veterans reported significantly worse role limitations due to general health, emotional health, and emotional well-being (Milanak et al., 2013). If left untreated, the constant state of concern and worry can lead veterans to other challenges, including depressive disorders (Forge Health, 2020).

Panic Disorder

Prevalence rates of panic disorder among Veterans reach as high as 6.1–8.3% (Barreraa et al., 2013). Panic disorder is associated with symptoms such as trembling, difficulty breathing, chest pain, heart palpitations, numbing or tingling, dizziness, and stomach distress (U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs, 2022). Unfortunately, due to the similarities in symptoms between panic attacks and physical disorders, most individuals pursue medical care rather than psychological care (Ströhle et al., 2018). Among veterans seeking care for panic disorder, there has been an increase in health care services, mental health comorbidity, antidepressant medication, suicide attempts, and suicide completion (Barreraa et al., 2013).

Social Anxiety Disorder (SAD)

Social Anxiety Disorder (SAD) is a mental health condition in which irrational anxiety is caused by social interactions (National Institute of Mental Health, 2022). Although scarce research examines the epidemiology of SAD in veterans, the disorder is highly prevalent in veterans (Byrne et al., 2021). Nearly one in ten veterans have reported experiencing SAD throughout their lifetime (Byrne et al., 2021). SAD causes veterans to avoid everyday social situations due to fear of being judged, experiencing physical symptoms of anxiety, and worrying about embarrassing themselves (Anxiety & Depression Association of America, 2022). Veterans living with SAD experience reductions in functioning, psychiatric comorbidities, and suicidal ideations (Byrne et al., 2021).

Chronic Physical Pain

Compared to the general population, chronic pain is more prevalent and of greater intensity among U.S. veterans (U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs, 2020). Analysis reveals that veterans are approximately 40 percent more likely to suffer from chronic pain than nonveterans (Nahrin, 2016). According to the National Institutes of Health, one in ten veterans live with chronic pain (Nahin, 2017). The most common chronic pain diagnoses among GWOT veterans are joint and back pain and other musculoskeletal ailments (U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs, 2020). However, no current study examines the severity of pain or the association of pain severity with particular conditions, such as jaw pain, neck pain, headaches, back pain, or neck pain of all veterans (Nahin, 2017).

Chronic pain is also associated with mental health conditions caused by trauma-related distress (Ravn, 2020). Several studies found that chronic pain and mental health conditions exacerbate one another, increasing higher levels of disability, pain, and psychological distress

(Ravn, 2020). Persistent and unrelieved chronic pain can contribute to anxiety, decreased quality of life, poor sleep patterns, depression, and substance use disorders (U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs, 2022). A veteran's quality of life can be significantly impacted by chronic pain affecting their ability to work, sleep, socialize, and conduct daily activities (Nahrin, 2017).

Polytrauma

A condition called Polytrauma has been designated as a "signature" illness of combat veterans (Clark et al., 2009). Polytrauma consists of two or more injuries that affect multiple organ systems or body parts, resulting in cognitive and psychosocial impairments or physical and functional disabilities (Adams et al., 2019). Analysis of combat veterans who visited a VHA Polytrauma Network Site found three different health conditions to be present simultaneously in 42% of participants (Kosasih et al., 2015). Analyses with a nationwide sample are suggested to understand the overlap of polytrauma conditions most effectively (Adams et al., 2019). Polytrauma can cause a negative synergistic effect in combat veterans, causing each health condition to worsen in the presence of another health condition, affecting their normal daily activities (Finley et al. 2015).

Veterans Transitioning to Civilian Life

Transitioning to civilian life causes various changes and challenges for veterans. Changes and challenges are based on a sense of purpose. They are moving away from the missions, honor, structured hierarchy and roles, and camaraderie they have become accustomed to (Whitworth et al., 2020). This can create a loss of meaning in life and identity for many veterans. The loss of meaning can also create different problems in the lives of those experiencing the transition back into civilian life (Stilwell, n.d.).

Transitioning to civilian life means navigating complex interpersonal relationships,

adapting to a novel culture, and obtaining a new job (Grimell, 2018). The transition changes

assumptions, relationships, roles, and routines (Street et al., 2009). In addition to these factors,

veterans can struggle with managing physical and mental injuries associated with their military

service. The experience of transition difficulty varies for each soldier based on various factors

(Morin, 2011).

Each military branch has created and implemented its transition program to aid service

members in the transition process. Despite having these programs, only about half of the veteran

population claims they feel well-prepared for the transition process (The MITRE Corporation,

2019). While many soldiers believe the programs are helpful in some way, they fail to make

transitioning service members feel sufficiently ready to transition because they apply a broad-

spectrum approach which is not beneficial to each service member's specific needs (Shue et al.,

2021). Feeling inadequately prepared for this transition has resulted in veterans having poor

coping strategies and engaging in harmful behaviors (Back et al., 2017). Results of these poor

coping strategies are confirmed in data derived from the Department of Veterans Affairs, finding

suicide rates among veterans are 21% higher than the U.S. population, with a daily suicide rate

of 20 veterans per day (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2021).

Veterans in Higher Education

After transitioning from the military, many veterans choose to pursue higher education.

Veterans have access to the Post 9/11 G.I. Bill, explicitly created for veterans who served during

the Global War on Terrorism. Student veterans face various challenges because of their combat

experience, which makes their higher education experience much different from that of a

traditional student (Reynolds, 2013). Disability laws were created to protect students with

diagnosed disabilities in pursuing higher education (U.S. Department of Education, 2023).

Disability support services ensure these laws are abided by and are responsible for providing the appropriate resources and aids. In addition to the services offered through disability support services, postsecondary institutions provide support specifically to student veterans through various methods (Rattray et al., 2019).

Veterans' Access to Education Benefits

Many veterans are skilled and knowledgeable but lack certifications and degrees valued in the civilian world (Combat Veterans to Careers, 2022). Additionally, their skills do not easily translate into civilian capabilities. Therefore, education is vital for veterans transitioning back into civilian life (Karp & Klempin, 2016). Enrolling in higher education institutions enables veterans to upgrade and gain skills needed to transfer into a new career (State of Connecticut, 2015). To advance their education and training, many veterans choose to utilize G.I. Bill benefits provided for their military service. This benefit helps veterans pay for undergraduate studies, graduate school, and various Veteran Affairs-approved training programs (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2019).

In 1944, the G.I. Bill was created to aid World War II veterans returning home from war (U.S. Department of Defense, 2019). Part of the bill granted stipends intended to cover tuition and expenses for veterans choosing to attend trade schools or colleges. These stipends provide veterans with education to prevent economic turmoil by expanding the middle class (Dortch, 2021). Since its creation, the G.I. Bill has been extended several times.

Congress passed the Post 9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Act in 2008 (Dortch, 2021). This was the most generous G.I. Bill being offered to veterans, granting the greatest number of educational benefits. In 2017, this benefit was further expanded, enabling more veterans to obtain higher education (Bush, 2017). Since the implementation of significant

changes made in 2009 to the G.I., the Department of Veterans Affairs has reported providing educational benefits to over 1 million veterans (Gross, 2019).

Enrollment Trends of Student Veterans

As of 2020, approximately 1 million veterans were utilizing their G.I. Bill benefits (Bryant, 2021). Data provided by Student Veterans of America show that as of 2020, 80% of student veterans are enrolled at postsecondary institutions as full-time students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). Fifty-nine percent of these students attend four-year public higher education institutions (Naphan & Elliott, 2015). Eighteen percent of students attend two-year public institutions (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). The remaining percentage of student veterans attend private institutions (Postsecondary National Policy Institute, 2020). Approximately one in three veterans attend a for-profit institution using their G.I. Bill benefits (Hill et al., 2019).

While many student veterans are using their G.I. Bill to obtain higher education, they fail to select institutions that offer the most resources and have the highest graduation rates (Paterson & Schwartz, 2019). Only one in ten veterans is enrolled at postsecondary institutions, with graduation rates at or above 70 percent (Hill et al., 2019). Sixty-five percent of student veterans are enrolled at low-graduation rate postsecondary institutions (Paterson & Schwartz, 2019). Student veterans were significantly more likely to enroll in postsecondary institutions having fewer than 50% of students graduating at a 150 percent graduation rate (Hill et al., 2019).

Despite the postsecondary institution selected by student veterans, most are enrolled as full-time students while working part or full-time. Eight percent of student veterans are between the ages of 24 and 35 (Student Veterans of America, 2019). Additionally, 52% of student veterans are married, 46% have children, and 19% are single parents (Bryant, 2021). Women

make up 31% of the student veteran population (Bryant, 2021). Nearly 2/3 of the student veteran population has a Veteran Affair disability rating from a service-connected disability (Student Veterans of America, 2020).

Academic Performance of Student Veterans

Military training, work ethic, commitment, and personal characteristics have given student veterans a unique position for academic achievement. Despite being predisposed to poor academic performance due to their social and educational backgrounds (Bailey et al., 2017), student veterans are valuable assets to postsecondary institutions (Schmeling & Maury, 2019). Investigation into the academic performance of student veterans validates that they are more likely to persist and graduate than nonveteran students (Ochinko & Kathy, 2020).

Compared to traditional students, student veterans graduate within the same time frame (Schmeling & Maury, 2019). Furthermore, student veterans are more likely than traditional students to be enrolled as full-time students (Schmeling & Maury, 2019). Student veterans outperform traditional students, earning higher grade point averages (Ochinko & Kathy, 2020). Additionally, they push themselves to achieve higher levels of education. Thirty-six percent of student veterans earning associate degrees and 21% earning bachelor's degrees went on to pursue higher-level degrees (Bailey et al., 2017).

Student Veteran Challenges

While research shows student veterans are performing well academically, it also uncovers veterans transitioning back into civilian life feel unprepared for academia. Therefore, student veterans are at a greater risk of difficulties than their non-veteran peers (Niv & Bennett, 2017). Challenges included balancing academic and other responsibilities, meeting academic expectations, coping with combat-related disabilities, and relating to non-veteran peers (Rumann

& Hamrick, 2010). In addition, researchers have documented that more specific challenges faced by student veterans are associated with the following: problems with political differences (DiRamio et al., 2008), alienation on campus, being uncomfortable being asked questions or making comments in class, being more mature than other students (Alschuler & Yarab, 2018), relearning study skills (Greg et al., 2016), and a desire for faculty understanding (Clark & Walker, 2020).

Research conducted in 2010 by the Rand Corporation found that challenges faced by student veterans result in lower retention and graduation rates, lower grade point averages (GPAs), and increased levels of anxiety, depression, hypervigilance, stress, and suicidal ideations (Steele et al., 2010). This non-traditional student population often did not graduate or took longer than other students to graduate (Ackerman et al., 2009). Only slightly more than 50% of this population are completing their postsecondary degrees (Shirley et al., 2022). Low retention rates of student veterans are credited to difficulties transitioning from the military (Lighthall, 2012), problems with severe mental health and physical disabilities (Parker et al., 2019), perceptions of having lost time for higher education due to serving in the military (Richman, 2017), and troubles connecting socially at institutions of higher education (Ackerman et al., 2009). Historical evidence provided by Student Veterans of America (2021) reveals student veterans have a demonstrated record of academic success. Student veterans' academic progress and outcomes are based on higher cumulative GPAs and graduation rates of student veterans compared to those of traditional students.

Help-Seeking Challenges of Student Veterans

Transitioning to a less structured college lifestyle from the regulated culture of the military can be challenging for student veterans (Wurster et al., 2013). Therefore, despite having a greater need for assistance when pursuing higher education, student veterans are reluctant to

seek support. Approximately less than half of student veterans are willing to seek assistance at postsecondary institutions for their disabilities (Borsari et al., 2017). Student veterans choose not to seek help because they are worried about being minimized or invalidated, don't recognize they need support, are not informed of where to seek help, or decide to handle challenges on their own (Misra-Hebert et al., 2015). Despite needing it, choosing not to seek help can also be associated with the military culture. Military culture strongly emphasizes behaviors, feelings, and thoughts that fall in line with traditional masculine roles, which prohibit behaviors for seeking help and decrease the veteran's self-worth, serving as a significant barrier to obtaining assistance that is needed (Currier et al., 2017).

