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# Student Veteran Success: A Grounded Theory Study

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## **Abstract**

Student veterans in undergraduate post-secondary education face many challenges. Current research addresses these unique challenges and offers recommendations for further research, as well as strategies for college administrators and faculty seeking to assist student veterans. However, the research does not address the strategies student veterans use to succeed. The purpose of this grounded theory study is to start this conversation. The objective of this study is to present a theory that predicts and explains student veterans' success, using grounded theory methodology to examine student veteran strategies to succeed in college. Thirteen student veterans from two different colleges participated in the study via semi-structured interviews and theoretical sampling. The data from the interviews and sampling sessions were coded using in-vivo and axial coding techniques until theoretical categories emerged. Study results showed that student veterans succeeded because they were adaptable and empathetic, and could prioritize their efforts based on goal setting, both on and off campus. Successful student veterans put more effort into their life outside of college, and tended to be internally motivated to succeed. Academic excellence and college degrees were secondary motivators, and fell behind broader-based life goals. The theory developed in this study offers guidance for future research on student veteran success. It also provides valuable insight that will allow post-secondary faculty, administration, and staff who work with student veterans in post-secondary education, to replicate this study's strategies for success. Lastly, it shows that, to student veterans and their supporters, life after the military is about more than college.

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Guillermo Montes

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Student Veteran Success: A Grounded Theory Study

By

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## Dedication

First and foremost, I want to thank Heidi. For everything. For saving me. For supporting me. For challenging me. Finally, for giving me the vision to see the present, the courage to acknowledge the past, and the wisdom to look to the future.

I give thanks to Danny and Mathew, for being my reasons to continue. To see both of you turn into the fine young men that I always knew you would be is proof that I made the right choice.

Mom, I hope I continue to make you proud. You gave me everything when you had nothing for yourself. You showed me that nothing—and I mean *nothing*— can keep you down if you choose not to let it.

My team, my cohort, my program, my school, and my college all played a monumental role in this journey. They never let me feel like I was in this alone, and they made me trust in the process. They made this journey wonderful. I will always remember them.

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Lastly, without my research participants, fellow veterans, and the men and women of the United States Armed Forces, I would not be here thanking all of these wonderful people and institutions. I am because we are. 09/08/09

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Study results showed that student veterans succeeded because they were adaptable and empathetic, and could prioritize their efforts based on goal setting, both on and off campus. Successful student veterans put more effort into their life outside of college, and tended to be internally motivated to succeed. Academic excellence and college degrees were secondary motivators, and fell behind broader-based life goals.

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

General of the Army Douglas MacArthur recalled in his autobiography, “Upon the field of friendly strife are sown the seeds that, upon other fields, on other days, will bear the fruits of victory” (MacArthur, 1964, p. 82). In this context, he was referring to his time as Superintendent of West Point and added mandatory physical education and athletic competition at the United States Military Academy. He even had the aforementioned quote inscribed in stone above the entrance to the gymnasium (MacArthur, 1964). These seeds also bear fruit long after the battle has ended.

Veterans, more specifically student veterans, have served in the military and have changed as people because of their service. This change has an impact on their successes in different aspects of their lives (Gade, 1991). Many studies reveal how service in the military can adversely affect student veterans (Barry, Whiteman, & Macdermid Wadsworth, 2014). However, there are no studies discussing how student veterans succeed in college. To begin examining this point, one must understand the background and context of today’s military service members, veterans, and the student veteran.

To study student veterans, one must also understand the United States military, its veterans, and veterans’ educational benefits, as well as the history and definitions of all three. This chapter defines the legal background of the military. It details what military service means, the definition of a veteran, and describes the overall context of being a student veteran. This includes a description of demographic characteristics of student veterans, as well as what colleges and universities do to accommodate student veterans

by being military friendly. Lastly, this chapter describes a research problem, poses a research question, discusses the potential significance of the study, and offers a preview of the rest of the study.

### **Legal Background**

The Constitution of the United States establishes the responsibilities and roles of the government regarding the military. Understanding the powers enumerated to legislative and executive branches of government is important to this understanding—specifically, how those powers apply to the military and its veterans.

The legislative branch (Congress) is responsible for providing military forces for the nation. Article I, §8, Clauses 12 and 13 (§8-12 & §8-13) of the U.S. Constitution, authorizes Congress to establish an army and navy, respectively. Article I, §8-11, authorizes Congress to declare war, and §8-14 allows it to regulate the rules for and govern the land and naval forces (United States Government [U.S.G.], 2014a). The powers granted to Congress are separate and equal to those granted to the President and the executive branch.

Specific powers granted to the president in Article II, §2-1 of the U.S. Constitution state that the president is the “Commander in Chief of the Army and Navy of the United States, and of the militia of the several states when called into the actual service of the United States” (U.S.G., 2014b, pp. 456). The powers granted to the president over the militias of the several states, or in modern terms, the National Guard (NG) (32 U.S.C., 2004), were later clarified with the National Defense Act of 1916 (Wiener, 1940).

Congress and the president fulfill their obligations regarding the military by enacting laws. Article I, §8-18 of the U.S. Constitution allows Congress “to make all Laws which shall be necessary and proper for carrying into Execution the foregoing Powers, and all other Powers vested by the U.S. Constitution in the Government of the United States” (U.S.G., 2014a, p. 353). Congress passed Title 10, The Armed Forces of the United States, of the United States Code (10 U.S.C.), into law in 1956. Title 10 established the modern organization of the armed forces, which include the active component (AC) and reserve component (RC) (10 U.S.C, 2011). The National Guard (NG) is part of the RC and is organized under state government control. State governors have the authority to employ the NG units in their states. Most of the NG funding and all NG doctrine is provided by the federal government through Title 32 (32 U.S.C, 2004).

### **The Military**

Title 10, as amended through 2011, provides for four branches of the military. The Army is the primary land component. The Navy is the primary sea component with a separate branch, the Marine Corps, as its land component. The Air Force is the primary air power component. The president, with consent of the Senate (U.S.G., 2014b), appoints a Secretary of Defense (SECDEF) as his primary civilian advisor for military matters. The SECDEF oversees the Department of Defense (DoD) with legal authority over all military branches, AC, RC, and NG alike (10 U.S.C., 2011, §111-119, & §131-144). The president also appoints, with consent of the Senate, service secretaries for the Departments of the Army, Navy, and Air Force (U.S.G., 2014b).

**From civilian to service members.** Service members are the heart of the military. Soldiers, sailors, airmen, and Marines (collectively referred to as service

members) are people that serve in the armed forces. Service members are divided into two categories: commissioned officers and enlisted members. Most officers receive commissions through military service academies or other colleges. There are three service academies: the U.S. Military Academy at West Point (Army), the U.S. Naval Academy in Annapolis, Maryland, and the U.S. Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs, Colorado. These are 4-year post-secondary colleges that grant commissions and bachelor's degrees to their graduates (10 U.S.C., 2011, §4331-4361, §6951-6981, & §9331-9362). Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) programs are offered at many public and private colleges and universities in all 50 U.S. states. The schools grant bachelor's degrees, which are required for the student/cadet to receive his or her commission. The ROTC program trains the student/cadet to meet the requirements for receiving his or her commission (10 U.S.C., 2011, §2101-2111b). The term of service incurred by officers varies by individual (10 U.S.C., 2011). Enlisted members join the military through recruitment from the private sector and are enlisted under contract for a term of service as agreed upon with the military branch of choice (10 U.S.C., 2011, §501-520c). The military is comprised of the men and women that serve in it. Honorable service in the military gives the service members access to government provided benefits upon separation. One of these benefits is access to education funds provided by the government. Colleges and universities accept funds from the government in exchange for providing educational and developmental opportunities to the student veteran (United States Government, 2011b)

**Transitioning from military service to the civilian sector.** Upon making the decision, in the case of voluntary separations, to separate from the military, service

members enroll in the Department of Defense Transition Assistance Program (TAP). The purpose of TAP is to prepare the service member to enter the civilian sector and be prepared to find employment, start a business, or attend college (Department of Defense, 2015a). TAP has grown considerably in the last 20 years and much of that growth is due to the implementation of the Post 9/11 GI Bill and the increased number of veterans who take advantage of Veterans Administration Education Benefits (112th Congress, 2012). Since the end of fiscal year 2015, all military service components are using the TAP Military Life Cycle (MLC) for members entering the service. This addition to the TAP promotes the service members' understanding of the available separation services, what the process looks like, and the requirements they have as individuals to plan for what they will do after the military. The MLC model accounts for everything, from the service member's first duty station, promotions and re-enlistments, major life events, and final separations preparation (Department of Defense, 2015b).

The Transition Assistance Program (TAP) has a core component of instruction and three separate training tracks that the service member can choose from. The core components are called the Goals, Plans, and Success (GPS) curriculum. The nine components of the GPS curriculum are:

- Pre-separation counselling,
- Resilient transitions,
- Military occupation code (MOC) crosswalk,
- Financial planning for transitions,
- Veterans Affairs benefits briefings I and II,
- Department of Labor employment workshop,



- Individual transition plan review,
- Capstone, and
- Individual training. (Department of Defense, 2015c)

The individual training tracks consists of (a) accessing higher education, (b) career technical training, and (c) entrepreneurship for those who want to start a business (Department of Defense, 2015c).

The accessing higher education training track consists of training modules, which cover topics that prepare service members for transitioning to college. Topics such as financial aid, registration, and transferring of military training into college credits give service members the knowledge they need to prepare for college. Classes that discuss college culture, methods of instruction, and veteran support programs show the service member what to expect and look for when arriving on campus (Department of Defense, 2015d).

**Veterans.** Service members leave the military in different ways. Retiring after 20 or more years of service, or reaching the end of their term of service or enlistment, are the most common (10 U.S.C., 2011). An honorable discharge from the service gives the former service member full benefits as a veteran of the armed services. The term veteran means a person who served in the active or reserve military service, and who was discharged or released under conditions other than dishonorable (38 U.S.C, 2011, §101). A dishonorable discharge eliminates the former service member's right to all veterans' benefits (38 U.S.C, 2011).

**Veterans' benefits.** As part of continuing support for service members after transitioning to veteran status, the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) manages eligible

veterans' needs and benefits. The VA is responsible for planning, coordinating, and executing programs for veterans and eligible family members (38 U.S.C, 2011). The Secretary of the VA is appointed by the president, with the consent of Congress (U.S.G., 2014b), and is responsible for the implementation of these programs and coordinating with other governmental agencies to ensure maximum effectiveness (38 U.S.C., 2011, §523).

A major benefit for veterans is access to education and training support. In 1944, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, or GI Bill, into law. The GI Bill provided government funded education and training for veterans who were returning from World War II. Of the more than 15 million veterans who left the armed services in the following ten years, more than 12 million used these benefits (Altschuler, & Blumin, 2009). In 1955, the GI Bill was adopted under Chapter 34, Veterans Educational Assistance, of Title 38 to the United States Code; it provided educational benefits for eligible veterans who received honorable discharges (United States Government, 2011b).

Providing education benefits allowed the military and the VA to jointly care for veterans. Title 38, Chapter 34 states:

The Congress of the United States hereby declares that the education program created by this chapter is for the purpose of (1) enhancing and making more attractive service in the Armed Forces of the United States, (2) extending the benefits of a higher education to qualified and deserving young persons who might not otherwise be able to afford such an education, (3) providing vocational readjustment and restoring lost educational opportunities to those service men and

women whose careers have been interrupted or impeded by reason of active duty after January 31, 1955, and (4) aiding such persons in attaining the vocational and educational status which they might normally have aspired to and obtained had they not served their country. (38 U.S.C. 2011, §3451)

The Chapter 30, All-Volunteer Force Educational Assistance Program, and the Chapter 33, Post-9/11 Educational Assistance Program (Post 9/11 GI Bill) assist veterans by paying for most or all of the cost of college attendance (38 U.S.C., 2011). Established in 1985, the Chapter 30, or Montgomery GI Bill, allows service members to elect to pay into an education fund for use after discharge. Generally, the service member pays a nominal amount for a three-year period and the government provides the remaining funds to cover most of the cost of tuition at an eligible institution (college, vocational school, etc.) for up to four years. The amount in the fund is a lump sum that does not vary based on the type or cost of the institution and is not transferable to eligible family members. The funds paid by the service member are not refundable if not used (38 U.S.C., 2011, §3001-3036 & §3451-3498). Veterans eligible for the Montgomery GI Bill can still elect to use those funds in conjunction with the Post 9/11 GI Bill, if eligible for both (38 U.S.C., 2011, §3451-3498).

The Post 9/11 GI Bill, signed into law in 2008, provides educational benefits to eligible veterans and their dependents. The program requires no payment into a fund by the service member, and he or she can elect to transfer all or part of their benefits to eligible dependents (spouse or children). The benefits of this program include the payment of 36 months, measured in days, of tuition and expenses for the highest in-state rates (tuition, room, board, and fees) for public colleges or universities. The program

also pays a stipend to the beneficiary to offset living expenses (38 U.S.C., 2011, §3311-3325).

The Yellow Ribbon program provides additional funds for military affiliated students who are attending an institution that charges tuition rates higher than the maximum paid for by the GI Bill. Schools agree to participate in the Yellow Ribbon program with the VA on a voluntary basis. The school agrees to pay part of the additional charge above the highest rate of in-state tuition, with the state and VA matching the amount and paying it directly to the school. This generally covers all of the additional cost to the student (VA, 2015c).

### **The Student Veteran**

There are roughly 22 million veterans in the US, with nearly 9 million (42%) over the age of 65 (Mall, 2013). As of 2013, approximately 2.6 million veterans (12%) served in the military in the post 9/11 era (National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics (NCVAS, 2015a). Between 2000 and 2013, the numbers of veterans using the Montgomery GI Bill has ranged from 350,000 to 162,000, with peak years between 2002 and 2009 with over 400,000 beneficiaries per year. Post 9/11 GI Bill utilization increased from 34,000 beneficiaries in 2009 to over 750,000 by 2013 (NCVAS, 2015b). In total, over 910,000 veterans were using one of these two programs in 2013, which represented 28.3% ( $n=3,210,509$ ) of the younger (under age 40) veteran population (NCVAS, 2015b). Veterans of all ages represent 5% of the total college (2- and 4-year, public and private) student population nationwide ( $n=18,948,521$ ) (Chronicle of Higher Education [CHE], 2014).

Table 1.1 shows data from different sources and different date ranges. It compares the select demographic percentages of DoD service members (active duty, reserve, and National Guard) to student veterans. The table shows that the demographics for DoD personnel and student veterans are roughly equal in most cases. In terms of minorities, 28.6% of DoD personnel identify as belonging to a minority group (non-white) versus 39.9% of student veterans.

Student veterans' demographics are difficult to frame because few sources accurately track current information. A 2014 report by the U.S. Department of Education (DoED) showed that of the 1,522 institutions surveyed, 91% identified service members and veterans by financial aid information, while 80% used admissions data also. Only 59% of surveyed schools used self-identifying options (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2014).

GI Bill utilization records from the VA and the DoED Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) were used for the Million Records Project (MRP), a joint public-private venture, which joined the Student Veterans of America with the VA and the National Student Clearinghouse (NSC). The purpose of the MRP was to study the educational outcomes of student veterans (Cate, 2014). Cate (2014) started with a review of the student veteran demographic data collected from VA records ( $n=859,297$ ). From 2002–2010, 88.9% of student veterans were male and 21.1% were female; 94.1% were under the age of 40; 89.9% went to public or private non-profit schools; and 10.1% went to proprietary or for-profit schools. Pursuant to the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), the findings did not reflect racial, ethnic, or marital status information (Cate, 2014).

Table 1.1

*DoD and Student Veteran Demographics*

	DoD			Student Veteran
	Active Duty <sup>a</sup>	Reserve & National Guard <sup>a</sup>	Total DoD	
Total	1,370,329	842,510	2,212,839	
<u>Demographic Variable</u>				
% Women/% Men	16.4%/85.1%	18.5%/81.5%	17.2%/82.8%	20.1%/79.9% <sup>b</sup>
% Minorities	30.7%	25.1%	28.6%	39.9% <sup>c</sup>
% Married	55.2%	45.9%	51.7%	47.3% <sup>c</sup>
% With Children	42.8%	42.5%	42.7%	47% <sup>c</sup>

*Note.* <sup>a</sup> Department of Defense. (2013b). *2013 Demographics: A profile of the military community.* <sup>b</sup> Cate, C. A. (2014). *Million records project: Research from Student Veterans of America.* <sup>c</sup> National Center for Education Statistics. (2009). *A profile of military service members and veterans enrolled in postsecondary education in 2007–2008.*

Racial and family status data from a DoED report in 2009 showed that 60% of enrolled undergraduate student veterans were White, and 18% were Black. The remaining 22% included Hispanic (13%), Asian (3%), and 6% were Native American/Alaskan, Hawaiian/Pacific Islander/Multi-racial and not listed. Married student veterans with dependents (children) made up 33% of the population (NCES, 2009).

There is little data on student veterans that show prior post-secondary educational degree attainment, socioeconomic status, or political/ideological affiliation. Education attainment level prior to becoming a student veteran is implicit regarding secondary success. However, some student veterans begin their postsecondary education journey prior to, or while in, the military. Some student veterans may be first generation students and therefore may require additional resources to succeed (Davis, 2010). Furthermore, there is no socio-economic information available for student veterans, including current status and status prior to and during their military service. Dempsey (2010) shows there is a tendency by the general public to view service members as socially conservative and having come from humble backgrounds. However, service members tend to be more in line with conservatives for national defense/security issues, and more moderate and liberal for social issues, such as education, the environment, women and minority rights. While they do not represent a true cross section of the American population as a whole because of gender disparity, demographically they are similar in many ways (Dempsey, 2010).

**Military friendly schools.** Leaving an environment based on hierarchical rules for one that requires self-regulation presents a set of challenges that requires the student veteran to redefine him/herself and ask, “who am I”? (American Society of Higher Education [ASHE], 2011). In postsecondary education, finding an institution that meets student veterans’ needs and is military friendly is important. There are a number of resources available to do this. There are no specific criteria to qualify a college as military friendly. However, there have been changes to the original Post 9/11 GI Bill that

have made it easier to access benefits, and have made schools more accountable to the government for administering programs for student veterans.

Presidential Executive Order 13607 established “Principles of Excellence for Educational Institutions Serving Service Members, Veterans, Spouses, and Other Family Members” (2012). The Order called for a cessation of predatory and unfair marketing practices that targeted service members, veterans, and their families. It directed the DoED, DoD, and VA to collaborate in order to encourage educational institutions to establish specific programs to support service members, veterans, and their family members (Executive Order 13607, Fed. Reg., 2012).

Colleges are now required to charge in-state tuition rates for military affiliated students who are eligible for the MGIB or Post 9/11 GI Bill. The GI Bill Tuition Fairness Act of 2014 directs the VA to:

Disapprove a course of education provided by a public institution of higher learning to a covered individual pursuing a course of education with educational assistance under chapter 30 or 33 of this title while living in the State in which the public institution of higher learning is located if the institution charges tuition and fees for that course for the covered individual at a rate that is higher than the rate the institution charges for tuition and fees for that course for residents of the State in which the institution is located, regardless of the covered individual’s State of residence. (H.R. 357, 2014)

The Veterans Administration and DoED launched a website in 2014 called the GI Bill Comparison Tool® that allows military affiliated students to compare different criteria to evaluate schools before choosing one to attend. The tool looks at the number of GI Bill



recipients, school accreditation, and the amount of money that the school receives from Post 9/11 tuition fees. More importantly, the tool shows whether or not the school is in compliance with the Principles of Excellence as detailed in Executive Order 13607, and the DoED's 8 Keys to Veterans Success.

Under the Principles of Excellence, schools must:

- Provide students with a personalized form covering the total cost of an education program,
- Provide educational plans for all military and veteran education beneficiaries,
- End fraudulent and aggressive recruiting techniques and misrepresentation,
- Provide accommodations for service members and reservists absent due to service requirements,
- Designate a point of contact for academic and financial advising,
- Ensure accreditation of all new programs prior to enrolling students,
- Align institutional refund policies with those under Title IV of the Higher Education Act of 1965 as required under §484B of that Act when students withdraw prior to course completion (Executive Order 13607, Fed. Reg., 2012, p. 2).

These principles guide schools by ensuring that the beneficiaries of veterans' benefits receive high quality academic support and services. Participation and reporting requirements for the schools are voluntary and there is no penalty for nonparticipation (GPO, 2012). By tracking a school's participation and reporting, military affiliated students can use the GI Bill Comparison Tool® to make a more informed decision.

The other key comparison tool is the DoED's 8 Keys to Veterans Success. These Keys are part of a voluntary initiative that allows participating schools to highlight steps they take to support positive education opportunities for student veterans. The DoED does not use them to endorse the school in any way. The DoED recommends the prospective student veteran seek additional information in order to make informed decisions (Department of Education (DoED), 2015).

The 8 Key to Veterans Success are:

1. Create a culture of trust and connectedness across the campus community to promote well-being and success for veterans.
2. Ensure consistent and sustained support from campus leadership.
3. Implement an early alert system to ensure all veterans receive academic, career, and financial advice before challenges become overwhelming.
4. Coordinate and centralize campus efforts for all veterans, together with the creation of a designated space for them (even if limited in size).
5. Collaborate with local communities and organizations, including government agencies, to align and coordinate various services for veterans.
6. Utilize a uniform set of data tools to collect and track information on veterans, including demographics, retention, and degree completion.
7. Provide comprehensive professional development for faculty and staff on issues and challenges unique to veterans.
8. Develop systems that ensure sustainability of effective practices for veterans.

(Department of Education 2015, para. 4).

A program started in 1972, the Servicemembers Opportunity College Consortium

(SOCC), works with American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU) to improve the ability of members schools to meet the educational opportunities of service men and women as well as veterans. SOCC establishes principles that recognize the unique needs of service members and veterans while acknowledging the requirement to foster and protect participating institutions academic excellence (Servicemember Opportunity Colleges [SOC], 2015).

There are other non-governmental rating systems that promote military friendly schools. One of these, MilitaryFriendly.com surveys over 10,000 VA approved schools and thousands of student veterans to gather data. The criteria are presented on the website with the data being weighted in Table 1.2.

MilitaryFriendly.com provides definitions for each of the categories listed in Table 1.2. The site does not reveal the detailed methodology behind their data. There is no disclaimer, as with the DoED and VA, that denies any endorsement or financial benefit information that schools get by submitting their information voluntarily (Victory Media Inc., 2015). This is not meant to imply that commercial comparisons tools like MilitaryFriendly.com are not valuable to the prospective student veteran.

Table 1.2

*MilitaryFriendly.com Rating Criteria*

<u>Criteria</u>	<u>Weight</u>
Military Support on Campus	24%
Academic Credibility	20%
Academic Credit for Military Service	10%
Flexibility for Military Students	10%
Veteran Graduation Rates	5%
Student Tuition Assistance	5%
Student Survey	5%
Employment Rates	5%
Military Spouse Policies	5%
Government Approvals	1%

*Note.* Adapted from MilitaryFriendly.com, Victory Media Inc (2015).

Another source of school rankings comes from U.S. News & World Report (2015). This report takes into account the rankings of all colleges and universities in its annual listing of Best Colleges and adds additional criteria to determine which schools are best for veterans. Only schools that make the list of Best Colleges are considered and their rankings on this list rate the order in which they are listed on the Best Colleges for Veterans list. The additional criteria include whether or not the school accepts GI Bill funding, participates in the Yellow Ribbon Program, and are members of the Servicemans Opportunity College Consortium. In order to be on the U.S. News & World report list, schools simply have to participate in all three programs as well as be on the overall list of best colleges (U.S. News & World Report, 2015).