Student veterans have common help-seeking patterns from informal, professional, and religious sources. Veterans in a psychological/emotional crisis are more likely to pursue informal sources such as friends, partners, spouses, and family members (Currier et al., 2017). There is a neutral probability of student veterans seeking assistance from professional sources (i.e., counselors, psychologists, physicians) (Currier et al., 2017). Compared with non-clinical counterparts, veterans with a credible need for treatment for depression or PTSD reported a decreased likelihood of help-seeking from informal and religious sources (Borsari et al., 2017). In addition, ethnicity, sex, and religious background substantially influence preferences for seeking help for emotional or psychological worries.

Responsibilities of Disabled Students

A postsecondary student determined to be disabled must notify their institution of their disability and assist the institutions in determining the appropriate aids and support they need. In addition, they must give adequate notice when needing disability support services. These students must also provide proper documentation from a psychologist, medical doctor, or other

qualified diagnosticians (Northern Illinois University, 2012). The documentation may include

one or more of the following (U.S. Department of Education, 2011):

- diagnosis of a current disability with supporting documentation

- date of disability diagnosis

- how that diagnosis was reached

- credentials of the diagnosing professional

- information on how the disability affects your academic performance

Upon receiving the proper notification of a disability, institution representatives may ask the

student to provide additional supporting documentation such as professional prescriptions or

diagnostic test results. They may also choose to obtain their own professional opinion to

determine the aid and support methods based on the student's specific disability (U.S.

Department of Education, 2011).

Disability Laws

Since the 1970s, various laws have been passed to protect the rights of people with

disabilities. The first official law regarding individuals with disabilities was addressed in Section

504, one of the civil rights provisions of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. Further protections were

later created to address the needs of people more adequately with disabilities. The laws include

the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, the Americans with Disabilities Act, and the Americans with

Disabilities Act Amendments.

Rehabilitation Act of 1973

The Rehabilitation Act of 1973 was created to prohibit discrimination against persons

with a disability. It is intended for federal agencies, federal employment, programs receiving

federal financial assistance, and the employment practices of federal contractors (National Center

for Learning Disabilities, 2022). The Rehabilitation Act of 1973 replaces the Vocational
Rehabilitation Act, created to complete the following (U.S. Department of Education, 2015):

- to extend and revise the authorization of grants to states for vocational rehabilitation services, with particular emphasis on services to individuals with the most severe disabilities

- to expand special federal responsibilities and research and training programs concerning individuals with disabilities

- to create a linkage between state vocational rehabilitation programs and workforce investment activities carried out under title I of the Workforce Investment Act of 1998

- to establish special responsibilities for the Secretary of Education for coordination of all activities concerning individuals with disabilities within and across programs administered by the federal government

- and for other purposes

Several sections of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 about different types of discrimination exist. The Act consists of seven titles. The seven titles combined are composed of 98 sections. For example, under Title II, Section 504 covers students with disabilities attending public elementary and secondary schools, as well as institutions of higher education (U.S. Access Board, n.d.).

To be protected under Section 504, a student must be determined to have the following (Employer Assistance and Resource Network on Disability Inclusion, n.d.):

(1) a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities

(2) a record of such an impairment

(3) regarded as having such an impairment.

Section 504 is enforced through the Office for Civil Rights in the U.S. Department of Education. Postsecondary institutions' failure to provide the appropriate aid to students with disabilities is deemed discriminatory and in violation of Section 504 (U.S. Department of Education, 2021).

Americans with Disability Act (ADA)

In February 1986, the National Council on Disability (NCD), then known as the "National Council on the Handicapped," released a report titled, "Toward Independence: An Assessment of Federal Laws and Programs Affecting Persons with Disabilities - With Legislative Recommendations." The NCD is an independent federal agency employed to make recommendations regarding Americans with disabilities to Congress and the President of the U.S. (National Council on Disability, 1986). The report was published to provide empowerment and full opportunities for persons with disabilities by creating a comprehensive law (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2020). Additionally, it was used to draft the first version of the Americans with Disabilities Act.

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) is a civil rights law that was passed in 1990 (Americans with Disabilities Act, 2022). The law prohibits individuals with disabilities in all areas of public life from being discriminated against. This includes transportation, schools, jobs, and all private and public places open to the general public (U.S. Department of Labor, n.d.). This act was designed to ensure that people with disabilities are afforded the same opportunities and rights as people without disabilities. The ADA is divided into five titles (or sections) that address various matters of public life. The five titles are Employment, state, and local government activities, public transportation, public accommodations, and telecommunications

relay services (Smith, 2020).

Americans with Disability Act Amendments

On January 1, 2009, the Americans with Disabilities Act Amendments Act (ADAAA) became effective. The amendments provided a broader interpretation of disability by employers, testing agencies, and schools than the ADA (National Center for Learning Disabilities, 2022). In addition, challenging the ADAAA, several significant changes were made to the definition of the word "disability" (U.S. Department of Education, 2020). The changes in the meaning of the word disability in the ADAAA apply to all five titles of the ADA (U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, n.d.). The intended impact of these amendments was to allow persons with disabilities to gain protection under the ADA, which is much more accessible than previously possible (National Center for Learning Disabilities, 2022).

Institutional Support for Student Veterans

Many post-secondary institutions are taking a critical look at how they support different student veterans. They intend to analyze the student veteran lifecycle to implement the resources and services necessary to ease the transition for student veterans and help them thrive academically (Chandra, 2021). This population's analysis shows that student veterans are more likely affected by non-academic factors (Klaw et al., 2021). It is also revealed that their persistence in higher education is linked to various factors, including satisfaction with navigating the campus, tremendous encouragement from family and friends, positive student-faculty interactions, fewer hours of employment, and more (Nyer et al., 2014). For these reasons, postsecondary institutions support student veterans through training faculty and staff, regular communication, peer mentorship, campus events, veteran resource centers, military transfer

credits, and community partnerships.

Training Faculty and Staff

Postsecondary institutions are conducting professional development training for their counselors, faculty, and staff on student veterans. This training is intended to guide veteran issues and foster a more inclusive campus. Research states that veterans are less likely to seek help for emotional or psychological distress (Elliott & Gonzalez, 2016). Therefore, faculty and staff need to be equipped with the knowledge to respond most appropriately to student veterans' issues in the classroom and on campus. This support can increase student veterans' graduation and retention rates (Elliott & Gonzalez, 2016).

Regular Communication

Providing information is key to the success of student veterans. Therefore, many postsecondary institutions regularly reach out to student veterans to share relevant information. They provide emails, blogs, flyers, newsletters, open houses, virtual forums, webinars, and more to connect with and engage with student veterans throughout their academic lifecycles (Hall, 2016). All these methods are used to communicate educational policies, provide access to additional resources, and publish articles by and for veterans.

Peer Programs

Many institutions are choosing to utilize peer programs because they provide new student veterans with resources, information, and socialization to aid in the transition to higher education. Peers are present during new student orientation and other opportunities where they can engage new student veterans and provide one-on-one assistance (Pease, 2021). Additionally, peers assist with completing course registration, applying for financial aid and G.I. Bill benefits, and other requirements. Peer programs provide social support, normalize transition experiences,

and reduce the help-seeking stigma associated with student veterans (Kees et al., 2017). Social support provided by peer programs creates a sense of connectedness that protects against the effects of stressors (Cohen, 2004) that are essential to student veterans' successful higher education experience (Kuh et al., 2008).

Campus Events

Hosting campus events is a great way for student veterans to connect with others who share the same experiences. In addition, they can find out about resources and services available. Resources and services include local VA services, student veterans' clubs and associations, and community partnerships. In addition, my post-secondary institutions have chosen to host forums, conferences, panel discussions, veteran celebrations, and more (Student Veterans of America, 2020).

Veterans' Resource Center

Many post-secondary institutions have designated spaces for student veterans to obtain necessary information and interact with one another. These locations offer a safe place for student veterans to feel safe asking for assistance (Simon-Rudolph & Stevenson, n.d.). Furthermore, academic success is optimized by providing access to services such as social events, academic advising, benefits counseling, tutoring, assistive technologies and training, referrals, and transition assistance (Challenge America, 2016). In addition, student veterans have a place to complete their assignments and use time productively between their classes. Ultimately, veteran resource centers enhance the sense of belonging for student veterans.

Transfer of Military Credits

The military has partnered with the American Council on Education (ACE) to provide equivalent college credits for military training. Therefore, postsecondary institutions strive to

create effective transfer credit policies. In doing so, they ensure student veterans get the appropriate college credits for their military training to effectively aid their academic success (Naylon, n.d.). This is based upon the fact that the longer it takes a student veteran to complete their degree, the less likely they are to stay enrolled and graduate (Wagner & Long, 2022).

Collaboration with Community

Due to the nature of disabilities that many student veterans have, postsecondary institutions have created partnerships with organizations providing the necessary services. Student veterans' needs range from hearing or vision impairment to mental health disabilities, stress, and more (Igielnik, 2019). Collaborations with the community aid postsecondary institutions in developing inclusive campuses, enabling student veterans to succeed (Student Veterans of America, 2020). For this reason, postsecondary institutions have partnered with local Veteran Affairs facilities, non-profit organizations, veteran service organizations, and more to provide comprehensive services. Many institutions also build alliances with the National Guard and Reserves units to generate centralized and prominent resource lists for student veterans (Igielnik, 2019).

Disability Support Services

Institutions of higher education are responsible for ensuring all facilities, programs, and services are accessible to and provide equal opportunities for education to students with disabilities. In addition, they must ensure that appropriate academic aids and support are provided to students with disabilities. Services include but are not limited to auxiliary aids, as well as services and modifications to academic requirements. Examples of modifications for students with a disability have the following: Reducing a course load; providing sign language interpreters, equipping school computers with screen-reading, extending the time for testing,

arranging priority course registration, providing a TTY in your dorm room; providing note-takers and recording devices, substituting one course for another, utilizing telephones with voice recognition, and using other adaptive software or hardware (U.S. Department of Education, 2011).

Despite postsecondary institutions being required to provide aids and services to disabled students, research reveals barriers in degree completion for students with disabilities (Carroll et al., 2020). The main discrepancy lies in the inaccessibility and lack of understanding of support services for disabled students by faculty and staff. While postsecondary institutions are not required to significantly modify essential requirements for disabled students (U.S. Department of Education, 2011), students with disabilities report their grades dropping due to attendance of medical appointments, needing technology in the classroom that is prohibited by faculty, and the requirement of timed assignments causing failing grades (Carroll et al., 2020). Institutional practices, including the effective training of faculty and staff, play a vital role in ensuring the proper implementation of support services for disabled students (Wessel et al., 2009).

Auxiliary Aids

Postsecondary institutions are responsible for providing auxiliary aids to support the academic success of students with a disability. Technology advancements have vastly improved the resource produced through educational activities and received by students with disabilities (U.S. Department of Education, 2021). While postsecondary institutions are not required to provide the most advanced aids, they have a requirement to give aids that most effectively meet the needs of students with disabilities. Institutions have the flexibility to choose the aids and services provided. Students must also agree upon aids to use after consultations. The U.S. Department of Education (2021) lists the following as postsecondary auxiliary aids for students

with disabilities:

- assistive listening devices

- assistive listening systems

- Braille calculators, printers, or typewriters

- calculators or keyboards with large buttons

- closed caption decoders

- electronic readers

- interpreters

- notetakers

- open and closed captioning

- reaching device for library use

- readers

- specialized gym equipment

- talking calculators

- taped texts

- telecommunications devices for deaf people

- telephone handset amplifiers

- television enlargers

- videotext displays

- voice synthesizer

Disability Support Services for Student Veterans

Institutions of higher education have an opportunity to provide a meaningful role in supporting students who have served in the U.S. military (Otter, 2012). Therefore, while all

institutions of higher education offer resources and support for students with disabilities, some services are specific to student veterans. The benefits include academic tutoring, career services, healthcare services, reasonable accommodations, and veteran-only courses (Otter, 2012). In addition, the assistance provided is designed to support veterans' transition into civilian life.