### **How postsecondary institutions receive student veterans at their schools.**

Colleges and universities communicate support services information to service members, veterans, and dependents of service members and veterans, in various ways. A 2014 Department of Education survey showed that 87% of schools use websites and 77% use e-mail to disseminate information; brochures (68%), admissions fairs (66%) and bulletin boards (58%) are other methods used to advertise support and service programs directly to both prospective and current military-affiliated student (NCES, 2014). These support services are designed to address challenges faced by student veterans. Student veterans often have dependent family members and are generally older than the traditional student (NCES, 2009). This can cause a higher potential for challenges outside of college. Some of these include, but are not limited to: additional financial stress, difficulty interacting socially with fellow students, and difficulty adapting culturally to their new environment (Olsen, Badger, & McCuddy, 2014).

Student veterans are generally less engaged than their non-veteran peers are and can be considered nontraditional. As non-traditional students, veterans may face some of the same challenges of those in Rendón's 1994 study that primarily addressed students of color, first generation students, females, and those with non-racial or gender differences. The study showed that nontraditional students generally have some form of anxiety and harbor doubts about their ability to succeed and fit in (Rendón, 1994). Engaging nontraditional students actively is an important step in overcoming these perceived barriers (Rumann & Bondi, 2015).

Colleges and universities offer programs that support student veterans and recognize them as nontraditional students (Vacchi, 2012). The NCES 2014 report on

Services and Support Programs for Military Service Members and Veterans, 2012-2013 asked a series of questions to gauge the level of support from the responding institutions ( $n=1,522$ ) (2014). Of the 98.49% of schools that reported having military affiliated students enrolled, the most common form of support was providing information and counselling on military and non-military benefits (83%). Other financial based initiatives included traditional financial aid counselling (47%), assistance with non-work study employment (27%), and career planning services (32%).

Less than 40% of the polled schools had educational and academic support programs for military affiliated students. Thirty-two percent of schools offered mental health counselling specific to service members and veterans and 68% had off-campus referral services. Thirty percent of all schools reported awareness training for faculty and staff regarding service member and/or veteran total health needs. Although 32% percent of schools provided some type of mental health awareness training, only 2% made it mandatory (NCES, 2014).

Schools, like employers, may compete for veterans. From a funding and quality of student standpoint, veterans are a commodity. Executive Order 13518, Employment of Veterans in the Federal Government of 2009 states “Our veterans, who have benefited from training and development during their military service, possess a wide variety of skills and experiences, as well as the motivation for public service that will help fulfill federal agencies' staffing needs” (The White House Office of the Press Secretary, 2009, §1. Policy). These same principles may also apply to college recruiters.

The role of the education institution in the academic experience of student veterans is one that begs examination. Esqueda, De Pedro, and Atuel (2015) detail the

historical perspective of higher education institutes that deal with an influx of veterans after a long conflict. At the time of the study, there was a small minority of colleges and universities that did not openly welcome veterans. The feeling was that veterans might not be capable of handling the academic rigors of college, and that colleges, out of greed, may lower standards in order to increase enrollment. All of this could lead to a watering down of standards across higher education as a whole (Esqueda et al., 2015).

Today, there is a general agreement among those in the higher education field that schools play an important “role in promoting access” (Esqueda et al., 2015, p. 9). This role expands as the student veteran gets into school and begins his or her academic journey. The institutional role extends to issues with retention, understanding, and accommodating nontraditional students, personal and professional growth, and preparation for life after college (Esqueda et al., 2015).

A common theme in the media, and in literature today is the effect of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) on the student veteran. It is important for college faculty to be knowledgeable as to the signs and symptoms of PTSD and to be on the lookout for student veterans, and students in general, who display these symptoms and are potentially struggling in school (Canfield & Weiss, 2015). Military friendly schools will seek to establish programs that share best practices regarding how to accommodate student veterans’ unique needs and will strive to understand the characteristics of the population (Brown & Gross, 2011).

Understanding student veterans is a crucial part of the teaching and learning process. Different strategies have been presented to inform college faculty as to effective methods of instructing student veterans. Barnard-Brak, Bagby, Jones, and Sulak (2011)

studied the feelings of self-efficacy of college faculty towards teaching student veterans. Their findings showed that most instructors are comfortable with veterans in their classrooms (Barnard-Brak et al., 2011). Sportsman and Thomas (2015) offered strategies to challenge college faculty to get to know their student veterans and discuss with them the importance of understanding the services on and off campus that are available to help student veterans with challenges they might face. Finally, Coll and Weiss (2015) and DiRamio and Jarvis (2011) assembled and edited a series of monographs that explored different issues and strategies that allowed faculty and administrators to increase their awareness about student veteran challenges. These strategies are meant to be a starting point for discussion, as opposed to boilerplate solutions.

### **Problem Statement**

Service in the military changes people (Gade, 1991). Current literature focuses on challenges faced by student veterans, including difficulties with adjustment to civilian/student life, financial difficulties, and physical and mental health issues (Barry et al., 2014). Such research lacks an argument for developing a richer, more detailed description of how student veterans succeed. It does not explain, describe, or seek to guide others by learning from success. Current recommendations for future studies point to replicating current research, possibly with different methods or variables. Instead of studying the student veteran as someone who can succeed, these studies focus on the student veteran's challenges and problems.

Studies on the transition of service members to life as a student veteran have examined the struggles veterans face (DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2008; Griffin & Gilbert, 2015; Jones, 2013; Ryan, Carlstrom, Hughey, & Harris, 2011). There is also



literature that examines the changes in veterans due to post traumatic stress disorder (Hoge et al., 2004). Others look to explain student veterans' problems with alcohol (Barry, Whiteman, & Macdermid Wadsworth, 2012). Calls for further research often cite the need for better variability in research questions and larger sampling on these topics (Barry et al., 2014), without expanding the scope of the research

Student veterans are a unique set of nontraditional students (Vacchi, 2012). Many theories and models exist that describe the challenges faced by student veterans (Barry et al., 2014). There is no existing theory that describes how student veterans succeed. As of the 2013–2014 academic year, there were roughly 750,000 student veterans, many of whom were undergraduates at 4-year public or private universities (National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics, 2015b). This made up nearly 5% of the entire student population at colleges and universities across the country (Chronicle of Higher Education, 2014).

### **Statement of Purpose**

The purpose of this study is to develop a substantive grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) that addresses how student veterans implement strategies to succeed. This fills a gap in contemporary research that focuses solely on challenges and deficits faced by Post 9/11 GI Bill era student veterans. Theory, as posited by Wacker (1998) “has these four components: definitions, domain, relationships, and predictive claims to answer the natural language questions of who, what, when, where, how, why, should, could and would” (p. 364). This study aims to address these elements of theory as they apply to the Post 9/11 student veteran and his or her success during their upper classman college years.

## **Research Question**

The guiding question in this study addresses are based on the process of succeeding as a student veteran. The question is in response to the problem statement above, that there is a focus in current research on student veterans' problems, with scant attention paid to other areas of their lives and personal development. The research question is what strategies do Post 9/11 student veterans employ to facilitate their success in post-secondary education?

**Potential significance of the study.** Investing in the education of student veterans is everyone's issue because of the sheer cost of the GI Bill program(s). In 2011, the VA spent roughly \$10 billion dollars on GI Bill benefits in 2011 (Wagner, Cave, & Winston, 2013). The Post 9/11 GI Bill provided educational opportunities for over 754,000 veterans in fiscal year 2013, with a cost exceeding \$13.68 billion dollars, or 8.5% of total veterans' programs expenditures (\$161.23 billion). Education assistance is the third largest veterans' program, behind compensation and pension (\$75.27 billion, 46.7%), and medical care (\$59.42 billion, 36.9%; National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics, 2015).

According to the Department of Labor, the average annual salary of a worker with a bachelor's degree is higher than one with just a high school diploma. This is also true for a worker with some college, or an associate's degree. Table 1.3 illustrates the difference in average wages over the last three years for the month of April (only) in the years 2013 to 2015 only (not seasonally adjusted).

Table 1.3

*Average Wages for Salaried Workers by Education Level, 2013-2015*

Month/Year	Degree Type			Delta of Low to High
	High School	Some College/ Associates	Bachelors or Higher	
April 2013	\$36,224	\$37,058	\$49,663	\$13,409
April 2014	\$36,050	\$37,167	\$50,212	\$14,162
April 2015	\$35,655	\$37,715	\$51,314	\$15,659

*Note.* Adapted from the U.S. Department of Labor Bureau of Labor and Statistics at <http://www.bls.gov/webapps/legacy/cpsatab4.htm>

A better-educated workforce increases productivity and adds to the nation's economic growth through increased tax revenue and consumer spending (Berger & Fisher, 2013). Improving the outcomes of these programs benefits student veterans, participating colleges and universities, and society as a whole. Angrist (1993) showed that, across all demographics, use of VA education benefits have a positive net impact on lifetime earnings, even with the monetary cost and opportunity cost of college attendance. This conclusion is based on data from a 1987 survey of veterans, and factors in use of the Montgomery GI Bill and Veterans Education Assistance Program (VEAP). The impact on veterans' earnings is a positive net of 6% per year over the lifetime of the veteran, compared to those that did not use their education benefits (Angrist, 1993, p. 649).

Veterans are oftentimes stereotyped in the workforce (Stone & Stone, 2015). Research on student veterans does not address stereotypes, per se, yet current literature is centered on the same issues that Stone and Stone (2015) addressed in their study on factors that affected hiring decisions for veterans. Negative stereotypical attributes are

more likely to lower employer generated job expectations for prospective veteran hirees, as opposed to positive ones (Stone & Stone, 2015). Having a college degree, on the other hand, is one way to increase job expectations for veterans who seek employment (Angrist, 1993).

The economic impact successful student veterans can have on society is only one issue affecting student veterans in higher education. The nation also has a moral obligation to take care of its service members after they leave the military. Since World War II, the federal government has provided education benefits for its military members upon separation (Altschuler & Blumin, 2009). Today, as support continues and evolves, President Bill Clinton's words, at the 50th anniversary of the GI Bill in 1995, are as relevant today as they were then: "[The GI Bill] gave generations of veterans a chance to get an education, to build strong families and good lives, and to build the nation's strongest economy ever, to change the face of America" (Altschuler & Blumin, p. 2, 2009).

Passage of the Post 9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Act of 2008 reinforced the moral obligation of the nation to provide veterans with opportunities for a college education. The introductory paragraph of Public Law 110-252, Title V §5002 (June 30, 2008) states:

On September 11, 2001, terrorists attacked the United States, and the brave members of the Armed Forces of the United States were called to the defense of the Nation. Service on active duty in the Armed Forces has been especially arduous for the members of the Armed Forces since September 11, 2001. The United States has a proud history of offering educational assistance to millions of

veterans, as demonstrated by the many “G.I. Bills” enacted since World War II. Educational assistance for veterans helps reduce the costs of war, assist veterans in readjusting to civilian life after wartime service, and boost the United States economy, and has a positive effect on recruitment for the Armed Forces. The current educational assistance program for veterans is outmoded and designed for peacetime service in the Armed Forces. The people of the United States greatly value military service and recognize the difficult challenges involved in readjusting to civilian life after wartime service in the Armed Forces. It is in the national interest for the United States to provide veterans who serve on active duty in the Armed Forces after September 11, 2001, with enhanced educational assistance benefits that are worthy of such service and are commensurate with the educational assistance benefits provided by a grateful Nation to veterans of World War II. (H.R. 2642, 2008)

The economic and moral importance of student veteran success is clear. Defining student veteran success is, however, something many educational, governmental, and private agencies struggle to achieve. The focus of current academic literature is on supporting student veterans as they struggle with challenges associated with mental and physical disorders, as well as transitional problems. If one understands how student veterans view and achieve success, one can share the strategies for success with others and focus on the positive aspects of being a student veteran, while simultaneously studying ways to overcome challenges.

To demonstrate the methods college’s use to assess students with military experience, Diramio and Jarvis (2011) adapted Schlossberg’s (1981, 1984) transition

model; they also modified Maslow's (1954) hierarchy of needs and Tinto's (1993) longitudinal model of institutional attrition to student veteran-specific tools (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011). Although these studies discuss specific areas like transitions, needs, and retention among student veterans, they are developed from reviews and do not use empirical data; most importantly, the studies do not involve any participation by or data gathered from the student veterans themselves.

Studies who reveal what it means to be a student veteran can help bridge gaps in understanding between veterans and their civilian counterparts. Hawn (2011) showed increasing dialog between student and non-veteran students can have both positive and negative effects. The positive effects included a better understanding on the part of the student veteran of what college life entails. Interaction between student veterans and non-student veterans helped the student veterans open up more and critically discuss issues in and out of the classroom. According to Hawn, the same could be said for the level of understanding the non-veteran students had of the military experience that their student veteran classmates had lived. There were, however, negative outcomes that needed to be managed. These included students taking offense to the nonchalant attitudes some student veterans had toward stories about people getting killed, and ideological differences about war in general (Hawn, 2011).

This grounded theory study is significant due to a dearth of empirical research on the subject of student veterans (Ackerman, DiRamio, & Mitchell, 2009; Livingston et al., 2011; Barry et al., 2014). A search of academic databases such as ProQuest© and Google Scholar© showed only five doctoral dissertations on student veterans focused on the Operation Iraqi Freedom/Operation Enduring Freedom (OIF/OEF) cohort of former

service members (Persky, 2010; Barnhart, 2011; Cate, 2011; McDonald, 2011; Murphy, 2011). This study adds to this body of knowledge by designing an original study instead of replicating the methods or theoretical rationale of others. It provides a new view of student veterans, one of success instead of facing challenges.

### **Chapter Summary**

Student veterans share a similar background; they either enlisted in the military or joined via one of the different commissioning sources. All student veterans in the study volunteered for service, and then decided to go to college after they completed. Those veterans who received financial assistance for college from the Veterans Administration can also claim their service was honorable. This means they achieved a level of success that resulted in an honorable discharge.

Studies addressing student veterans in terms of deficits offer recommendations on how college administrators, faculty, and advisors can assist student veterans with a multitude of issues. There are no existing studies addressing how student veterans succeed. Chapter 2 of this study examines the recent scholarly literature on student veterans, reviews findings from these studies, and synthesizes the work of the different authors to illustrate the point that student veterans are often seen as being challenged, instead of successful. An examination of the methodologies used in existing studies shows that there is no single, preferred method to address student veteran issues.

Chapter 3 details the proposed methodology for this study. Again, there is not a dominant methodology used in the field of student veteran studies. Grounded theory is used in this study as it best supports answering the research question: What strategies do student veterans employ to facilitate success in post-secondary education. Grounded

theory methodology allows for the discovery of a theory explaining student veteran success in an if/then, logical way. It will also predict success and guide improvement of student veteran strategies for success.

Chapter 4 includes study analysis and findings and presents data is presented in terms of subcategories and categories that lead to the development of a substantive grounded theory. The theory is examined using extant theory as part of the grounded theory methodology.

Implication and recommendations in Chapter 5 inform future research and add to the body of knowledge of student veterans in post-secondary education research. This proposed study informs researchers; student veteran groups/organizations; college administrators, faculty, and advisors; the military; and the Veterans Affairs Administration.



## **Chapter 2: Review of the Literature**

### **Introduction and Purpose**

Appreciating the task of studying student veterans requires knowledge of the current state of scholarly research surrounding them. As nontraditional learners (MacKinnon & Floyd, 2011; Vacchi, 2012), student veterans are one of many different diverse populations found on college campuses. All students with diverse backgrounds have different needs and bring different strengths and challenges to the college classroom (Quaye & Harper, 2014). Researchers who study student veteran needs use a variety of methods. The first step in understanding student veterans is to review the significant empirical findings and research methodology in current literature.

This chapter is a review of current research on student veterans in post-secondary education. The review examines recent changes in the makeup of the student veteran population, challenges due to neurobehavioral problems and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and issues with transitioning from the military to civilian/student life. This chapter presents significant findings that have added to or changed the state of the applicable science. It also includes a review of the research methodology used in the reviewed articles.

**Parameters.** Student veterans are post-secondary students who have previously served in any of branches of the military (38 U.S.C, 2011, §101). Vacchi (2012) defined student veterans as “any student who is a current or former member of the active duty

military, the National Guard, or reserves regardless of deployment status, combat experience, legal veteran status, or GI Bill use” (p. 17).

The search term, student veteran, initially yielded results that included numerous scholarly articles and studies. Further searches used the terms veteran students and military students. Many of the studies reviewed included service member participants or subjects on active or reserve duty status in their definition of student veterans. For the purpose of this review, the difference between the Vacchi (2012) and Title 38 definition of veteran is minor, and only applicable in studies that address transitions from military to civilian/college life. Except where noted by individual researchers for the purpose of their study, the term veteran does not imply any research participant, subject, or respondent’s direct or indirect participation in armed hostilities or combat. This paper includes only research on U.S. veterans and post-secondary institutions. Lastly, to remain consistent to the language used by the researchers, the terms college, university, post-secondary education, and institutes of higher learning, are used interchangeably. Additional literature was found using bibliographical cross-referencing. Scholarly articles, books, and book sections published on the topic of student veterans and the veteran population were found by examining the literature reviews of empirical research articles. Examples include research on neurobehavioral issues specific to veterans, transitioning from military to civilian life, health care and Veterans Administration challenges, and veteran employment trends. These are cited in this review to add contextual understanding regarding broader veteran’s topics.

The date range of the literature reviewed covers the years 2004-2016. The justification for this is, in 2004, the population of combat veterans in the United States

began to grow significantly (Cate, 2014) due to the wars in Iraq (Operation Iraqi Freedom, or OIF) and Afghanistan (Operation Enduring Freedom, or OEF). The student veteran population began to grow significantly in 2009 due to the implementation of the Post 9/11 GI Bill. This enhanced the opportunity for student veterans to attend college after separating from the military (38 U.S.C., 2011, §33; Cate, 2014; Steele, Salcedo, & Coley, 2010). Research on student veterans has increased in volume since 2009, likely due to the recommendation of DiRamio et al., (2008) to “update the current cohort (OEF/OIF) of student-veterans” (p. 75). A systematic review of the literature by Barry et al., (2014) confirms this.

Excluded from this review is literature focused solely on suicide among student veterans. This allows the study to focus on student veterans’ military and college experience with a goal of succeeding. This review excludes articles that do not address student veterans currently enrolled in college (i.e., veteran graduates).

### **Significant Empirical Findings**

The articles reviewed in this section cover a range of topics. These include changing student veteran demographics, challenges faced by student veterans with PTSD and other neurobehavioral issues, and struggles with transitioning from the military to civilian/college life.

**The changing face of student veterans on campus.** Ness, Rocke, Harrist, and Vroman (2014) explored difficulties associated with the post-secondary college experience of student veterans who were managing neurobehavioral issues such as traumatic brain injury and PTSD. For the study, the authors used an estimate of 660,000 veterans enrolled in post-secondary education institutions in 2012. This number is an

approximation derived using data from the Departments of Defense, Education, and Veterans Affairs over a three-year period, from 2009 to 2012 (Ness et al., 2014). Earlier studies compared the student veteran population to the non-military affiliated student population. For example, Radford (2011) showed 3.1% ( $n=657,000$ ) of the total undergraduate student population ( $n=20,928,000$ ) were student veterans in the 2007–2008 academic year (p. 4). Radford (2011) used nationally representative, post-secondary education data from the 2007–08 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study, and the 2004/09 Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study (p. 1). All data was collected prior to the implementation of the Post 9/11 GI Bill (Radford, 2011; 38 U.S.C., 2011).

Cate (2014) explained the difficulty in describing the demographics and educational outcomes of the Post 9/11 GI Bill cohort of student veterans. He examined student veterans' records from the U.S. Department of Education, National Student Clearinghouse, and the Department of Veterans Affairs. Using 898,895 records of first time use of the Montgomery GI Bill or Post 9/11 GI Bill from 2002 to 2010, this equaled 22.1% of all GI Bill recipients ( $n=4,067,476$ ) during this time frame. This population excluded student veterans who did not use GI Bill benefits due to the difficulty in identifying them (Cate, 2014). Cate (2014) stated this population was very small and would not have had a significant effect on the outcome of the study.

Cate (2014) also looked at completion rates for student veterans. Two opposing story lines drove the study. First, student veterans did not complete their degrees at a rate comparable to non-military affiliated students. Second, student veterans completed their degrees at a rate similar to or higher than their civilian counterparts did. The purpose of

these two story lines was to “allow researchers to begin to determine whether student veterans are a unique group of nontraditional students or potentially require greater assistance to aid in their postsecondary completion” (Cate, 2014, p. 20). The data showed, across a wide spectrum of institutions (public, not for profit private, proprietary), student veterans attained degrees at or above the level of their civilian counterparts. However, it generally took student veterans longer to complete their degrees, possibly due to dis-enrollment and re-enrollment due to military deployments (Cate, 2014).

The U.S. Department of Education tracks degree attainments for an associate’s degree out to the 4-year time to-completion, and bachelor’s out to six years, or the maximum amount of time it should require to complete these levels of degrees (Cate, 2014). Cate (2014) found the mean time for completion for student veterans to attain an associate’s degree is 5.3 years, and 6.1 years for a bachelor’s (p. 34).

Bell, Boland, Dudgeon, and Johnson (2013) studied student veteran insights on the Post 9/11 GI Bill. They addressed the demographic makeup of their research participants by using an e-mail list of student veterans at three university campuses in the Pacific-Northwest. The result showed 74% of the respondents ( $n=247$ ) were male and 26% were female. The majority, 78%, self-reported as Caucasian and 22% reported as minority or elected not to respond (Bell et al., 2013, pp. 250-251). This compares to Cate’s (2014) study, which showed males make up roughly 80% of the student veteran population; 40% identify as minority or other than Caucasian. Although the gender percentages in the two reports are similar, there is a large disparity in the percentage for minorities. Cate (2014) showed the demographic makeup of student veterans is difficult to track because of the lack of a national reporting system, due to privacy restrictions

with some national databases (for example, the VA does not report racial data). Other researchers studied perceptions about the Post 9/11 GI Bill Utilization (Bell et al., 2013). Ness et al., (2014) confined their research to gender (83% male) and marital status (29% married).

Colleges and universities wishing to expand services to student veterans must understand the current and projected demographic make-up of the population (Steele et al., 2010; Ness et al., 2014; Bell et al., 2013). Using data from many sources allows researchers to understand a veteran's demographic characteristics, while understanding who they are in terms of needs, strengths, and challenges (Kim & Cole, 2013; Cate, 2014). Whatever the source of information about student veteran demographics, the Post 9/11 GI Bill seems to be the most reliable resource for data collection (Cate, 2014).

Most respondents in the study by Bell et al., (2013) felt positive about their experiences with the Post 9/11 GI Bill. Ninety-one percent ( $n=247$ ) reported using the Post 9/11 GI Bill, with the remainder either using Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment (VR&E) benefits or other benefits. Roughly 83% of respondents selected agree or strongly agree as to whether they were satisfied with their benefits. Seventy-two percent felt the process of applying for benefits was easy, and 89% were confident that the skills they gained from their education would help them greatly in their future career (Bell et al., 2013).

This level of satisfaction showed a positive overall view to the program. Bell et al., (2013) presented narrative responses from their study that revealed those on the unsatisfied or frustrated spectrum had real issues and concerns. Concerns included perceived poor customer service from the VA and university and confusion and

frustration as to how benefits actually affected the student veteran (Bell et al., 2013). Responses reflected a lack of understanding as to how the program worked. For example, one respondent stated the living stipend, known as the Basic Allowance for Housing (BAH) was only for full-time students, and sometimes student veterans would not receive an entire month worth of BAH for a partial month of school (Bell et al., 2013). Unfortunately, this shows a lack of understanding by either the student veteran, benefits counsellor, or both. Veterans enrolled from half time to full-time status receive BAH, even though it is pro-rated starting at 50% for half time, to 100% for full-time and more. Also, Post 9/11 GI Bill benefits are figured in days, not months. Therefore, if a student veteran is in a program that starts halfway into a calendar month, he or she will only receive BAH for the days at a rate of 1/30th of the BAH per day of school (the VA calculates every month to be 30 days) (38 U.S.C., 2011, §33).