New Student Orientation

Postsecondary institutions provide orientations for new students. Orientations are designed specifically for student veterans. They walk incoming student veterans through the information necessary for their transition, including G.I. Bill benefits, veteran success centers, and other support services (Alschuler & Yarab, 2018). They also experience meeting other student veterans with similar experiences based upon military service.

Academic Tutoring

Many student veterans find that while attending higher education institutions, they need additional educational support in the form of tutoring (Ask Vetsfirst, n.d.). For this reason, many institutions are designing tutoring programs specific to student veterans. This includes providing priority registration for student veterans for tutoring sessions (Ask Vetsfirst, n.d.). In addition, if more intensive tutoring is needed, institutions can recommend students go through the Veterans Affairs office to obtain those services.

Veteran-Only Courses

Veteran-only courses are offered at some institutions to help student veterans more successfully begin and navigate through their higher education experience. Many of these courses are one-credit-hour introductory college courses (Alschuler & Yarab, 2018). These courses discuss disabilities, transitioning, and leveraging benefits. Some institutions also offer general requirement courses specific to veterans.

These courses are designed to help student veterans acclimate to higher education institutions. This student group often reports difficulty interacting with classmates who do not share the same experiences (U.S. Department of Education, 2011). Veteran-only courses help student veterans feel more included on campus. It also provides camaraderie with other veterans who have similar experiences.

Accommodations

Many experiences in the military have left veterans with memory-related and significant learning impairments (Wounded Warrior Project, 2021). Understanding how physical and mental injuries impact learning for student veterans, various accommodations at institutions of higher education are often provided. Several offices within institutions, including disability support services offices, ensure capacities are in place for student veterans. Outside of postsecondary auxiliary aids already being provided for students with disabilities, the following accommodations are offered to student veterans: Considerations of alternate courses for the foreign language requirement, extended time, readers and scribes for exam taking, modification of seating, furniture, or class location to ensure access, permission to tape-record classes, preferential seating, priority course enrollment, reduced distraction environment for exams, and use of a word processor for exams requiring significant writing (U.S. Department of Education, 2021).

Medical and Mental Health Services

Institutions of higher education provide medical and mental health services for students. However, student veterans face several health challenges compared to their traditional student peers. Therefore, institutions have increased the resources available to support student veterans. One way this has been accomplished is by partnering with the local Veteran Affairs locations to

ensure student veterans get veteran-focused medical and mental health services (Szitanyi, 2022).

Medical services provided by postsecondary institutions are provided to student veterans in the form of primary medical care. Care ranges from essential treatment of colds and viruses to conducting lab tests, X-rays, and more. While mental health resources vary by institution, many typically offer individual and group counseling sessions. Health and lifestyle programs are also provided to promote a holistic health approach (Szitanyi, 2022).

Summary

During the transition from military to civilian life, many veterans utilize their G.I. Bill benefits to pursue higher education. While this population brings a wealth of strengths to postsecondary institutions, many veterans must face challenges associated with this transition. Student veterans often deal with physical and mental disabilities that affect their success when enrolled in degree programs. Unfortunately, due to core beliefs and principles learned through the military, many student veterans choose not to seek help.

Understanding the support needed for student veterans, as well as their reluctance to seek help, postsecondary institutions are implementing auxiliary services and aids. It is their goal to ensure the inclusivity of the student veteran population. To be most effective, they also provide faculty and staff training, host events, communicate regularly, offer veteran courses, and more. Most of the assistance available to student veterans is provided through disability support services. Student veterans are responsible for seeking help and providing supporting documentation. Disability support services ensure that student veterans are protected by disability laws to address their needs and protect their rights.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenology is to explore the lived experiences of student veterans using disability support services at postsecondary institutions. This chapter is organized to clearly and concisely describe the methods used to conduct the research. Sections in this chapter include the following: Research design, research questions, settings and participants, researcher positionality, procedures, data collection plan, trustworthiness, and summary.

Research Design

This research aims to explore the perceptions and lived experiences of student veterans using disability support services at postsecondary institutions. A qualitative research design was employed to effectively investigate and analyze the experiences and perceptions of student veterans. Yilmaz (2013) defines qualitative research as an "emergent, inductive, interpretive, and naturalistic approach to the study of people, cases, phenomena, social situations, and processes in their natural settings to reveal in descriptive terms the meanings that people attach to their experiences with the world" (p. 312). Qualitative research uses a variety of methodologies, research strategies, methods, and theoretical paradigms to advise the study of a specific research problem. Open-ended questions are used to explain the "how" and "why" of processes and patterns of human behavior (McMillan, 2012).

Qualitative research allows participants to explain how, why, or what they were experiencing, feeling, and thinking during the phenomenon being studied. The researcher can facilitate the interpretation of the participant's experiences and metaphorically *step into the participant's shoes* to give an understanding of the phenomenon from their perspective

(Olekanma et al., 2022). Heidegger's (1927) work supported the view that a method lies in interpretation as the meaning of phenomenological description (p. 61). Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1945) clarified that the researcher's perspective creates interpretations of the studied phenomena. To avoid external inference made through interpretations, the participants' lived experiences must be described in all their purity (Giorgi, 1986).

A hermeneutic phenomenological design was used to seek an understanding of lived human experiences (Van Manen, 1990). Using a hermeneutic phenomenology study allows the researcher to reflect on fundamental themes that combine inherent features of lived experiences (Creswell, 2013). According to Wilson and Hutchinson (1991), the researcher's goal in conducting a hermeneutic phenomenology study is to understand the phenomenon by focusing on trivial aspects and illuminating details. Furthermore, Heidegger (1927/1962) emphasizes understanding as the primary form of human existence. This viewpoint is maintained through the belief that a person's background or history gives them methods and means to view the world (Koch, 1995). Through the methods and means of understanding, a person can determine what is 'real' (Laverty, 2003).

Crucial to understanding experiences and perceptions is the factor of interpretation. Heidegger (1927/1962) gave emphasis and importance to a person's background or history influencing the interpretation of their encounters. Hermeneutic phenomenology, therefore, attempts to find an understanding of the phenomenon through the utilization of an interpretive process (Annells, 1996). Interpretation permits the researcher to determine the intended or represented meanings of the phenomenon (Kvale, 1996). This claim was agreed upon by Gadamer (1960/1998), who stated that understanding occurs through interpreting.

According to Heidegger (1927; 1962), all understanding is associated with a specified or

stated set of fore-structures. These fore-structures, including background and history, cannot be excluded from consideration of the phenomenon. Therefore, the researcher must be cognizant and report these interpretive influences (Laverty, 2003). Questioning is also considered to be an essential factor when interpreting experiences and perceptions. To establish the meaning of someone's experiences or perceptions, questioning allows significant factors to pass into the researcher's thinking on the topic (Gadamer, 1960). Ultimately, interpretation and understanding are bound together through the evolving process of interpretation (Annells, 1996).

A hermeneutic phenomenology begins with the researcher self-reflecting on the assumptions and biases they have relating to the research topic. These assumptions and biases are essential to the interpretive process and must be embedded throughout the research (Laverty, 2003). Therefore, the researcher should continuously consider their position, based on their beliefs and experiences, and clearly explain how those factors relate to the research topic. Henceforth, the research can incorporate the assumptions, biases, and philosophical bases used for interpretation by the researcher (Allen, 1996; Cotterill & Letherby, 1993).

Research Questions

The focus of this study will be guided by the central research question and three sub-questions.

Central Research Question

What are the experiences of student veterans using disability support services at postsecondary institutions?

Sub-Question One

How do student veterans with disabilities describe their academic learning experiences?

Sub-Question Two

How do student veterans with disabilities describe the support provided by disability support services?

Sub-Question Three

How do student veterans with disabilities describe their personal and academic relationships?

<div align="center">

Setting and Participants

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Details about the site and participants used for this study will be outlined in this section. Sufficient detail will be provided so that the site can be visualized. The criterion for participation is provided to describe the profile of the participants. This information serves to give the limitations of the study.

Site

The setting of this study will be a large public university, Mountain Valley University, located in the south-central region of the United States. The university currently reports having a population of roughly 25,000 students, with approximately 2,000 student veterans. The university was selected because of its significant student veteran population. Mountain Valley University's support to student veterans includes providing credits for military training, assistance applying for and using military education benefits, scholarships for student veterans, and various services to their family members. The university also provides student veterans with a dedicated Military Student Success Center, student veteran orientation, veteran education counselors, G.I. Bill work-study opportunities, and access to numerous off-campus and community resources.

Participants

   The sample size for the study will be between 10 and 20 participants, which is deemed

sufficient for a phenomenology study (Ellis, 2016). Participants will be student veterans and staff

from the Military Student Success Center and Disability Support Services of Mountain Valley

University. A combination of purposive and snowball sampling will be used to select participants

for this study. Purposive sampling allows researchers to sample a group of people based on

specific criteria (Mikecz, 2012) with the expectation of becoming most informed on the research

problem (Creswell, 2013). If enough participants are not initially obtained, I will conduct

snowball sampling by asking existing participants to identify other potential participants. Student

veteran participation criteria will be the following:

- Previously deployed to a combat zone

- Currently using or previously used disability support services

- Currently using or previously used Military Student Success Center

The criteria for staff participants will be the following:

- Currently employed by Mountain Valley University

- Experience working with student veterans

<p align="center">Researcher Positionality</p>

   For the past 13 years, I have worked in the United States Army Reserve. For

approximately 10 of those years, I served as a military education counselor. The military has had

a significant impact on my military and civilian careers, as well as my educational endeavors. I

have been exposed to this population's challenges when pursuing higher education in all my

roles. I am dedicated to aiding veterans' success, ensuring awareness is brought to their specific

needs, and determining which forms of services and support are most effective for their

accomplishments. If issues supporting student veterans are found through my research study, I intend to bring awareness to these issues to create purposive change.

Interpretive Framework

The motivation for conducting this study is based on a critical research paradigm. This paradigm operates from the perspective that scientific investigation should be performed with the aim of social change (DeCarlo, 2018). Certain studies within this paradigm focus on understanding people's real-life experiences. Through these studies, the goal is to foster positive change for the research participants and the systems being studied (DeCarlo, 2018). Subjective meanings of people's experiences are developed, guiding the researcher to focus on the complexity of all viewpoints (Creswell, 2013). Furthermore, practice and theory will be combined to create actual change from theoretical development.

Philosophical Assumptions

The philosophical assumptions I intend to provide in this research study are ontological, epistemological, and axiological. Using these assumptions will guide my research by informing my choice of theories (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The research questions will be designed to expose the nature of reality concerning the research topic. The research questions frame knowledge and establish how knowledge claims are justified.

Ontological Assumption

The ontological assumption will focus on finding out the reality of student veterans' experiences while reducing personal bias. Individual interviews, focus groups, and letter-writing will be used to interpret the thoughts, perceptions, and meanings of participants' experiences. Themes and subthemes will be developed from the data collected, aimed at reporting the multiple realities gained from participants (Creswell, 2013). The result of this research will

provide a comprehensive view of student veterans' experiences and perspectives that can be shared with other participants, researchers, and readers (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Epistemological Assumption

According to Creswell (2013), subjective evidence can be assembled by getting as close to the participants as possible. In addition, getting close to the participants will allow *distance* or *objective separateness* during data collection to be decreased between the participants and the researcher (Lincoln et al., 1988). A close relationship with participants allows the researcher to understand and explain the experiences of student veterans most effectively. A reliance will be made on quotes, as well as spending time with participants to obtain their individual views (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Axiological Assumption

Being a student veteran, I have been influenced by my personal experiences and thoughts on the value of the military and the role of higher education. The biases and values I possess will be actively reported. This will be provided in conjunction with the information gathered from participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). My presence will be made available by ensuring that the experiences presented represent an interpretation of both the participants and me (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Researcher's Role

My role in this study is to use my personal experiences as a guide to gain insight into the participant's experiences. First, I will personally collect all data through interviews, focus groups, and letter-writing prompts. Next, I will analyze all the data collected. Triangulation and reflexivity will be used to prevent researcher biases, effectively interpret the data, and support the trustworthiness of the data.