Understanding the nature of the student veteran population is an important factor for campus administrators and faculty. Osborne (2014) found that many veterans felt misunderstood on campus. Many of the participants (9 out of 14) in his study stated that they felt there was a stigma about veterans, and the campus setting was very “liberal” and “anti-military” (Osborne, 2014 p. 254). These factors led student veterans to feel as if they should not advertise the fact that they were veterans and simply try to blend in. They felt vulnerable and susceptible to inaccurate perceptions about what it meant to be a veteran (Osborne, 2014).

With the increasing number of student veterans, there is a need to examine what perceptions exist as to barriers and facilitators to achieving success in college. Norman et al., (2015) concluded student veterans are “a unique campus cohort who may benefit

from tailored academic services institution supports to acclimate to campus life” (p. 709). Their findings showed there were a number of positive and negative views of self, institutions of higher learning, and policies towards veterans. Policy issues were those dealing with the Post 9/11 GI Bill availability and administration. All of these views were often in competition and/or in conflict with one another, and negative views were exacerbated by the presence of PTSD or other neurobehavioral problem (Norman et al., 2015).

**PTSD and other neurobehavioral issues.** The recent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have created a large cohort of veterans that have actively participated in combat are now separating from the military (Ackerman et al., 2009; Barry et al., 2014). Studies by Bryan et al., (2014), and Ness, Rocke, Harrist, and Vroman (2014) reported that roughly two thirds of student veterans state they deployed to a combat zone. The authors in both studies stated the relationship between combat exposure and PTSD may show a higher correlation when self-reported after military service. Both studies stated that this could be due to possible concerns with the stigma of mental health issues while on active or reserve duty (Bryan et al., 2014; Ness et al., 2014).

Smith-Osborne (2012) reviewed literature on the topic of supported educational service for student veterans with PTSD. She found that out of the 142 articles that met the criteria for supported educational services, most ( $n=112$ ) did not mention or support student veterans. More detailed evaluation, revealed more articles ( $n=27$ ) did not meet the criteria for student veterans with PTSD. The remaining articles ( $n=5$ ) included two that the author had published or was in the process of publishing (Smith-Osborne, 2012).



Supported educational service for student veterans with PTSD tend to focus on improving overall quality of life issues. Many models for PTSD treatment in the civilian sector support this approach. Even with limited research available, Smith-Osborn (2012) points to positive trends in both the direction of PTSD research for student veterans, and programs taking place on college campuses. Many veterans themselves point to integrating supportive educational services with other support programs, such as mental and behavioral health (Ellison et al., 2012).

Ellison et al. (2012) studied 31 veterans who were in college, actively planning to attend, or had completed some level of postsecondary school. All participants either self-reported PTSD symptoms or had a diagnosis of PTSD from a service provider. The purpose of the study was to determine what supportive educational programs the participants viewed as most needed. The results of the needs assessment showed that education planning, integration into college life, and VA benefits counselling were the three focus areas the participants strongly recommended (Ellison et al., 2012).

Combining these services with those that support PTSD therapy and management, starts with identifying those who suffer from PTSD and/or other neurobehavioral disorders.

PTSD is often referred to as an invisible wound (Tanielian & Jaycox, 2008). Ramchand, Karney, Chan Osilla, Burns, and Caldarone (2008) reviewed 22 studies to look for emergent themes regarding PTSD among troops returning from combat. What they found was there was a lack of research on the effects of PTSD and traumatic and mild traumatic brain injuries (TBI and mTBI) due to several factors. These included difficulties with consistent definitions of PTSD, TBI, and mTBI, and the release of information to researchers due to privacy concerns. Convenience sampling was used in

most studies, which limited the ability of researchers to generalize findings across the entire military. None of this affected the overall quality of the reviewed research and the findings pointed to the increased likelihood of some form of neurobehavioral issues faced by combat veterans (Ramchand et al., 2008).

Recent research reveals the difficulty in predicting the issues veterans face when they have been out of the military for less than one year, such as preparing for or just entering college. Larson and Norman (2014) examined functional difficulties associated with the transition from military to civilian life for recently separated post 9/11 era veterans and found five possible negative outcomes, which included patterns of unlawful behavior, financial problems, work problems, limitations due to mental health, and overall challenges with adjustment to civilian life. A survey of 2,943 separating active duty service members (those preparing to leave the military) yielded responses over a four-month period at six different installations during Transition Assistance Program (TAP) classes (Larson & Norman, 2014). This data was collected prior to the mandated expansion of TAP programs in fiscal year 2015, which required a separate training track for service members who wished to attend college after leaving the military (Department of Defense, 2015b).

Of the participants in the initial survey, 25% agreed to be contacted after nine months ( $n=2,116$ ), and responded to follow up questions. Of those, 92% were male and 73% were White, with a mean number of combat deployment of 1.6. In addition, 37.7% of respondents indicated having mental health problem symptoms prior to separation and 34.4% reported symptoms during reintegration in to civilian life (Larson & Norman, 2014, p. 420). PTSD was shown to have a positive correlation with all of the negative

outcome related behaviors except for unlawful behavior. The results of this study were consistent with previous studies done with Vietnam Veterans. PTSD is shown to be a reliable predictor associated with financial and work problems, as well as limitations in day-to-day life and difficulty adjusting to civilian life (Larson & Norman, 2014).

Hoge et al. (2004) found that a diagnosis of PTSD with the military members and among veterans is not associated with gender, race, age, branch of service, or deployment history. Early detection, diagnosis, and treatment are shown to be effective in managing the symptoms and improving day-to-day life in veterans. Perceived barriers to care exist, such as a lack of trust of mental health professionals to concerns about career advancement and stigmas (Hoge et al., 2004). Hoge et al. (2004) used the National Center for PTSD 17 item Check List (PCL) to screen active duty Marines and Army soldiers who had recently deployed to Iraq or Afghanistan. They found among a population of active-duty service members ( $n=6,153$ ), 731 screened positive for PTSD symptoms. Of these respondents, 65% felt that seeking help would cause them to appear weak and 63% feared that their unit leadership would treat them differently if they did so. The perception that fellow unit members would lose confidence in them, their career advancement would suffer, and that they would lack of support with getting time off from work to seek help, were perceived as barriers by more than 50% of the respondents (Hoge et al., 2004).

Lu, Duckhart, O'Malley, and Dobscha (2011) showed many recently diagnosed veterans who sought care at Veterans Administration facilities failed to follow through with a thorough treatment plan. The author's study of OIF-OEF and non-veterans stated significantly fewer of OIF-OEF veterans completed an adequate course of treatment

compared to non-OEF veterans (29% and 36% respectively) in the first year of treatment after diagnosis (Lu et al., 2011, p. 946). The findings of Hoge et al. (2004) and Lu et al., (2011) revealed that the perceived barriers to PTSD care and the low utilization rates for available care after diagnosis were possibly related.

PTSD can increase the student veteran's anxiety and fear levels, as well as decrease the ability to learn (Elliot, Gonzalez, & Larsen, 2011). Elliot et al., (2011) studied 104 student veterans from a mid-sized Midwestern college and found a positive and significant correlation between self-reported PTSD symptoms and alienation on campus, intimate relationship strain, alcohol problems, and overall functional limits. The presence of a social support system was significant and negatively correlated with PTSD (Elliot et al., 2011).

Barry et al., (2012) demonstrated the positive correlation between PTSD and alcohol problems, with the potential for related negative consequences. They hypothesized student veterans that reported PTSD symptoms would abuse alcohol at a higher rate than their non-military student peers and other student veterans. (Barry et al., 2012). The sample ( $n=281$ ) for their study included 145 (115 males, 30 female) student veterans and 136 (60 males, 76 female) civilian students. Student veterans were older ( $M=31.21$  years) compared to civilian students ( $M=24.64$  years). Student veterans in the study were also more likely to be married (46%) than were civilian students, at 10% (Barry et al., 2012, p. 417).

The study further showed male student veterans drank at a rate very similar to that of their civilian counterparts. The male student veterans tended to not identify issues with binge drinking as being associated with negative short or long-term health

consequences, for example, they did not think they had a drinking problem. Female student veterans in the study drank the least of any demographic group. Although the authors did not prove the first part of their hypothesis, they believed by not identifying their drinking habits as problematic, male student veterans were creating the potential for long term health problems, as compared to students who acknowledged their drinking was a problem. Those who identified their drinking as problematic were more likely to seek help later in life (Barry et al., 2012). The second part of the author's hypotheses, regarding the correlation of PTSD with problematic drinking, was demonstrated by the result of the study and supported findings from earlier studies. The results indicated binge drinking was positively linked to PTSD and other neurobehavioral problems for student veterans, but negatively related to the same symptoms for their civilian students' peers (Barry et al., 2012, pp. 419-420).

Another factor that PTSD and other neurobehavioral issues (such as depression) can affect is grade point average (GPA). Bryan et al., (2014) surveyed 276 student veterans from colleges across the US to examine if there was a correlation between self-reported PTSD and/or depression symptoms, and academic performance, as measured by GPA. The authors looked at four possible academic problems in relationship to reported PTSD or depression symptoms: "Turning in an assignment or paper late, receiving a lower grade than expected on (but still passing) an exam or quiz, failing an exam or quiz, and skipping or choosing not to attend class" (Bryan et al., p. 1038). The results showed that student veterans reported relatively low occurrences of the academic problems listed above, with roughly 70% reporting zero to one occurrence of each. The results showed student veterans with a mean GPA of 3.45 (SD = .49); those respondents reporting severe

PTSD and/or depression symptoms had a mean GPA 0.25 lower than the overall population. Also, there was a negative correlation between the severity of PTSD and depression symptoms, and receiving a grade lower than expected (Bryan et al., 2014).

Studies that highlighted PTSD as an issue for student veterans tend not to look at its impact on others. One such group who needs consideration is the educators themselves. Barnard-Brak et al., (2011) conducted a study of the viewpoints of educators regarding PTSD in student veterans. It showed that educators have an overall positive view of service members, and most tend to have positive feelings about military service. In the study, researchers asked a group of educators ( $n=4,554$ ) about negative views of service in the military and about perceptions of war, as opposed to positive views of the service of veterans. The educators tended to more negative views of war and military service, and while having a positive view of service members (Barnard-Brak et al., 2011).

The educators then answered questions as to their beliefs on their own efficacy towards teaching and supporting student veterans. The educators felt prepared to have student veterans with PTSD in their classroom, were confident about teaching student veterans with PTSD, and felt they could direct student veterans with PTSD to necessary supportive services (Barnard-Brak et al., 2011).

Not all studies point to student veterans having mental health issues at a rate greater to the general student population. Cleveland, Branscum, Bovbjerg, and Thorburn (2015) examined the 2011 American College Health Association–National College Health Assessment and matched student and non-student veteran results and found no statistically significant data showing mental health issues occurred at a higher rate among student veterans. Instead, they noted that, over a 12-month period, student veterans were

less likely than their non military affiliated peers to have experienced feelings of being overwhelmed (Cleveland et al., 2015).

**Transitioning from the military to higher education.** Leaving the military requires one to adjust to a new way of life. It is a life with different rules, norms, and mores. Naphan and Elliot (2015) referred to this transition as a “role-exit” (p. 38). Role exit has four stages: first doubts, seeking and weighing role alternatives, the turning point, and establishing the ex-role identity (Wallace, 1989). Student veterans are likely to go through these stages because their identity is shaped in part by the military environment. Veterans, especially those who saw combat, possess conditioned normative responses based on hypervigilance and aggression. These traits have shown to be necessary in the military, but dysfunctional and counterproductive in civilian life (Naphan & Elliot, 2015).