My personal experiences and the interpretive framework will allow me to conduct a thorough investigation into the challenges possessed by veteran students if disability support services play a role in student veterans' educational successes and the most significant resources that enable the academic achievements of student veterans. Second, I will be honest and forthcoming about my role in the research, as it can affect data collection, trustworthiness, and validity. Third, I will actively listen to the experiences and input of the participants. The expectation is that while there will be several similarities between the incidents, there will also be many differences, as every veteran student has been impacted differently based on their combat experience. Lastly, I will address information that can alter the data's assembly, investigation, or explanation (Allen, 2015).

Procedures

Approval to conduct research will first be obtained by Mountain Valley University. After gaining this approval, the Institutional Review Board (IRB) application will be submitted to Liberty University. Upon receiving IRB approval, participants will be recruited using flyers posted throughout Mountain Valley University's campus and on their social media websites. Potential participants agreeing to engage in the study will then be provided with consent forms detailing the purpose of the study, confidentiality, and withdrawal rights. If the desired sample is not reached, participants will be asked to refer others who qualify and are interested in participating in the study. A research flyer will be emailed or mailed directly to each referral.

Upon receiving consent forms, each participant will be contacted to schedule individual interviews. During the scheduling of interviews, predesignated locations will be selected by the participants. Two focus groups, one consisting of student veterans, and the other with staff, will be scheduled with participants after the completion of individual interviews. Interviews and

focus groups will be semi-structured with open-ended questions. Follow-up questions will be used based on clarification needed. Each session will be audio recorded, transcribed, and sent to participants to clarify and validate responses provided to the researcher (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In addition, letter writing with two different prompts will be provided, one to student veterans and the other to staff participants, with a specified turn-in date to be returned to the researcher.

Permissions

IRB approval will first be received from Liberty University (Appendix A). Next, IRB approval will be received from Mountain Valley University before the recruitment of participants begins. Permission from the Texas Public Information Act will also be granted for access to email addresses of student veterans at Mountain Valley University. Then, permission to post flyers on campus (Appendix B) and on social media (Appendix C) will be obtained from the Disability Support Services Office and the Military Student Success Center at Mountain Valley University. Next, I will ensure consent forms (Appendix D) are signed and received from participants. After obtaining all permissions, data collection will commence.

Recruitment Plan

Student veterans and staff members at Mountain Valley University will make up the pooled sample used for the study. Purposive and snowball sampling will be used to select and recruit participants for the study. Student veterans must have combat experience, be diagnosed with disabilities, and have used disability support services. Staff participants will be based on experience working directly with student veterans in the Disability Support Services Office or Military Student Success Center at Mountain Valley University. Purposive sampling will rely on my knowledge and judgment to select participants for the study (Palinkas et al., 2015). Snowball sampling will allow participants to assist in identifying other potential participants.

Recruitment flyers will be posted on campus and social media, adhering to IRB and Mountain Valley University permissions. Recruitment will also include flyers being emailed or mailed to potential participants suggested by participants who will have already completed consent forms. All participants will have to sign and turn in consent forms. Participants will be allowed to examine the consent form and ask questions. A combination of ten participants will be selected, using staff participants and student veteran participants.

Data Collection Plan

Data collection methods will consist of semi-structured individual interviews (Appendix E), focus groups (Appendix F), and letter-writing prompts (Appendix G). Semi-structured interviews will allow the researcher to gain detailed views, insightful explanations, and associated reasoning to answer the research question (Lee & Saunders, 2017). Focus groups will draw upon the participants' attitudes, beliefs, experiences, and feelings. Finally, letter-writing prompts complement the individual interviews, enriching the participants' perspectives.

Individual Interviews Data Collection Approach

Individual interviews will be used as the first data collection method. Interviews with open-ended questions will permit the participants to provide in-depth perceptions and experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Interview questions will be piloted first (Neuman, 2012) to ensure that appropriate data relevant to the study can be acquired. These questions will be piloted on one to two individuals who will not be participating in the study but possess experience with the researched phenomenon. Based on responses from the pilot interview, questions will be revised. The researcher will ensure interview questions are modified to stimulate comprehensive explanations and perceptions centered solely on the research topic.

Semi-structured interviews using open-ended questions will be used with each student

veteran participating in the study. Questions will be used to perceive student veterans' challenges and the institution's support and services. Additional questions will be asked to explain further or clarify previously supplied answers. Audio recordings and notes will be taken during interviews.

Individual Interview Questions

1. Please tell me about yourself. SQ1

2. Please tell me about your experience transitioning from the military to becoming a student veteran. SQ1

3. How do you think your military experience impacted your student veteran experience? SQ1

4. How do you think your disabilities have challenged you as a student veteran? SQ1

5. How did you learn about services provided by the Disability Support Services Office? CRQ

6. What was your experience when signing up for disability support services? CRQ

7. What services have you used through the Disability Support Services Office? CRQ

8. What services have been most helpful to you from the Disability Support Services Office? SQ2

9. How does your institution communicate veterans' programs, policies, support, and services? SQ2

10. What relationships with family, peers, and professors, have you found helpful as a student veteran? SQ3

11. How have personal and academic relationships influenced or aided you in succeeding academically? SQ3

12. What were your experiences using transition support services (i.e., veteran orientation,

veteran transition courses, veteran academic degree programs, etc.)? CRQ

13. What additional services should your institution provide to student veterans with disabilities? CRQ

14. What else would you like to add to our discussion of your experiences as a student veteran with disabilities that we haven't discussed? CRQ

Question one begins with a grand tour question, developing rapport with the participant and setting a tone for the elicitation of subsequent answers (Marshall & Rossman, 2014). Questions two through four produce information on the military service history of the participants and the impact it has on academic performance. Physical and mental health injuries sustained during combat pose significant threats to achieving a positive life after war (Kinney et al., 2021). Questions four through eight address the problem statement and focuses on the participant's knowledge and utilization of disability support services provided by their postsecondary institution. The purpose of questions nine through 13 is to determine the types of support provided to student veterans and the impact that sponsorship has on their academic performance (Vacchi et al., 2017). The final question, 14, seeks the perspective and awareness of additional services and experiences essential to the research (Rosenthal, 2016).

Individual Interview Data Analysis Plan

After transcribing the data, I plan to analyze it by reading it in its entirety, numerous times. By immersing myself in the details of the data, I will be able to obtain a perception of the entire interview prior to segmenting it into parts (Agar, 1980). Memoing will then be completed to identify key concepts, ideas, and phrases (Saldana, 2021). Coding of the data, in a meaningful and systematic manner, will occur by hand initially and then through the utilization of a software program (Gibbs, 2007). The codes will be worked through to either modify existing codes or

generate new ones (Saldana, 2021). General concepts and patterns will be identified as themes and organized into broader themes. Data will be organized to determine the exact number of themes and subthemes (Braun & Clarke 2006).

Focus Groups Data Collection Approach

After the completion of individual interviews, a focus group session will be scheduled for staff participants. A discussion will be facilitated with staff participants regarding disability support services for student veterans, including personal experiences and experiences and perceptions provided to them by student veterans. Focus group questions will be open-ended and include questions based on responses provided during individual interviews. Questions will be oriented towards opening a new perspective and gaining insight (Hoffding & Martiny, 2016) on disability support services for student veterans. Using focus groups as a data collection method will add to the quality of collected data by allowing the researcher to acquire clear feelings and perceptions of participants, which may be atypical of responses received during individual interviews (Carey & Asbury, 2016). Furthermore, the focus groups will allow me, as the researcher, to witness and annotate the unfiltered dynamic of each group as they respond to the questions.

Focus Group Questions for Staff

1. What forms of support do student veterans need to be academically successful? SQ1

2. How is information on disability support services, provided by the institution, relayed to student veterans? CRQ

3. What hesitations, if any, do student veterans have about using disability support services? CRQ

4. What is the most challenging part of student veterans registering for disability support

services? CRQ

5. Which disability support services do student veterans have the most academic success with? CRQ

6. How do disability support services impact the academic performance of student veterans? CRQ

7. How do interactions with family, friends, and peers impact the academic success of student veterans? SQ3

8. How do interactions with faculty and staff impact the academic success of student veterans? SQ3

9. What additional services do you suggest can be provided for student veterans with disabilities? CRQ

10. Is there any additional information relating to your utilization of disability support services as a student veteran that you would like to share?

Although there were two separate focus groups, the questions are aligned with one another. Question one refers to the purpose of the study, focusing on the need of student veterans to use disability support services. Questions two through six address the experiences of the student veteran using disability support services relating directly to the central research question. Questions seven and eight focus on personal and academic relationships impacting the academic performance of student veterans. Questions nine and ten seek the perspective and awareness of additional services and experiences essential to the research (Rosenthal, 2016).

Focus Groups Data Analysis Plan

The data will be transcribed and then I will analyze it by reading it in its entirety, numerous times. By immersing myself in the details of the data, I will be able to obtain a

perception of the entire interview prior to segmenting it into parts (Agar, 1980). Memoing will then be completed by identifying key concepts, ideas, and phrases will be completed (Saldana, 2021). Coding of the data, in a meaningful and systematic manner, will occur by hand initially and then through the utilization of a software program (Gibbs, 2007). General concepts and patterns will be identified as themes and organized into broader themes. Themes and subthemes from the focus groups will be paired with data from the individual interviews to determine if they align with one another.

Letter-Writing Data Collection Approach

A letter-writing prompt will be emailed to the participants following the focus groups. The prompts will focus on student veterans sharing what advice they would give themselves if they could return to their first day of post-secondary education. Letters provide an account of participants, make meanings of their experiences, and attempt to establish and maintain relationships among the participants themselves, their experience, and the experience of another (Clandinin & Connelly, 1998). Participants will be given two weeks to draft, edit, and submit the letters. Due to its non-immediacy and quasi-anonymity, letter writing provides an emotional safety zone for the participants (Stamper, 2020).

Letter-Writing Prompt for Student Veterans

If you could go back to your first day of postsecondary education, what advice would you give yourself about the following:

- Challenges you may experience due to your disabilities

- The role of interactions on academic performance

- Your experiences using disability support services

- Support provided through disability support services

Letter-Writing Data Analysis

I will read each letter several times, to analyze them and identify key concepts, ideas, and phrases (Saldana, 2021). Coding of the data will occur by hand initially and then through the utilization of a software program (Gibbs, 2007). To modify existing codes or generate new ones, the codes will be worked through (Saldana, 2021). Themes and subthemes will then be identified. Finally, themes will be matched with data collected and analyzed from the individual interviews and focus groups to determine if they align with one another.

Data Synthesis

Analysis of the data is projected to last between six to eight weeks. During this time frame, my sole responsibility as the researcher will be to analyze and interpret the qualitative data acquired from participants. I will begin by identifying and connecting the data to the research questions. Next, data will be managed and organized as collected, and codes will be generated to represent the data. Next, data will be annotated by labeling relevant sections, phrases, words, and sentences with codes (Canary, 2019). After initial coding is completed, focused coding will begin to group coded text into more significant segments. Codes will then be collated to determine an overarching idea to organize the essential words and phrases identified as themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Analytical and descriptive themes will be generated and developed. Categories and subcategories will then be used to group the codes and align data with specific themes. The segmentation of themes will follow the alignment of data. Types will be labeled, and connections between each category will be described (Canary, 2019). Categories will then be ranked in importance when specific themes are found to be more critical than others. Once interpretations are developed, a visual interpretation of the data will be presented.

Trustworthiness

In quantitative research, instruments are utilized to establish reliability and validity metrics. Since qualitative research does not use these same instruments, it is essential to establish the trustworthiness of the findings. According to Sandelowski (1993), the researcher is viewed as using practices to make the research audible and visible, making trustworthiness a matter of persuasion. Trustworthiness in qualitative research comprises credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. All trustworthiness components have different meanings and implications for the value and precision of the study.

Credibility

Confidence in the facts of the research findings defines credibility. Credibility determines whether the correct interpretation of the participants' original views is confirmed through plausible information represented through the research findings (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). The credibility of my research will be based upon a combination of triangulation, reflective commentary, and member checking. I will develop familiarity with the research topic through document analysis. The significance of the documents is based upon establishing the conceptual framework, accuracy, authenticity, comprehensiveness, credibility, representativeness of the data, original purpose, and the target audience (Korstjens & Moser, 2018).

Individual interview and focus group questions will be well-written, comprehensive, concise, and pertain to the research problem to accurately determine the challenges and support experienced by the participants. A rapport will be established with each participant, and tactics will be used to encourage the participants to be honest. Member-checking will be performed by returning data collected to participants to ensure the findings resonate with the recollection of their experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Reflective commentary will be used throughout the

research to evaluate the investigation as it develops. This will enable me to monitor the

considerations of research I deem critical in establishing credibility.

Transferability

Transferability is the degree to which research results can be transferred to other settings

or contexts (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). It is completed through the use of thick descriptions. To

ensure the transferability of my findings, extensive descriptions will be used to account for the

experiences of student veterans at postsecondary institutions and the research settings used.

While I cannot assure transferability, I intend to provide evidence through data collection,

collection, making the findings applicable (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Dependability

Dependability is based on the stability of the research findings over time. Participants

evaluate the findings, interpretations, and recommendations, ensuring the data they receive is

adequately supported and, therefore, dependable (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Comprehensive

descriptions of each research component will be provided, allowing the study to be replicated. A

thorough review of the procedures will be performed through an inquiry audit. When a

researcher can follow the decision trail, the findings and the study are auditable (Sandelowski,

1993). Furthermore, Koch (1994) argued that dependability is based on another researcher with

the same data, situation, and perspectives to obtain similar or exact conclusions.

Confirmability

When other researchers can confirm the findings of the research study, confirmability is

acquired (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Confirmability establishes that interpretations of the

findings are derived from the data. An audit trail will be created to ensure the data collected,

procedures analyzed data, and the final report can be correctly traced (Shenton, 2004). Data

triangulation will be employed, using individual interviews, focus groups, and letter-writing prompts. Additionally, I will systematically attend to the collection of knowledge in the responsibility of this study.

Ensuring reflexivity will entail keeping a journal with notes about my ideas, thoughts, and questions as they arose during my data analysis and coding of the data. In keeping these notes, I will separate my bias from the context of the findings in this study. However, I will ensure to include my reflections on the research topic while keeping my perspectives open to the factors and resources identified as critical to student veterans' success. I will also have to ensure that all participant voices are accurately reflected in the data to deflect any bias or preconceived notions (Shenton, 2004).

Ethical Considerations

To ensure ethical consideration, IRB approval is required and essential to the study. Participants will be guaranteed confidentiality guaranteed in consent forms (Appendix A) and stated by the researcher. Through both methods, the participants will be informed of the voluntary nature of their participation and their right to withdraw from the study at any time (Shenton, 2004). Pseudonyms will be used to protect the identity of both the participant and the interview site. Electronic and physical data will be stored in secured locations to maintain privacy and effectively address ethical considerations. A locked filing cabinet will keep physical notes, letters, and files. Data files will be stored with password protection on the computer.

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Summary

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A hermeneutic phenomenological study was chosen to understand the utilization and impact of disability support services on the academic performance of student veterans. After receiving site and IRB approvals, purposive and snowball sampling will be used to recruit

student veterans and staff members from a postsecondary institution in the south-central region of the United States. After volunteering, participants will be informed of the research purpose, ensured confidentiality, provided consent to participate, and notified of the option to withdraw from the study at any time. Data collection methods will include individual interviews, focus groups, and letter-writing prompts. After data is collected, various techniques will be employed to analyze and interpret it. All components of trustworthiness will be used to verify the reliability and validity of the research.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of student veterans using disability support services at Mountain Valley University. The perspective for this study was derived primarily from student veterans using disability support services, as well as from university staff who serve this non-traditional student population. Prior research establishes the significant need for proper support for student veterans at postsecondary institutions (DiRamio et al., 2008; Livingston et al., 2011; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010). This chapter includes descriptions of participants, themes, subthemes, and responses to research questions.

Participants

Before obtaining research participants, IRB approval from Mountain Valley University, as well as approval from the Texas Public Information Act was attained. Ten participants were acquired for this study through purposive sampling. The sample consists of three staff participants, four undergraduate and three graduate student veteran participants. All participants have either worked at or attended the institution in the previous five years.

Samantha

Samantha has been working with Mountain Valley University for 15 years. She has worked in the Disability Services office since she began her employment with the institution. Samantha provided an abundance of experience and knowledge from her time servicing student veterans with disabilities. She is dedicated to the mission of helping student veterans.

Rachel

Rachel currently serves as the Assistant Director of the Disability Support office at Mountain Valley University. She has been working with disability services for the previous 10

years. Rachel was able to provide various experiences she encountered with student veterans and felt a sense of belonging from the praise and recognition she received from student veterans for her hard work.

Claire

Claire has only served one year with the Disability Services office in the role as Director. She feels that she is still learning new things on a daily basis. She is excited for the future plans the institution has made to further support student veterans. Claire is grateful for the sacrifice made by student veterans and the opportunity she gets to work directly with them.

Table 1

Staff Participant Demographics

Staff	Department/Office	Position	Years of Experience
Samantha	Center for Accommodations and Support Services	Administrative Assistant	Fifteen Years
Rachel	Center for Accommodations and Support Services	Assistant Director	Ten Years
Claire	Center for Accommodations and Support Services	Director	Two years

Benjamin

Benjamin spent seven years enlisted in the U.S. Army, while being deployed twice. After leaving the military due to medical reasons, he decided to pursue higher education. He wanted to obtain his college degree in order to land a job that would allow him to efficiently take care of his family. He completed a Bachelor of Science degree at Mountain Valley University. He is grateful for the opportunity to get his degree and the support provided by the institution.

Joseph

Education has always been a priority for Joseph. He enlisted in the U.S. Army with the goal of getting a Bachelor's degree. After 10 years of service, Joseph was discharged due to medical issues after two deployments. Joseph wanted to use his G.I. Bill to get his Master's degree. He completed a Master of Business Administration degree at Mountain Valley University. Joseph acknowledged both academic and non-academic relationships as being his main form of motivation while enrolled.

Elizabeth

Elizabeth is a military spouse and mother of two young sons. She had attended a university directly after graduating high school, but left college to join the U.S. Air Force. After completing a four year tour, with one deployment, she wanted to get out in order to focus on her family. She joined the U.S. Air Force Reserves and decided to complete her degree program in nursing.

Nancy

Nancy is a single mother who spent the last fourteen years in the U.S. Army Reserves. She has been deployed two times. Nancy is currently enrolled at Mountain Valley University obtaining her Master of Arts degree in Human Resources Management. She appreciates all the support she has received from institutional faculty and staff. It has made her time pursuing higher education more enjoyable.

Tracey

Tracey is a retiree who spent 21 years in the U.S. Air Force. During her tenure on Active Duty, she was deployed twice. Now that she is able to spend more time focusing on education, she is following her long time goal of getting a Philosophy Degree in Clinical Psychology. She

wants to show her children that it is never too late to achieve your dreams. Tracey is passionate about helping others, similar to the help she has received from others.

Gilbert

Gilbert decided to enlist in the U.S. Navy after graduating from high school. He deployed once during his six years in the Navy before getting out and returning home. He and his wife decided to go to college together at Mountain Valley University. They are very supportive of each other. Gilbert is currently pursuing a Bachelor of Arts degree in Business Administration.

Maureen

Maureen and her husband Gilbert met in high school and decided to enlist together in the U.S. Navy. During her time in the military, Maureen deployed once. After her husband and she decided to leave the military, they decided to venture on another journey together at Mountain Valley University. Maureen is currently getting a Bachelor's degree in Marketing. She is excited about sharing this experience with her spouse.

Table 2

Student Veteran Participant Demographics

| Student Veteran	Branch of Service	Degree Program	Degree Status
Benjamin	Army	Bachelor of Science in Psychology	Graduated
Joseph	Army	Master of Business Administration	Graduated
Elizabeth	Air Force	Bachelor of Science in Nursing	Graduated
Nancy	Army	Master of Arts in Human Resources Management	Currently Enrolled

Tracey	Air Force	Philosophy Degree in Clinical Psychology	Currently Enrolled
Gilbert	Navy	Bachelor of Arts in Business Administration	Currently Enrolled
Maureen	Navy	Bachelor of Arts in Marketing	Currently Enrolled

Results

The themes and subthemes of the research are presented based on the analysis of the qualitative data. They provide the perspective of both student veterans and the staff that work directly to support them. The phenomenon was analyzed from different perspectives, which identified units of meanings that were clustered into themes to form textural descriptions (Neubauer et al., 2019, p.93). The themes presented are *institutional support*, *influences of personal factors* and *impact of relationships*. The subthemes are *transfer credit, early registration, military instilled values, willingness to seek help, academic interactions* and *non-academic interactions*. To provide a visual form of data, a diagrammatic representation of the themes and subthemes has been created.

Figure 2

Themes and Subthemes of Student Veterans using Disability Support Services
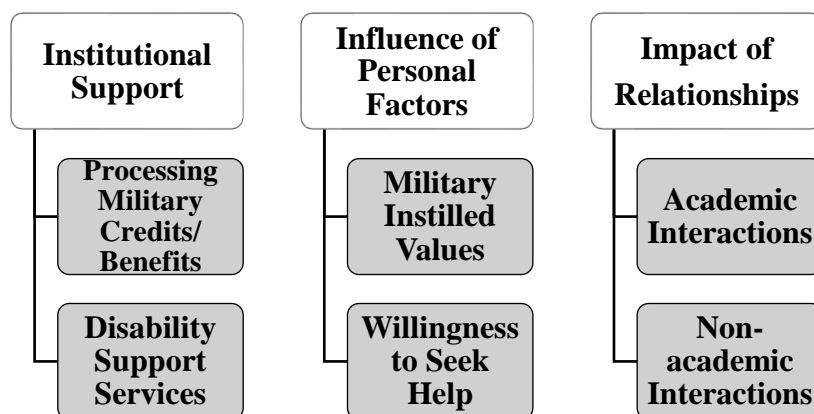
Institutional Support

Since the student veteran population increased significantly with the creation of the Post 9/11 G.I. Bill, research illustrated the substantial need for efficient support for student veterans at postsecondary institutions. Therefore, institutions of higher education have implemented changes to accommodate this population of students. Their accommodations include providing college credit for military training, processing of G.I. Bill benefits, and early registration for student veterans. Disability support services are also available for over 50% of GWOT veterans enrolled at institutions of higher education. Overall, the student veterans acknowledged how support provided by the institution made their experience less physically and mentally daunting.

Processing Military Credits/Benefits

When explaining their experiences transitioning from the military to becoming a student veteran, participants recognized that *institutional support* began shortly after applying to Mountain Valley University. Support included *processing military credits/ benefits*, with student veterans receiving college credit from their military training and assistance processing their G.I. Bill benefits. Student veteran participants were grateful for getting credit for their military training, which meant they would be spending less time completing their degree requirements. Gilbert appreciated the "load lifted off of me knowing that my G.I. Bill benefits would be handled by the school." The institution also provides early registration each semester for student veterans to ensure they are enrolled in courses in a timely manner. According to Nancy, "I felt the institution was prioritizing me" by assisting with all these aspects.