Naphan and Elliot’s (2015) research found five themes from interviews with research participants ( $n=11$ ), all of whom served in the military after September 11, 2001. The themes derived from the interview narratives were: “the military’s emphasis on task cohesion, military structure, military responsibilities and release anxieties, combat experience, and social cohesion in combat units” (Naphan & Elliot, 2015, p. 40). The individual themes communicated a sense of belonging. Research participants felt they had made a difference every day they served and reported a bond with the members of their unit that was difficult or impossible to replicate in the civilian world. The sense of structure that participants spoke of was challenging to let go of and not easily replaced in civilian or school life (Naphan & Elliot, 2015). The additional freedoms the participants enjoyed in their new role were not necessarily welcomed, as they had become

accustomed to the relatively rigid military lifestyle. Lastly, a sense of responsibility was missing for the participants themselves. They missed the connection with and senses of shared responsibility with and for others. With combat veterans, missing this responsibility was amplified because they learned in combat about the increased cost of mistakes and failure, such as the potential loss of life of fellow unit members, as noted in the description of their experiences (Naphan & Elliot, 2015).

Managing transition alone can be a challenge, but is made easier with assistance and understanding of the transition process. Naphan and Elliot (2015) stated switching roles from service member to civilian or student veteran is one of these challenges. As Schlossberg, Waters, and Goodman (1995) said “(a) given role change can be more or less difficult (and have greater or lesser impact), depending on whether the new role is a loss or a gain, positive or negative, or has explicit norms and expectations for the new incumbent” (p. 56).

Other studies using different methods came up with similar results. Tomar and Stoffel (2014) used a photovoice methodology (Wang, 1999) to examine two student veterans at a midwestern college campus (Tomar & Stoffel, 2014). Their findings showed themes similar to Naphan and Elliot (2015), in that student veterans tended to feel a sense of belonging to their previous military organization that is difficult to replicate in the civilian world. They also showed there is a sense of struggling with transition to campus life and challenges fitting in. In contrast, the new role the student veterans found themselves in began to get easier to accept over time (Tomar & Stoffel, 2014).



DiRamio, Ackerman, and Mitchell (2008) used grounded theory methodology (Bryant & Charmaz, 2010; Glaser & Strauss, 1967) as a research epistemology to study the transitions of student veterans. They interviewed 25 student veterans from three separate universities, and selected a combination of men ( $n=19$ ) and women ( $n=6$ ) who served in Iraq or Afghanistan between 2003 and 2007. Former active and reserve component members were represented in the sample (DiRamio et al., 2008). The authors used open ended research questions such as, “Please describe your service” and “Please describe your current college experience” to allow the participants the freedom to provide rich, detailed background into their experiences (DiRamio et al., 2008, pp. 78-79).

DiRamio et al., (2008) stated the themes that emerged from the data fit Schlossberg, Lynch, and Chickering’s (1989) moving in, moving through, and moving out model. The student veterans' military service had a moving in period that explained why they joined the service and what it was like to be called to serve overseas in a combat zone. The moving through period included combat duty, the memorable experiences from their overall military service, and possibly earning college credits whilst on active or reserve duty. Finally, the moving out period dealt with transition programs in the military that assisted the prospective student veteran with separation and academic preparedness (DiRamio et al., 2008).

DiRamio et al. (2008) stated one of their key findings was the need for a holistic approach to student veteran transitions, and they called for a multipronged approach that centered on the student veteran and an “orientation coach” (p. 93). Additional elements of their recommended approach included financial aid assistance and counselling, support from the disabilities office (as necessary), academic advising, increased faculty

awareness to veteran specific issues, and increased institutional research on veterans' issues (DiRamio et al., 2008).

Ryan et al., (2011) also used Schlossberg's transition model (Schlossberg et al., 1995) and applied to it student veterans. They examined the needs, strengths, and challenges faced by student veterans as they transitioned from the military to college. They examined a series of secondary data sets that showed an overall lack of support systems in colleges and universities around the United States. Based on their findings, they presented a recommended list of topics for academic advisors to consider when working with student veterans. The list introduced advisors to "the strengths, needs, and challenges associated with student veterans to explore during advising sessions, and the potential supports and services to which advisors can help connect student veterans within the framework of the 4 Ss of Schlossberg's transition model" (Ryan et al., 2011, p. 56).

The 4 Ss of Schlossberg's transition model are situation, self, support, and strategies (Ryan et al., 2011; Schlossberg et al., 1995). Each student veteran's situation is different and defined by factors, such as reasons for the transition and the timing. Self means they all have different personal assets and liabilities in terms of internal and external factors. Functional and social support systems vary from person to person, as do strategies for coping with transitions (Goodman, Schlossberg, & Anderson, 2006).

Ryan et al. (2011) stated student veterans have strengths that include the skills and values gained from serving in the military and the ability to work in a diverse environment. For student veterans, the transition from the military to college is not the first major cultural shift they have experienced. Joining the military is an important

moment in the student veteran's life. Leaving the military is just as important, and the impact is different for everyone. The effect of the impact on the individual can cause student veterans' needs to vary greatly from individual to individual. College administrators, faculty, staff, and advisors must acknowledge this. Academic advisors should be aware that physical disabilities, neurobehavioral issues, and assistance with learning new cultural and procedural norms are potential challenges that student veterans face. When understanding the specific challenges of each individual student veterans is not feasible, it is acceptable to appreciate him or her in the general terms of the student veteran population (Ryan et al., 2011).

One challenge that has been examined specifically is the ability to write at the college level. Whereas traditional students have the advantage of honing their writing skills in secondary educations immediately before starting college, student veterans experience a break from academic writing, and are exposed to writing in a non-academic setting, while in the military. Hinton (2013) studied the experiences of 10 student veterans during their transition to college level composition, and the effect that military style writing had on them, and concluded student veterans were very confident writers coming into college. Because their military writing experience is ultimately viewed as negative, student veterans have to unlearn what they knew in order to adjust to their new settings (Hinton, 2013). Hinton (2013) offered a solution that addresses the paradigm in college that students might focus strictly on academic mastery to one that acknowledges other types of prior writing mastery. The recommendation goes on to say how to address the individual needs of each writer, based on their skill level (Hinton, 2013).

Issues like this can be compounded by a lack of understanding of the student veteran experience by academic advisors. Parks, Walker, and Smith (2015) found in a mixed methods study involving 51 student veterans that academic advisors lack an understanding of what being a student veteran means and, according to the participants, causes advisors to stereotype them. Four participants took part in extended interviews and the following themes emerged. First, there was a lack of knowledge of the student veteran experience on the part of the advisors. Second, student veterans wanted to be recognized as individuals and not lumped into a special category. Third, all student veterans felt that advisors should research more about student veteran issues and capabilities. Lastly, all of the participants wanted help integrating with traditional students, but felt stymied by their peers' lack of knowledge and acceptance (Parks et al., 2015).

Livingston et al., (2011) used 15 research participants at a 4-year mid-sized southeastern U.S. college. Each of the participants had attended college prior to joining the military and had re-enrolled at the completion of their term of service. Until the mid-twentieth century, the school been an all-male, private military college and still maintained a strong tradition of military history. At the time of the study, it was gender integrated with no compulsive military component in regards to pursuit of a degree. The study focused on the re-enrollment experience of the research participants, using Schlossberg's transition theory (Livingston et al., 2011; Schlossberg et al., 1995).

Livingston et al., (2011) used a grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) due to the lack of current literature on student veterans in transition and general knowledge of the topic (Livingston et al., 2011). This was in contrast to their theoretical

model description that used Schlossberg's transition theory (Schlossberg et al., 1995). Grounded theory states that theory is developed inductively from the data and is not tested against it (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Of the 15 research participants, 14 identified as male and all 15 were White/Caucasian with a mean age of 25. Themes from the data centered on two elements: a sense of auxiliary or outside aid, and how to navigate the re-enrollment process. Auxiliary aid was defined as the availability of formal and informal support systems and the campus cultural attitude towards student veterans. Navigating re-enrollment focused on financial considerations, remembering and forgetting difficult moments from their past, dealing with change, the unfamiliar structure and routine of academia, and the lack of understanding towards the student veteran's unique experiences. (Livingston et al., 2011). The authors stated the findings validated Schlossberg's transition theory (Schlossberg et al., 1995), while at the same time presenting their own theory in the form of a descriptive model. Their conclusions addressed the challenges colleges and universities can face if they cannot identify, or identify with, the student veteran population (Livingston et al., 2011).

Griffin and Gilbert (2015) used the four Ss (situation, self, support, and strategies) of Schlossberg's theory to study the transition of military personnel to higher education. For situation, the authors examined the potential stress caused by the change from military to college culture, and issues with possible educational benefit delays. Self-challenges included mental and physical disabilities and the difficulties associated with navigating unfamiliar support systems in order to receive help. Support focused on social support and integration as it applies to student veterans. Lastly, strategies addressed the

ability of the student veteran to manage all of the challenges previously noted, either on their own or with the help of others through formal or informal networks (Goodman et al., 2006; Griffin & Gilbert, 2015).

Griffin and Gilbert (2015) interviewed research participants from seven different colleges/universities, which consisted of a mix of students ( $n=28$ ) and faculty and administrators ( $n=72$ ). The student veteran interviews were semi-structured and consisted of four questions, designed using the author's interpretation of Schlossberg's 4 Ss, and intended to elicit responses from each student veteran who described his/her unique experience. The interviews with faculty and administrators examined their knowledge of veterans' programs on campus and their perceptions of student veterans' use of services (Griffin & Gilbert, 2015).

The study identified three main themes: (a) both groups identified the importance of student veterans' specific support systems, offices, and programs; (b) there was a need for student veteran specific policies, ranging from financial aid assistance, to providing assistance for health and academic services; and (c) there was need for a voice representing student veterans in the student body, concerning the relationship between student veterans and the rest of the campus population. With a growing student veteran population on campuses across the US, these issues are not only applicable to the schools involved in the studies; they are relevant for many universities and colleges that want to support their student veteran population (Griffin & Gilbert, 2015).

Olsen et al., (2014) surveyed 10 student veterans using semi-structured interviews in order to explore the experience of the participant's transition from the military to higher education. Seventy percent ( $n=7$ ) of the participants had also served overseas in a

combat zone. The participants discussed their leadership ability, discipline, and broader perspective as strengths they brought to their college experience. Financial stress, challenges with cultural adjustments, and poor social integration were the main challenges presented by the author's analysis of the participants' interviews responses. The analysis showed four themes from the interviews: "Perceived strengths helpful in the college environment, perceived challenges experienced in their college experience, ideal support resources, and perceptions regarding low participation of student veterans in established support programs" (Olsen et al., 2014, p. 103). The first two themes are internal to the student veteran; the second two focus on the interaction between the student veteran and the institution. These themes are consistent with other researchers (Griffin & Gilbert, 2015; Jones, 2013).

Olsen's et al., (2014) institutional related findings were associated with the perceived challenges regarding assistance with financial aid and administrative requirements. Participants noted they would like to get help with social networking, and see their school offer services where student veterans could talk, professionally, to someone that understood them. Problems with low student veteran participation in existing programs was stated to be a problem of a lack of free time, a desire for anonymity, and living off campus. The authors' findings were similar to other researchers (Ackerman, DiRamio, & Mitchell, 2009; DiRamio et al., 2008).

A similar study by Jones (2013) presented a phenomenological examination with three research participants to "describe and understand the identity development of student veterans as they transitioned from active duty service members to students at higher educational institutions" (p. 3). The author used criterion sampling in order to

ensure commonality of experience, while also ensuring he had diversity in terms of race and gender. There was one African American male selected for the study, one African American female, and one White male (Jones, 2013).