Disability Support Services

Disability support services for veterans at Mountain Valley University were provided by the Disability Services and Military Center offices. When disclosing their experiences signing up

for disability support services, participants posited student veterans are responsible for requesting specific disability support services each semester. No student veteran participant voiced any complaints or concerns regarding having to request these services periodically. The staff participants provided a comprehensive list of disability support services most used by student veterans: Accommodation of absences from class, providing more time for exams and assignments, memory aids, early registration, tutoring services, computer lab/veterans' lounge, and trigger recall tools. All participants, staff, and student veterans, recognized the positive impact to the success of student veterans who used the services.

Benjamin provided experiences of using the GLEAN note-taking app "designed to transcribe quickly" and the Life Scribe Pen that "records lectures while taking notes". The assistance gained from these devices allowed him to go back and listen to lectures at a time convenient for him. He was able to ensure he did not miss any important information provided in his classes, resulting in him receiving better grades. Tracey appreciated having additional time for her exams which helped reduce her anxiety. Elizabeth and Joseph were appreciative of the "transportation system that takes student veterans to their parking spot and other locations", as well as "parking passes that allow us to park closer to our classrooms". The transportation system decreased the physical challenges faced by student veterans.

In an effort to further assist student veterans choosing to use disability support services, Rachel stated that the institution provides a web link which "is available 24/7 to request appointments/accommodations through phone or computer." Samantha spoke about the hybrid model used by Disability Services to provide privacy for meetings, as well as extended operating hours which provide student veterans the opportunity to come take proctored exams. Tracey described her experiences using the web link as "easy and convenient." Gilbert recalled

appreciating the "privacy and discretion provided during my meetings with my disability services counselor." After initially using disability support services, student veteran participants had an increased aspiration to use these services in the future, when needed.

The use of disability support services was more favorable for student veterans when they used the services sooner in their enrollment rather than later. Elizabeth stated,

I didn't start using disability support services until my second year at school. I am grateful for the services available, but I wish I had found out about them and started using them as soon as I began taking classes.

If Tracey could go back to her first day of postsecondary education, she would advise herself to

Find out as much information about services for disabled veterans as possible and begin using those services immediately to make certain that I would be as successful as possible at "Mountain Valley University". Since I didn't start using disability services initially when starting school, I feel like I missed out on additional support available to me. This support would have helped me transition better into my new role as a student.

When discussing additional services that should be provided for student veterans with disabilities, Claire provided plans for the institution to install privacy pods located within the CASS office "intended for providing Military Sexual Trauma (MST) counseling and care department services." "The institution wants to make sure they are doing everything within their power to take care of the veterans who have already sacrificed so much," she concluded.

Influence of Personal Factors

Influence of personal factors, the second theme presented in this study, was deemed a theme due to its impact upon ideals, decisions and actions taken by student veterans. This includes personal values and beliefs derived from military service. When asked how military

experience impacted their student veteran experience, all student veteran participants unanimously claimed that their military values significantly impacted their academic experiences. Personal factors also determined the lack of willingness of student veterans to seek assistance for their disabilities. Samantha stated that when assisting student veterans for the past 15 years in the Disability Services office, student veterans are more successful "the more support they have." "They need to know they have support; people to listen to them and help them when needed," she established.

Military Values

This subtheme emerged when participants were asked how military experiences impacted the student veteran experience. *Military values* were credited for the discipline, resiliency, hard work, integrity, and respect each student veteran exhibited while enrolled at the institution. Student veterans exhibited pride in their service and explained how their military values influenced their capabilities as student veterans. According to Benjamin, "My military values kept me disciplined. Everything I learned from the military made it very easy to transition. This included being to class on time, turning in assignments, and treatment of classmates." Joseph stated, "The military made me more resilient. Other students who were non-military got bombarded and overwhelmed. The military teaches you to get the mission accomplished." Tracey had previously begun college before entering the military. She believed "the military matured me and made me more focused. I had more goals and took school more seriously than I did before." Maureen asserted that the military "allowed me to be able to multitask and manage several tasks at one time." Ultimately, military values provided several positive aspects of aid to student veterans in their transition, as well as throughout their academic pursuits at Mountain Valley University.

Willingness to Seek Help for Disabilities

This subtheme explains why student veterans are unwilling to seek help for their disabilities, and how this unwillingness has led to the main hindrance to their success at Mountain Valley University. Without receiving assistance for their disabilities, student veterans felt triggered, distracted, and anxious. Student veterans acknowledged that their military experiences, along with the challenges from their disabilities, led to their lack of willingness to seek help. According to Rachel,

> Student veterans have a hard time disclosing they have a disability. This is because they either don't want to ask for help or they believe help is not available. However, once they realize they can get help, they are good.

Claire believes that student veterans' "perception of their abilities/disabilities" hinders them from choosing to seek help. Samantha agreed with statements made by her two co-workers and added that student veterans feel more confident seeking help when they know that "assistance will not be part of their permanent record" and "everything is confidential and they won't be judged."

Several student veterans looked for help only after having a challenge with their disability prompted it. Benjamin was use to a military culture where "you don't ask for help because you will be perceived as weak." It was not until he experienced triggers at the institution that he was prompted to seek assistance for his disabilities. He recounted

> When I went into the courtyard one day, music was playing, students were yelling and there were loud sounds surrounding me. The DJ played gun sounds and there were games with cannons. Everything around me was triggering me. The sounds took me back to a war zone and the memories I had during that time. I had to sit down and realize where I was at.

 Like Benjamin, Tracey began searching for disability support services only after having increased anxiety. "Shortly after beginning school, I was unable to sleep throughout the night and I began having panic attacks." These were signs for Tracey that she was overwhelmed and needed to figure out how to get the proper support to decrease her anxiety. Benjamin and Tracey both acknowledged that they had difficulty recognizing they would need support for their disabilities. Tracey stated

> I thought I had everything under control and would not need any help. Going to college seemed way easier than being in the military. Not realizing I needed the help hindered me from seeking and receiving assistance before it was too late and I began having anxiety I needed help controlling.

Impact of Relationships

The theme of *impact of relationships* was most referenced from analyzed data on participants' experiences. When asked how interactions with faculty, staff, family, friends, and peers impacted the academic success of student veterans, all participants considered support from these relationships as having the most positive impact on their higher education experiences. Each student veteran participant felt fulfillment from the *academic interactions* and *non-academic interactions* they experienced. All participants acknowledged the role these interactions play in keeping student veterans motivated and determined to complete their degree requirements. All staff participants shared praise they received previously from student veterans regarding the support the student veterans obtained from the institution during their academic pursuits. Student veterans also praised their various interactions as creating the foundation of inspiration needed to successfully complete their academic pursuits.

Academic Interactions

The data exhibits *academic interactions* were essential to producing an accommodating

atmosphere for student veterans, making them feel more comfortable, supported and motivated. According to Gilbert,

> I felt support from a couple of my professors sharing their experiences of being a veteran. This created a bond and motivated me knowing that my professors have a similar lifestyle. It makes you feel more comfortable talking to them, attending their classes, and seeking advice on how to navigate college.

Gilbert felt a sense of belonging from professors and a willingness from them to help him foster his abilities. Elizabeth gained appreciation and patience from her professors after she informed all of them that she is currently an Air Force Reservist, as well as a disabled veteran, who could be called to duty at any time. Maureen found comfort in knowing that other veterans, whether professors or students, could relate to her because "no one can understand what you have been through and the people who you lost in combat; signing up to give your life away for your country." Benjamin stated received support from most professors who were "willing to accommodate me due to their respect for my service to our country." He also appreciated the senior student veterans he met on campus that "showed me how to use my G.I. Bill, gave me life advice, and grew lifetime bonds with that started at the school." Nancy mentioned being motivated when "seeing other student veterans with their support animals on campus." Additionally, Claire verified that many student veterans were motivated knowing "the President of Student Services is a veteran herself."

Non-academic Interactions

Non-academic interactions were also as impactful as *academic interactions*. Joseph understood the sacrifice that his family made when he decided to return to an institution of higher education, after being an Active Duty Soldier for so many years previously. He

appreciated his wife taking on the responsibility of "stepping up and providing more support for the household" while he was concentrating on his degree. "My family was consistently praising me for my hard work and dedication to my schoolwork. They encouraged me to keep going with my studies until I had completed them." Gilbert and Maureen are a married couple who decided to enroll at the institution together after their active duty service in the Navy. "This is the greatest and most supportive experience to enroll as husband and wife at the same school, because we are able to relate to one another and support each other better that way" Maureen stated. Overall, each student veteran participant shared commonalities in the support provided from their non-academic interactions, as well as the positive effects of that support.

Outlier Data and Findings

Outlier data and findings emerged during my study. They consist of: *Lack of diversity in communication methods for disability support services*, *micro-aggressions of non-military faculty*, and *veteran proactiveness*.

Lack of Diversity in Communication Methods for Disability Support Services

When asked to suggest additional services that Mountain Valley University can provide to student veterans, participants suggested the institution needs to find alternative ways to communicate with student veterans. The consensus for the student veteran participants was that different and more effective communicative methods would have motivated them to be more inclined to use disability support services. All student veteran participants agreed that they received several emails throughout each semester as the main means of communication. According to Elizabeth, she felt inundated by all the emails that were sent by the Disability Services and Military Center offices. She rarely checked these emails and later realized how much information she missed. "Many times, I would overlook the emails they sent and tell

myself I didn't have time or would not prioritize it when I should have," Elizabeth stated.

Maureen attended a new student orientation but didn't "remember hearing about disability

support services." She stated, "New student orientation had several teenagers. It didn't feel

personal." Maureen suggested that the institution offer new student orientation specific to student

veterans that expanded upon disability support services available to them. In doing so, student

veterans would not have to rely on emails to obtain all the information pertaining to disability

support services.

Micro-aggressions of Non-military Faculty

When uncovering relationships with professors, a couple of the student veteran

participants shared their experiences with micro-aggressions by non-military faculty. These

experiences made the student veterans uncomfortable and negatively impacted their higher

education experience. Tracey recalled a professor "laughing about inappropriate things as it

pertained to veterans." The professor failed to ask if anyone in the room was a veteran. She

found that the professor's approach to veteran topics was insensitive. Tracey suggested

sensitivity training for faculty and staff. Joseph suggested that the institution do more to "ensure

the privacy of veterans unless they want to share." Having to self-identify in front of the class

when introducing himself made him feel that he would have been treated differently after doing

so. He was uncomfortable when asked the "tell us about yourself" prompt. "When discussing

current or past events, world affairs, they would single out opinions from veterans, which made

me feel overwhelmed [sic]," he stated. The micro-aggressions exhibited by professors were

discouraging and distracting to student veterans.

Veteran Proactiveness

When prompted to give themselves advice if they could go back to their first day of

postsecondary education, half of the student veteran participants wrote they would be more proactive. Gilbert and Maureen choose to keep to themselves as a married couple initially when beginning their academic pursuit at the institution. "I wish I would have taken more time to research opportunities for student veterans instead of expecting people to freely provide information," Maureen stated. Gilbert agreed claiming, "I wish I would have asked more questions and been more proactive." Although Tracey is almost finished with her degree program, looking back, she

> Would have sought more positive interactions with classmates to build my network and enhance my understanding. Having different perspectives allows for deeper understanding of a topic and gives a "real life" view which is what I value in some cases more than the academic outlook.

Research Question Responses

Four research questions were used to guide this study. The participants provided perspectives on the experiences of student veterans using disability support services at postsecondary institutions. The subthemes encompassed their ideologies on academic learning experiences, support from disability support services, and personal and academic relationships of student veterans. While ten different viewpoints were annotated, the connections in beliefs and experiences were similar in nature and provided a richer valuation of the topic.

Central Research Question

What are the experiences of student veterans using disability support services at postsecondary institutions? The data reveals that experiences of student veterans using disability support services were all similar in nature as relayed by the staff and student veteran participants. The most common theme describing these experiences was influence of personal factors. Several

of the student veteran participant experiences were based upon their military instilled values, as well as their lack of willingness to seek help for their disabilities. All participants acknowledged that student veterans are reluctant to seek help due to military values that encouraged them to be strong and resilient. Negative perceptions of their disabilities, such as being seen as "weak" for asking for help, also discouraged efforts to seek help. Additionally, student veterans have the opinion that their disabilities don't warrant assistance in an academic setting.

Although reluctant to ask for help, many student veterans are not informed about the assistance provided through disability support services. They often don't start seeking disability support services until they start experiencing complications from their disabilities. After learning about these services and the confidentiality of using the services, student veterans are more receptive and appreciative of receiving assistance. Student veterans receive assistance with transfer of military credits, G.I. Bill certifications, early registration, absences from class, additional time for assignments and exams, tutoring services, note taking apps, transportation assistance, and more. Student veterans felt that the support provided by disability support services helped reduce their mental and physical challenges, in turn allowing them to be less distracted and more successful in the classroom. Participants also described favorable outcomes using disability support services because they were then able to form trusting relationships with disability support staff and were more apt to ask for assistance in the future when needed. Their positive experiences with disability support services prompted them to encourage other student veterans to utilize disability support services. Having positive experiences using disability support services made a few students veterans regret not seeking out and using the services sooner.

Sub-Question One

What are the academic learning experiences of student veterans with disabilities? When examining Vacchi's model for student veteran support, academic interactions, support and services are essential to the academic learning experiences of student veterans. Student veterans were motivated academically through academic interactions and support from faculty, staff, and other student veterans that shared similar military experiences and those they grew to trust. Student veterans were also highly academically motivated by family and friends through encouragement to complete their goal, urging them to excel in their courses and graduate. Services provided to student veterans include processing G.I. Bill benefits and obtaining college credits for their military training. Academic learning experiences are also impacted by physical and mental health limitations which cause difficulties for student veterans getting to classes and being distracted while being in the classroom. Additionally, student veteran participants gave united accounts of the importance of their military values on their academic learning experiences. Military values provided the foundation needed for being to class on time, being respectful to classmates, multitasking, finishing assignments in a timely manner, and being more focused in the classroom.

Sub-Question Two

How do student veterans with disabilities describe the support provided by disability support services? Student veterans describe favorable outcomes when using disability support services. They deemed these services as invaluable to their academic success and the completion of their degree programs. Overall, student veterans found support through disability support services from accommodations for their disabilities and from interactions with staff and other student veterans. After utilizing support services provided by the Disability Services and Military

Center, student veterans felt supported and began to trust the staff working in these offices.

Unanimously, student veterans claimed being able to obtain support by connecting with other

student veterans using disability support services. Support from the institution consisted of

processing G.I. Bill benefits, a computer lab and student veteran lounge, and accommodations

for physical and mental limitations acquired by military service. Student veteran and staff

participants both list the most utilized accommodations as excused absences from class,

provision of memory aids, recording and trigger recall tools, early registration, additional time

for exams and assignments to be completed, and tutoring services.

Sub-Question Three

How do student veterans with disabilities describe their personal and academic

relationships? The answer to this question was revealed when participants were asked what

relationships they found helpful and how relationships influenced or aided in them succeeding

academically. The theme of *impact of relationships* emphasizes the significance of support from

family, friends, faculty, staff, and other student veterans. The data presents *academic* and *non-*

academic interactions as the main form of motivation for degree completion. These relationships

fostered praise, feelings of belonging, appreciation, being prioritized, and talents being nurtured.

Gilbert and Maureen have the distinct pleasure of supporting each other while they are both

currently attending the same institution to obtain their bachelor's degree. Maureen stated

> I can't explain the love and support I feel by having a spouse who is having the same
>
> postsecondary experiences as me. We ride to school together, meet during breaks, and
>
> study together. For me, it is the most satisfying form of support and motivation to
>
> complete my degree program.

Joseph proclaimed "how proud I was to have my children watch me graduate. They got to see me

complete a major goal and accomplishment in my life while being there to help me celebrate. They are my motivation." Tracey's children are consistently telling her how happy they are to see her completing her PhD, which warms her heart and makes her feel proud of herself.

Summary

This chapter analyzed the data acquired through qualitative research consisting of student veteran and staff participants. A clear description of the department, position, and years of experience for staff participants were provided, along with the branch of service, degree program, and degree status for student veterans. Three themes, consisting of *institutional support, influence of personal factors*, and *impact of relationships*, along with four subthemes established as *transfer credit, early registration, military instilled values, willingness to seek help, academic interactions* and *non-academic interactions* were developed from the analysis. The central research question and three sub-questions were answered discovering the similarities in experiences encompassed by student veterans using disability support services. All participants cited positive experiences and motivation gained by institutional support from Mountain Valley University. Military values were used to guide student veterans' transition from the military and navigate their focus in completing their degree requirements. Ultimately, student veterans' experiences aligned with each element of Vacchi's (2017) model for student veteran support and illustrated each component's impact on the academic success of student veterans.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Overview

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenology was to explore the lived experiences of student veterans using disability support services at postsecondary institutions. This chapter will utilize my ideas and interpretations to refine the findings of this study and interpret them for readers. The themes and subthemes acquired guided my interpretations of disability support services positively impacting the success of student veterans. Findings confirm the validity of Vacchi's (2017) model of student veteran support on the academic success of student veterans. Implications for policy and practice are discussed, along with theoretical and methodological implications of this research. Limitations and delimitations are offered along with recommendations for future research on student veterans using disability support services.

Discussion

This section discusses the interpretation of my study's findings as developed from the themes and subthemes. The summary of thematic findings provides the foundation for implications for policy and practice. Theoretical and empirical implications, along with limitations and delimitations of the study, are explored and analyzed. This section concludes with recommendations for future research.

Interpretation of Findings

Data analysis resulted in three themes and six subthemes. The data exposes experiences of student veterans using disability support services as being comparable as conveyed by the staff and student veteran participants. Findings from this study substantiated theoretical and empirical literature reviewed in Chapter Two. Discussion of the thematic findings is followed by a series of interpretations deemed significant by me.

Summary of Thematic Findings

My research consisted of 10 participants from Mountain Valley University. The three themes established from this research are *institutional support*, *influence of personal factors*, and *impact of relationships*. These themes describe the experiences of student veterans using disability support services at postsecondary institutions. The themes and subthemes aligned with Vacchi's (2017) model of student veteran support. All four elements of this conceptual framework highlight the support needed to impact the success of student veterans. Many student veterans are hesitant to use disability support services due to numerous personal factors, but unanimously agreed, after using these services, their mental and physical challenges were reduced, and their academic success increased. Disability support services provided by the institution made student veterans feel prioritized by the institution and increased the appreciation and trust of faculty and staff. Positive and influential academic interactions encouraged student veterans to use disability support services and to persist in the accomplishment of their academic goals.

Disability Support Services as Institutional Support. The data analyzed confirms the success provided from elements of the vertical axis of Vacchi's (2017) model of student veteran support. Transition support and services provided by the institution were recognized as being provided after a student veteran was accepted into the institution. The institution services provided college credits for military training, processing G.I. Bill benefits, and ensured early course registration each semester for student veterans. Student veterans indicated feeling better supported by being less overwhelmed by tasks being handled by the institution. The Reserve student veteran participants referenced transition support from faculty and staff for their required military duty throughout the academic year.

Student veterans felt prioritized by the institution which led to their increased trust and appreciation for the support staff. Student veterans did specify wanting more support in terms of specific transition courses for them. However, they did not acknowledge a lack of transition support as a hindrance to the impact of success disability support services provided. Although student veterans are responsible for signing up each semester for disability services, this is not a deterrent for them choosing to use these services. Various services specific to the needs of each student veterans' disability are used each semester, increasing their success in their academic performance in classes and degree completion. Student veterans report becoming more comfortable with staff assisting them with disability support services, increasing their future usage of services. Overall, data presented the positive impact using disability support services had on the success of student veterans.

Willingness to Seek Help for Disabilities. Student veterans choose not to seek assistance for their disabilities based upon military values and other personal factors. While military instilled values play a vital role in the positive aspects of student veterans' success, they also hindered them from seeking support for their disabilities. Training and experiences of student veterans led them to push through tough circumstances without getting help for risk of seeming weak. In many cases, student veterans' perceptions of their disabilities make them unaware of their need for services and therefore they do not seek them.

All participants acknowledged how the limitations they possessed due to their disabilities negatively affected their academic endeavors. Although aware of disability support services, student veterans can be hesitant and unwilling to use them out of fear of being judged or a lack of confidentiality. This unwillingness led student veterans to feel anxious, overwhelmed, distracted, and triggered. After choosing to utilize disability support services, student veterans

deemed the support significant to their success and praised the staff who provided support. The use of disability support services was more favorable for student veterans when they used the services sooner in their enrollment rather than later.

Impact of Academic Interactions. Academic and non-academic interactions were both imperative to the academic success of student veterans and proved influential in student veterans choosing to use disability support services. However, academic interactions from faculty, staff, and other student veterans were instrumental to the utilization of disability support services and motivation for academic success. The horizontal access of Vacchi's (2017) model of student veteran success displays the impact of support and academic interactions on student veterans' success. While the data revealed minor issues with micro-aggressions of faculty, a majority of academic interactions with faculty and staff were key to making student veterans feel comfortable, supported, accommodated, and motivated. With other student veterans, they found comfort in being able to relate with them and created lifetime bonds. Shared experiences of quality academic interactions are further evidence of the impact and motivation for student veterans to be most successful.

Implications for Policy or Practice

This section discusses the implications for stakeholders in higher education policy and practice. Improvements for disability support services for student veterans at postsecondary institutions are provided from my study's interpretations. Policy and practice suggestions are specific to the administrative and academic offices. Implications are also applied to faculty and staff employed by postsecondary institutions.

Implications for Policy

Postsecondary institutions have applied various policies derived from previous

interpretations of other studies. Despite these policy changes there are more changes to current policies that would better enable the success of student veterans with disabilities. Understanding that student veterans can be hesitant and unwilling to seek assistance for their disabilities, stakeholders should ensure they are aware of how to effectively advertise and communicate disability support services. This includes using different methods of advertising that convey positivity towards using disability support services. This could consist of postsecondary institutions creating policies making it mandatory for student veterans to meet with military support services counselors to understand what is available to them and how to obtain assistance if needed. A standard policy should be created for brochures addressing the needs and assistance available to go into all welcome packets mailed or emailed to incoming student veterans. Policies should be created to require training and development for engaging with student veterans for all faculty and staff, regardless of whether they directly serve student veterans. This will create a culture within institutions which foster sensitivity and understanding towards the experiences and needs of student veterans.

Implications for Practice

Implications for practice involve understanding what services are used most by student veterans with disabilities, which services are most valuable, and if there are any additional services requested by student veterans or provided by outside community resources that may be instrumental in the success of student veterans with disabilities. Institutions of higher education should conduct annual surveys, to be completed by student veterans, determining the services most often used and believed to be useful, and suggestions for additional services not currently provided. Partnerships with local Veteran Affairs offices can be established to determine what community resources are available for student veterans and if any partnerships between those

resources and the institution can be made. Having this information will increase both the amount and effectiveness of services offered.

A common practice of educational stakeholders should be to assure confidentiality of services and communicate availability of services effectively. I recommend that foundational practices be established for new student veterans at postsecondary institutions. This includes creating transitional guides provided to student veterans as they enroll as new students, which establishes effective methodologies in transitioning. A technique for postsecondary institutions may be to create a practice in which each incoming student veteran is matched with another student veteran, either one who is also a new student or one who has already been enrolled for at least one semester at the institution, to provide guidance and support.

Theoretical and Empirical Implications

The theoretical implications of my study support Vacchi's (2017) model of student veteran success, Diamond's (2012) adaptive military transition theory, and Hammond's (2016) combat veteran conceptual identity model. This study confirmed each component of Vacchi's (2017) model of student veteran success as being helpful and necessary to the academic success of student veterans. Analysis of the data provided by each participant reveals the interconnected fundamental concepts of this model and clarifies the experiences and needs of student veterans. The study emphasized Phase II: Passage and Phase III: Arrival of Diamond's (2012) adaptive military transition theory. For the Passage Phase, student veterans were able to form relationships with one another and obtain support for disability services. The Arrival Phase of Diamond's (2012) adaptive military transition theory solidified the student veteran accepting their new life pursuing higher education, being able to formulate and express their plans, and having a decreased struggle with their new identity as student veterans. All participants

acknowledged how military instilled values and unwillingness to seek help for disabilities influenced their experiences in higher education. This substantiates the perceptions of self and connection to other veteran components of Hammond's (2016) combat veteran conceptual identity model.