From this study, three themes emerged (Jones, 2013) which were consistent with other recent studies (DiRamio et al., 2008; Griffin & Gilbert, 2015). First, transitioning from the military to the civilian world is challenging and discovering one's identity can be difficult. Simply labeling student veterans does not take into account many other aspects of a person's being. A student veteran can also be a parent, minority, physically or mentally handicapped, religious, politically active, and many other things in addition to a student veteran. Second, the role higher education plays in a student veteran's life may be much different from that of a traditional student. Student veterans may question the role that higher education plays in their success; they may wonder why they are in school when they have life experience and skills that could suit them in the work force. Third, the research participants noted the need for dedicated services for student veterans (Jones, 2013). Jones concluded more work is needed to identify specific programs and recommended practices post-secondary institutes can adopt to assist their student veteran population (see also: Ackerman et al., 2009; Cate & Albright, 2015; DiRamio et al., 2008; Elliot et al., 2011; Griffin & Gilbert, 2015; Livingston et al., 2011; Naphan & Elliot, 2015; Olsen et al., 2014; Vacchi, 2012;).

### **Methodological Approaches for Research on Student Veterans**

The following section of this chapter discusses the details of the research methodology in each paper and categorizes each study with others that use similar designs. The categories are quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods studies



(Creswell, 2014). The philosophical worldview and paradigms of the author(s) are presented for review, if applicable.

**Quantitative methods.** The landscape for student veterans has changed over the last decade and many researchers have examined the change. Cate (2014) used secondary data from multiple governmental databases to design his study on student veteran data to describe what the student veteran population in America looked like. He discussed the strengths and weaknesses of the data sets and how these related to the problems addressed (Cate, 2014). The U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics maintains multiple databases that, in the view of Cate (2014), have incomplete, confusing, and poorly managed information. The Integrated Post-Secondary Education Data System (IPEDS) and the National Post-Secondary Student Aid Study (NPAS) are two of these. For the purposes of Cate's study (2014), neither of these was sufficient by themselves. Although the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) is able to track nearly all student veterans through veterans' education usage information, until recently, they were not required (or even able) to track educational outcomes (Cate, 2014).

Cate (2014) designed a "secondary data quantitative analysis study to report student veterans' post-secondary completion rates, based on initial school enrollment cohorts, student veterans' time-to-completion, their highest level of education, and their majors or degree fields" (p. 21). He also explored differences in the primary outcomes of student veterans based on demographic variables. Data collection methods included requesting student veteran information from the VA through the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA). In collaboration with the VA, the National Student Clearing House, and

Student Veterans of America collaborated to “obtain completion data for 1 million student veterans who initially used their GI Bill benefits between 2002 and 2010. Data analyses were conducted using descriptive and inferential statistics including frequencies, means, and crosstabs” (Cate, 2014, p. 21).

Radford (2011) also studied student veteran demographics, and used many of the same databases as Cate (2014). Radford (2011) examined the student veteran population enrolled during the academic year 2007-2008 and presented a profile for the year before the Post 9/11 GI Bill went into full effect. This is a valuable starting point for researchers interested in the changing demographics caused by the Post 9/11 GI Bill. One year later, the student veteran population began to increase dramatically with the full implementation of the Post 9/11 GI Bill (Kim & Cole, 2013). Radford (2011) also used multiple secondary data sets from government organizations. These were the 2008 NPAS (NPAS 08) and the 2004/2009 Beginning Post-Secondary Student Longitudinal Study (BPS 04/09). For the purpose of her study, Radford included student veterans and military service members who were still serving on active duty, unlike Cate (2014), who removed actively serving members of the military from his data set. The other main difference in data sets is Radford’s (2011) use of longitudinal data, which tracked students over time instead of looking at each academic year as a distinct data set, as Cate (2014) did. Radford’s study accounts for complex sampling errors involved with the NPAS 08 and BPS 04/09 data sets using “the balanced repeated replication (BRR) and Jack-Knife II (JK2) methods to adjust variance estimation for the complex sample design.” (Radford, 2011, p. 16). Non-sampling errors are generally attributed to coding

errors, incomplete portions of data sets, and lack of participation by potential respondents and institutions involved in the NPAS 08 and BPS 04/09 studies (Radford, 2011).

Kim and Cole (2013) used the 2012 National Study of Student Engagement (NSSE) as a secondary data source to explore how student veterans and service members engaged in on campus activities and how they used support services, relative to their civilian/non-military counterparts. The sample of student veterans/military service member students who responded ( $n=2,505$ ) was compared against over 88,000 civilian/non-military respondents, to study engagement on campus. All data was examined and the author stated all results are statistically significant. No other discussion on methodology or validity was presented.

C. J. Bryan, A. O. Bryan, Hinkson Jr., Bichrest, and Ahern (2014) used primary data collection to study the correlation between PTSD, depression, and grade point average (GPA) among student veterans. The subjects in this study ( $n=422$ ) were asked to self-report their GPA because the researchers stated other research had shown self-reported GPA and institution-reported GPA had a high correlation ( $.90 \pm 0.05$ ) and the discrepancies did not affect research outcomes. The Patient Health Questionnaire-9 (PHQ-9; Kroenke, Spitzer, & Williams, 2001) measured depressive symptoms in the subjects over the preceding two weeks. The PTSD Checklist-Short Form (PCL-SF; Lang & Stein, 2005) gave the researchers an assessment of the participants' PTSD symptoms (if present). Subjects answered questions regarding academic problems by completing a survey, scaled from zero (never) to five (more than 10 times) that asked questions about missed/late assignments, skipping class, and failing an assignment (C. J. Bryan et al., 2014).

After screening out subjects who did not have a grade point average (GPA) due to being a first term student ( $n=146$ ), the authors examined the responses of the remaining participants ( $n=276$ ) and correlated the descriptive statistics to the PTSD, depression, and academic problem scores (Bryan et al., 2014). The study used secondary analysis to develop cutoff scores to determine positive signs and symptoms of depression (Manea, Gilbody, & McMillan, 2012) and PTSD (Lang & Stein, 2005). The severity of depression and PTSD were used in a regression analysis to determine if there was a correlation between PTSD, depression, lower GPA, and academic problems. Also, the severity of PTSD and/or depression were used to determine if there was a positive correlation to the corresponding severity/increase of academic problems and lowering of GPA. Results showed that there is in fact there is a “significant association between” PTSD, depression, lower GPA, and general academic problems (C. J. Bryan et al., 2014, p. 1040).

Larson and Norman (2014) collected primary data to conduct a longitudinal study of separating service members to determine if there were prospective predictors associated with combat exposure, PTSD and depression, and functional limitations upon re-entering the civilian world. A series of scales were adapted for the study, which included a resiliency scale (Connor & Davidson, 2003), and scales for PTSD, alcohol use, and criminal activity. From an initial population of 2,116, approximately 461 respondents chose to answer follow-up questions, though not all surveys were filled out in their entirety, which created different  $n$  values for different variables (Larson & Norman, 2014). A series of bivariate correlations, regression models, and multivariate

analysis were conducted in order to ensure validity between all of the variables involved (Larson & Norman, 2014).

Hoge et al., (2004) and Lu et al., (2011) collected primary data and used methods that relied on secondary analysis tools to develop data from their research subjects. For example, the PTSD Checklist from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual [DSM], 4th Edition, Text Revised (4<sup>th</sup> ed.,; *DSM-IV-TR* American Psychiatric Association, 2000) to gauge mental health issues, primarily PTSD (Hoge et al., 2004; Lu et al., 2011). Both studies used volunteers from a naturally formed group (veterans) in a quasi-experimental study. Neither study explicitly defined a theory or hypothesis (Hoge et al., 2004; Lu et al., 2011).

Quantitative studies in this review covered a range of topics from student veteran populations (Cate, 2014; Radford, 2011) to PTSD and depression among student veterans, combat veterans, and recently separated veterans (Hoge et al., 2004; C. J. Bryan et al., 2014; Larson & Norman, 2014). The methods employed in these studies were similar across the topics. In all of the quantitative studies reviewed, the researcher used different sampling techniques to be more selective in recruiting research participants (Creswell, 2013).

All of the research in this section used post-positivist worldviews. The utilization of secondary data and surveys were the primary method of data collection in the studies. All of the studies in this section acknowledged the imperfect nature of their data and findings, and presented research using established standards of reliability and validity (Creswell, 2014).

**Qualitative approaches.** Researchers used Schlossberg's transition theory (Goodman et al., 2006) and grounded theory methodology (Bryant & Charmaz, 2010; Glaser & Strauss, 1967) in two of the articles reviewed in this paper. DiRamio, Ackerman, and Mitchell (2008), and Livingston, Havice, Cawthon, and Fleming (2011), examined student veterans in different settings in the context of transitioning from the military to college. DiRamio et al. (2008) justified the use of grounded theory when they stated it "is particularly well suited for this study because it emphasizes how people's subjective thoughts and feelings are used to make meaning of the world" (p. 77). There are a number of indicators in this study that lead the reader to believe a true grounded theory methodology was used. First, DiRamio and Jarvis (2011) pointed to the development of themes to describe the experiences of student veterans. Grounded theory methodology uses data to develop a theory, grounded in the data. Second, the rationale for using grounded theory does not fit the purpose of the methodology (Charmaz, 2014).

Livingston et al. (2011) rationalized their use of grounded theory by pointing to the lack of literature and knowledge on the topic of student veterans transitioning to college. DiRamio et al. (2008) used purposive sampling with a combination of non-proportional quota and snowball techniques (Creswell, 2013). Livingston et al., (2011) also used the snowball technique, but started with convenience sampling (Creswell, 2013) to reduce constraints caused by access and time (Livingston et al., 2011). However, the use of Schlossberg's transition theory (Schlossberg, 1981) as an extant theory to examine interview data also violates the role of grounded theory methodology (Charmaz, 2014). Finally, neither study posited a new theory in their findings and simply

referred back to the agreement with Schlossberg (DiRamio et al., 2008; Livingston et al., 2011).

DiRamio et al. (2008) used member-checking methods (Holosko & Thyer, 2011) to ensure accuracy of the transcripts from all research participants. Each researcher reviewed the transcripts independently in order to ensure completeness and check for inconsistencies. Pattern coding (Saldaña, 2013) was used to group data into more manageable themes, which were used to build a conceptual framework to describe their findings (DiRamio et al., 2008). More true to what Saldaña (2013) refers to as the “grounded theory’s coding canon” (p. 51) techniques, Livingston et al. (2011) used “open, axial, and selective coding” (p. 319). Five credibility and validity checks, to include member checking, ensured the accuracy of the interview data and resolved any inconsistencies. The final check involved the researcher’s use of field notes to perform one last crosscheck (Livingston et al., 2011).

Griffin and Gilbert (2015) used student veterans and post-secondary education administrators and faculty from different institutions to address gaps in literature on the inter-relatedness of institutions and the student veteran (Griffin & Gilbert, 2015). They used purposive sampling (Creswell, 2013) to maximize opportunities to gain specific insights into the transition experiences of their research participants (Griffin & Gilbert, 2015). Thirty to 60 minute semi-structured interviews were conducted with administrators and faculty, with both general questions, and questions that were particular to the participants’ role in the specific institution. Student veterans participated in focus groups. A standard set of questions were used to begin the sessions, with the group moderator allowing the discussion to follow its own course based on the participants’

responses (Griffin & Gilbert, 2015). Data was coded using the constant comparative method (Saldaña, 2013). The researchers reviewed the initial coded data and noted themes and categories, and then re-coded it using ATLAS.ti to apply the codes to specific parts of the interview transcripts and to assist in the aggregation of data (Griffin & Gilbert, 2015). The second part of the data analysis applied the coded data to the 4 Ss of Schlossberg's transition theory (Schlossberg et al., 1995; Griffin & Gilbert, 2015).

Naphan and Elliot (2015) used the five-step framework analysis to conduct semi-structured interviews with 11 student veterans enrolled in a mid-sized public U.S. university. The five steps of framework analysis are familiarization, identifying a thematic framework, indexing, charting, and mapping and interpretation (Ritchie & Spencer, 1994). Framework analysis allowed the authors to use inductive and deductive reasoning with a "comprehensive set of procedures to analyze complex, detailed interview transcripts" (Naphan & Elliot, 2015, p. 39). Framework analysis procedures as well as regular meetings between the authors ensured quality control of the emerging data (Naphan & Elliot, 2015).