Limitations and Delimitations

This section identifies the limitations serving as potential weaknesses that were beyond the control of the researcher. The delimitations were purposefully selected by the researcher to define the perimeters of the study. Rational for the selection of the delimitations are explained.

Limitations

Limitations of this study were based on the sample of participants. The student veteran population was a small percentage of students at the postsecondary institution. Additionally, the Public Information Act provided me with a limited number of these student veteran email addresses. Therefore, I was unable to advertise the study via email to all student veterans at the institution. Only three employees from one office providing disability support services chose to participate in the research, limiting the perspectives given by staff participants.

Delimitations

The delimitations of this research consisted of using student veterans who had previously mobilized or deployed, attending Mountain Valley University within the past five years, also using disability support services as a residential student. It also consisted of staff participants who have serviced student veterans using disability support services in the past five years. None of the students selected to participate in this study consisted of online students. There is a large population of online learning students that are student veterans. However, they do not have access to or choose to use disability support services as much as the residential students.

Therefore, choosing to use students who took classroom classes within the previous five years, provided better insight on the current utilization and impact of disability support services.

Recommendations for Future Research

Recommendations for research comprise of selecting participants with specific disabilities and/or those using explicit disability support services to determine the utilization and impact of those services more accurately. It would also be important to focus on residential student veterans with disabilities who choose not to use disability support services and uncover how they navigate their challenges and their motivators for success. Future research can also focus on the student veterans who chose not to complete their degree requirements to determine the factors for them discontinuing their higher education. Comparing experiences where student veterans used disability support services at a different postsecondary institution would pinpoint the effectiveness of disability support services provided by Mountain Valley University. Using analysis from a multi-site study will provide more insight on the research topic. I recommend quantitative analysis be examined to better understand the impact of disability support services on the success of student veterans. A study conducted using a different qualitative research design approach will allow for more data on the subject to be ascertained and revealed through the research process.

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Conclusion

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In determining the impact of disability support services on the success of student veterans, a hermeneutic phenomenology was conducted using Vacchi's (2017) Model of Student Veteran Support. The problem is that too many veterans with disabilities do not use campus disability services, potentially limiting their potential to earn a college degree. The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenology was to explore the lived experiences of student veterans using

disability support services at postsecondary institutions. Individual interviews, a focus group, and a letter writing prompt were the three data collection approaches used to yield answers to one central research question and three sub-questions. The central research question asked what are the experiences of student veterans using disability support services at postsecondary institutions? Data analysis validated the significance of each component of Vacchi's (2017) Model of Student Veteran Support. Findings resulted in three themes and six subthemes. Participants revealed that institutional support, influence of personal factors, and impact of relationships were essential to their success in higher education. When disability support services were used, they were determined to provide positive experiences and were recommended for other student veterans to use. Interpretations from thematic findings includes disability support services as institutional support, willingness to seek help for disabilities, and impact of academic interactions. Implications of the study exposed the need for educational stakeholders to better determine how to effectively advertise and communicate disability support services for student veterans who are unwilling to seek assistance for their disabilities. Effort should also be taken to create more policies and practices that create a culture within institutions which foster sensitivity and understanding towards the experiences and needs of student veterans.

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Appendix A

IRB Approval

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY.
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

May 25, 2023

Chante Burnell
David Vacchi

Re: IRB Exemption - IRB-FY22-23-1526 The Impact of Disability Support Services on the Success of Student Veterans

Dear Chante Burnell, 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 46:104(d):

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 and final versions of your study documents can be found under the Attachments tab within the Submission Details sections of your study on

Cayuse IRB. Your stamped consent form 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 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, PhD, CIP
Administrative Chair
Research Ethics Office

Appendix B

Recruitment Template: Social Media

ATTENTION STUDENT VETERANS/STAFF: I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a Doctor of Philosophy degree at Liberty University. The purpose of my research is to explore the impact of disability support services on the academic success of student veterans. To participate, you must be one of the following: Student veteran who previously deployed in a Global War on Terrorism (GWOT) operation and are currently using or previously used Disability Support Services and/or the Military Student Success Center, or a staff member who is currently employed by the institution and possess experience working with student veterans. Participants will be asked to participate in an individual interview (30 minutes), focus group (1 hour), and letter-writing (30 minutes). If you would like to participate and meet the study criteria, please email me at ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮ or ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮ to schedule an interview. A consent document will be emailed to you a week before the scheduled interview. You will need to sign and return it at the time of the interview.

Appendix C

Recruitment Template: Flyer

Disability Support Services Impact on Success of Student Veterans

- Are you a student veteran who has deployed and using disability support services?

- Are you a staff member who is working or has previously worked with student veterans?

If you answered **yes** to either of these questions, you may be eligible to participate in a student veteran research study.

The purpose of this research is to explore the impact of disability support services on the academic success of student veterans. Participants will be asked to participate in an individual interview (30 minutes), focus group (1 hour), and letter-writing (30 minutes). Study can be conducted online through Zoom or at the following location:

Chante Burnell, a doctoral candidate in the School of Education at Liberty University, is conducting this study.

Please contact Chante Burnell at ████████ or ████████████ for more information.

Appendix D

Consent Form

Title of the Project: The Impact of Disability Support Services on the Success of Student Veterans
Principal Investigator: Chante Burnell, Doctoral Candidate, School of Education, Liberty University

Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. To participate, you must be one of the following: Student veteran who previously deployed in a Global War on Terrorism (GWOT) operation and are currently using or previously used Disability Support Services and/or the Military Student Success Center, or a staff member who is currently employed by the institution and possess experience working with student veterans. 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.

What is the study about and why is it being done?

The purpose of the study is to explore the impact of disability support services on the academic success of student veterans. This research will confirm the efficiency of services being provided to student veterans and allow any needed changes found necessary to be made for student veterans to be most efficiently supported.

What will happen if you take part in this study?

If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to do the following:
1. Participate in an audio and visually recorded individual interview that will take no more than 30 minutes (student veterans only).
2. Participate in an audio and visually recorded focus group that will take no more than 1 hour.
3. Participate in a letter writing prompt that will take no more than 30 minutes (student veterans only).

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 include more educated and well adapted veterans contributing effectively to society.

What risks might you experience from being in this study?

The expected risks from participating in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life. The risks involved in this study include the possibility of psychological stress from being asked to recall and discuss prior trauma. To reduce risk, I will monitor participants, discontinue the interview if needed, and provide referral information for counseling services.

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 by replacing names with pseudonyms.
- Interviews will be conducted in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation.
- 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.
- Data collected from you may be used in future research studies and/or shared with other researchers. If data collected from you is reused or shared, any information that could identify you, if applicable, will be removed beforehand.
- Data will be stored on a password-locked computer and in a locked file cabinet. After five years, all electronic records will be deleted and all hardcopy records will be shredded.
- Recordings will be stored on a password locked computer for five years and then deleted or shredded. The researcher and members of her doctoral committee will have access to these recordings.

How will you be compensated for being part of the study?

Participants will not be compensated for participating in this study.

Is study participation voluntary?

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University or ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮. 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 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 Chante Burnell. 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 IRB. Our physical address is Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA, 24515; our phone number is 434-592-5530, and our email address is irb@liberty.edu.

Disclaimer: The Institutional Review Board (IRB) is tasked with ensuring that human subjects research will be conducted in an ethical manner as defined and required by federal regulations. The topics covered and viewpoints expressed or alluded to by student and faculty researchers are those of the researchers and do not necessarily reflect the official policies or positions of Liberty University.

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 and/or video-record me as part of my participation in this study.

_____
Printed Subject Name

_____
Signature & Date

Appendix E

Individual Interview Questions for Student Veterans

1. Please tell me about yourself. SQ1

2. Please tell me about your experience transitioning from the military to becoming a student veteran. SQ1

3. How do you think your military experience impacted your student veteran experience? SQ1

4. How do you think your disabilities have challenged you as a student veteran? SQ1

5. How did you learn about services provided by the Disability Support Services Office? CRQ

6. What was your experience when signing up for disability support services? CRQ

7. What services have you used through the Disability Support Services Office? CRQ

8. What services have been most helpful to you from the Disability Support Services Office? SQ2

9. How does your institution communicate veterans' programs, policies, support, and services? SQ2

10. What relationships with family, peers, and professors, have you found helpful as a student veteran? SQ3

11. How have personal and academic relationships influenced or aided you in succeeding academically? SQ3

12. What were your experiences using transition support services (i.e., veteran orientation, veteran transition courses, veteran academic degree programs, etc.)? CRQ

13. What additional services should your institution provide to student veterans with disabilities? CRQ

14. What else would you like to add to our discussion of your experiences as a student veteran with disabilities that we haven't discussed? CRQ

Appendix F

Focus Group Questions for Staff

1. What forms of support do student veterans need to be academically successful?

2. How is information on disability support services, provided by the institution, relayed to student veterans?

3. What hesitations, if any, do student veterans have about using disability support services?

4. What is the most challenging part of student veterans registering for disability support services?

5. Which disability support services do student veterans have the most academic success with?

6. How do disability support services impact the academic performance of student veterans?

7. How do interactions with family, friends, and peers impact the academic success of student veterans?

8. How do interactions with faculty and staff impact the academic success of student veterans?

9. What additional services do you suggest can be provided for student veterans with disabilities?

10. Is there any additional information relating to your utilization of disability support services as student veteran that you would like to share?

Appendix G

Letter Writing Prompt for Student Veterans

If you could go back to your first day of postsecondary education, what advice would you give yourself about the following:

- Challenges you may experience due to your disabilities

- The role of interactions on academic performance

- Your experiences using disability support services

- Support provided through disability support services

Appendix H

Memos

<u>August 4, 2023</u>

The focus group for staff participants were conducted prior to the academic school year beginning. When I went back to listen to the recording, and re-read my notes, I recognized that all three of the staff participants consistently used the words "accommodations", "trust", and "support". These words aligned Vacchi's (2017) model of student veteran support and the corresponding literature provided in the literature review.

<u>September 18, 2023</u>

As I am reanalyzing data obtained from the staff participants and first three student veteran participants that I have acquired thus far, support seems to be the underlining theme that provides success for student veterans. This support is gained from within the institution, as well as from outside sources. I began to reflect upon my own experiences as a student veteran with disabilities currently pursuing higher education. For me personally, support from various people has been invaluable to my experience. It helps to not only have the support, but just to know that it is available when you need it. It provides a sense of security while pursuing your educational goals.

<u>October 1, 2023</u>

I have begun coding the information provided from the focus group, individual interviews, and letter writing prompt. Initially, I perceived this to be a most difficult task of this research, but with the assistance of technology, I am realizing that it will not be as difficult as I first believed it would be. I am analyzing the data obtained, without the use of any applications, to determine if I am able to find the themes provided in the data. I am highlighting the most commonly used words. While each student veteran has their own personal experience in higher education, military values were listed as imperative to their transition and success. These values are instilled in them and they will continue to use them throughout the experiences they have in life.

<u>October 25, 2023</u>

I am impressed with the data transcription application that I am using on the computer. It is picking up on all of the words that I had previously highlighted. It has also been providing other words that I do deem essential in the research consisting of "community", "benefit" and "proactive". Now that I am looking at the data in its totality, I am amazed at how it lines up with the conceptual model used as the foundation for this research and how similar the answers are in nature for seven different student participants who do not know each other.

<u>December 23, 2023</u>

It was my plan to be completed with Chapter 4 by now and have it turned in for review. Unfortunately, my health issues have put a pause on the work I hoped to have completed now on my dissertation. This serves as a testament to my research on the obstacles that student veterans with disabilities face and the support needed while pursuing higher education.