Jones (2013) conducted a phenomenological study with three student veteran participants that resulted in the emergence of three distinct themes centered on the veteran, higher education institutions, and veteran services. The author stated his position as a researcher added a level of trust with the research participants because he had also served in the military and was a combat veteran (Jones, 2013). Criterion sampling (Creswell, 2013) was used to ensure each research participant met the authors criteria of: being "first time college students, enrolled full-time, and have completed at least one full semester of academic coursework" (Jones, 2013, p. 4). The author gave



preference to participants during screening to ensure gender and racial diversity. Data was gathered during one-hour semi-structured interviews (Jones, 2013). The researcher used a modification of the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method of analysis of phenomenological data (Moustakis, 1994) to transcribe the interviews with respect to the significance of the description of the participant's experience. Next, he noted key phrases and observations, to cluster the meanings into themes, synthesized the meanings and themes into a description of the experience using verbatim examples, and constructed structural descriptions. Finally, he constructed a description of the textual structural of the meanings and essence of the participant's experiences (Jones, 2013, pp. 5-6).

**Mixed methods approaches.** Three studies used mixed methods for the research design. Olsen et al., (2014) Elliot et al, (2011); and Bell et al., (2013) used quantitative and qualitative design methods in their research. All researchers used convergent parallel mixed method designs to collect quantitative and qualitative data at the same time, analyzed it separately, and synthesized it into the results and findings (Creswell, 2014).

Olsen et al. (2014) studied the college experience of student veterans ( $n=10$ ) by collecting descriptive statistical data via a survey and conducting semi-structured interviews. Purposive sampling was used to ensure participants were at least 18 years of age and had served on active duty in the military. The quantitative survey collected demographic information and participant perceptions towards comfort seeking and resource awareness. Participants were asked to assess their own perceptions and the perceptions of other student veterans, using Likert scaled questions (Olsen et al., 2014). The researchers collected qualitative data from the interviews and coded it individually. Open, or initial, coding (Saldaña, 2013), and constant comparative methods (Holosko &

Thyer, 2011) were used throughout the data analysis to ensure validity. Four themes emerged from the quantitative data that were consistent with the quantitative results of the survey (Olsen et al., 2014), which validated the convergent parallel approach.

Elliot et al. (2011), and Bell et al., (2013) both employed online surveys with a mix of closed and open-ended questions. In both studies, the closed-ended questions (quantitative analysis) were required, with the open-ended questions (qualitative analysis) being required by Bell et al (2011), and Elliot et al. (2013). Elliot et al. (2011) presented their quantitative data and then simply used narrative quotes to reinforce the results of the test on the model to determine alienation factors among student veterans. Bell et al. (2013) used the qualitative data to reinforce the negative perceptions of the Post 9/11 GI Bill, even though the findings from their quantitative analysis tended to show an overall positive view of the program.

The surveys used by Elliot et al. (2011) contained closed-ended questions, which covered the topics of demographic information, military service data, PTSD symptoms, and issues with transition to civilian life (Elliot et al., 2011). PTSD data was gathered using the 17 Item PTSD Checklist (American Psychiatric Association, 2000). The means and standard deviations for all of this data were then analyzed looking at bivariate correlations. Finally, a model was developed that graphically showed the correlation between military service, PTSD, and problems facing university students. There was a 63% response rate for the optional opened ended questions in the survey and these were used to amplify the findings presented in the model (Elliot et al., 2011).

Bell et al., (2013) conducted an e-mail based survey using a distribution list of student veterans enrolled at three different colleges within the same university system.

Included in the text portion of the survey introduction was a section explaining the rights of the potential participants as well as a warning that answering question regarding neurobehavioral symptoms may cause some distress (the only study in this paper to include such a warning). The survey development included steps to ensure its validity (Bell et al., 2013).

There was a 40% response rate ( $n=248$ ) over the three-week period that the survey was open. One hundred twenty-six usable responses were collected from the qualitative portion of the survey. As stated earlier, the narrative responses tended to support the more negative responses in the survey. They were grouped into three themes: the overall GI Bill program, the financial aid process, and support available for student veterans (Bell et al., 2013).

### **Chapter Summary**

The reviewed literature in this chapter points to a trend in contemporary research on student veterans who focuses on deficits and challenges faced by today's veteran in higher education. Challenges include those that are caused by post-traumatic stress disorder, alcohol and drug abuse, and physical disabilities, as well as the stress of transitioning from military culture to the culture of a modern college campus. Additional stresses include those associated with being older, with potentially more outside of the classroom responsibilities. Finally, there is the challenge of feeling that you are not understood by your academic peers, faculty, and staff, simply because you took another path to college that is different from most.

Student veterans still succeed in college, despite all of these challenges. The rate of success may be different and slightly lower, but they still succeed. Chapter 3

addresses how and why grounded theory methodology was used in this study to determine how student veterans succeed. It describes the research problem, questions, context, and actual procedures recommended for the study. The use of grounded theory methodology is intended to fill the gap between the rhetorical focus on deficits and challenges in contemporary research, and the absence of research on student veteran success.

## **Chapter 3: Research Design and Methodology**

### **Introduction**

Student veterans are nontraditional students (Vacchi, 2012). Barry et al., (2014) reviewed 13 empirically based studies that used extant theories to describe and predict challenges faced by student veterans. They also reviewed the negative effects of the challenges ranging from neurobehavioral issues, physical disabilities, and problems transitioning from the military to college. The conclusion was there is not enough emphasis in current literature that addresses the unique health challenges of Post 9/11 student veterans. In addition, there is plenty of good work being done to study transitional challenges of student veterans into college (Barry et al., 2014).

This shows a research focus on how student veterans struggle in college. Olsen et al., (2014) stated student veterans in their study state they have self-discipline, possess leadership and teamwork skills, and bring a different perspective to the classroom experience. The study states that these traits were developed in the military (Olsen et al., 2014). Ryan, et al., (2011) detail how student veterans have already experienced difficult transitions when they left civilian life and joined the military. These two studies are examples of exceptions to the norm.

Current literature on student veterans in undergraduate programs mainly focuses on the challenges these students face. These challenges include difficulties with adjustment to civilian or student life, financial difficulties, and physical and mental health issues (Barry et al., 2014). Recommendations from these studies consistently point to

focusing more on student veteran challenges, or deficits, with different qualitative, quantitative, or mixed methods (Coll & Weiss, 2015; DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011; Osborne, 2014). The qualitative method most often used in a recent sample of studies is phenomenology. These studies examine student veterans in terms of challenges and problems, and inform others on how to help student veterans succeed, using extant theories and models as guides. The studies all use extant social science theories or models not developed specifically to examine the lived experience of student veterans (Barry et al., 2014).

Theories are made up of “four components: definitions, domain, relationships, and predictive claims to answer the natural language questions of who, what, when, where, how, why, should, could and would” (Wacker, 1998, p. 364). Social science theory has three characteristics: “It predicts and controls action through an if-then logic; explains how and/or why something happens by explaining its causes; and it provides insights and guidance for improving social life” (Saldaña, 2013, p. 250). Thornberg and Charmaz (2012) defined a theory in the social sciences as one that “states relationships between abstract concepts” and “may aim for either explanation or understanding” (p. 41). In grounded theory methodology, one of the types of theories generated is a substantive grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Corbin, & Strauss, 2008; Bryant, & Charmaz, 2010; Charmaz, 2014).

There is no theory unique to student veterans that explains or predicts why or how the student veteran population succeeds. The theory discovered in this study is meant to inform future research, guide college administrators, faculty, and advisors in developing a better understanding of student veterans in their classrooms, and allow student veteran to

groups improve support strategies and get more of their peers involved with group activities.

There are three perspectives woven throughout the following sections. The first is an acknowledgement of student veterans as nontraditional students (Vacchi, 2012), and validates their experiences inside and outside the classroom as a key to understanding the methodology used in this study (Rendón, 1994). Second, social constructivism was used as a “theoretical perspective” to “create social reality through individual and collective actions” (Bryant & Charmaz, 2010, p. 610). Lastly, the methodology used symbolic interactionism from a constructivist perspective that “assumed meaning and obdurate realities are the product of collective processes.” (Bryant & Charmaz, 2010, p. 610). These perspectives shaped the design, data gathering, and data analysis of the study by focusing on student veterans as a substantive area of study and as a sociological area of inquiry worthy of examination.

### **Research Question**

What strategies do Post 9/11 student veterans employ to facilitate success in post-secondary education?

### **Research Context**

Research took place in a private 4-year liberal arts college and a public 4-year college, both located near a mid-sized city in the northeastern United States. The use of research participants at the two colleges increased the number of available research participants for data collection and theoretical sampling. One college had active student veterans’ organizations on campus that allowed the researcher access to research

participants. The other participants were recruited initially through personal contact and then through the snowball sampling technique (Creswell, 2011).

### **Procedures**

After approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB), potential research participants were contacted via e-mail with a brief summary of the research proposal. Those who agreed to participate were given an IRB approved consent form that detailed the confidentiality of the study as well as potential, however remote, negative consequences of participation. Each eventual participant agreed to participate and provided a signed consent form.

Interviews were conducted at multiple locations, each one selected by the participant. Prior to the interview, each participant was read a brief statement detailing the purpose and format of the interview, and again asked whether they understood and were willing to continue. After each interview, each participant was assigned a random pseudonym as part of the transcription process. Therefore, not even the participants know their randomly assigned name.

All interview data will be digitized and stored on a password protected external flash drive for three years after publication of this research. Once digitized and placed on the aforementioned flash drive, all notes and recordings will be removed from voice recording devices and laptop computers. Only drafts and the final copy of this study and its chapters will remain on any other electronic device.

### **Research Participants**

During the 2013-2014 academic year over, 750,000 Post 9/11 student veterans attended college classes on campuses or online across America. Most were



undergraduates at 4-year public or private universities (National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics, 2015). This made up nearly 5% of the entire student population at colleges and universities across the country (Chronicle of Higher Education, 2014). According to Cate (2014), student veterans graduate at a rate similar (51.7%) to the overall college graduate completion rate of (52.9%).

Research participants represented Post 9/11 student veterans in their junior or senior years in full-time undergraduate programs. This allowed collection of data for category development based on research participant ability to complete at least two years of college at the time of data collection, while being able to describe strategies used for success and offering relevant examples. This type of sampling, grounded theory initial sampling, establishes initial “criteria for people, situations, and/or cases before entering the field” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 197). This was not purposeful sampling, as defined by Creswell (2013) and others (Holosko & Thyer, 2011), where the researcher uses prior knowledge to seek out those that may have information to answer the research question. Tinto’s (1993, 1997) assertion that students remaining in college is due to factors that include individual student success, guided the study to focus initial sampling of student veterans with some type of success, as measured by completion of at least two years of academic work.

Recruiting and data collection took place over an eight-week period. Recruiting began by contacting student veterans via e-mail, with e-mail addresses gathered from student veteran organizations, or through personal contact with self-identified student veterans. In some cases, snowball sampling (Creswell, 2014) allowed for the collection of additional e-mail addresses.

Eleven research participants took part in full, semi-structured interviews. Of those 11, the first four simply answered the questions in the semi-structured interview, with the final seven participating in theoretical sampling based interviews. Theoretical sampling allowed the researcher to use the coded and analyzed data from earlier interviews to delve deeper into the interview, specifically looking for information to add to, clarify, or contradict data from earlier interviews (Bryant, & Charmaz, 2010). Four of the original 11 participants also took part in follow up interviews as part of theoretical sampling. Two of the original participants, plus two new participants took part in interviews solely focused on validating the findings of the data analysis. This brought the total number of participants to 13.

Ten of the participants were male, and three were female. Three of them had retired from the military after 20 or more years, and all 13 received honorable discharges. All but two were utilizing the Post 9/11 GI Bill. There were no African American, and two Hispanic American participants. The remaining 11 identified as White, not Hispanic. Finally, six participants were single with no children, and seven were married, with six having children living at home. Initially, this information was not going to be included in the study's findings because it did not appear to be relevant. However, after theoretical sampling began, the decision was made to add demographic information to the findings because there was some significance to race and gender in the findings. All affected research participants agreed to this change after notification by the researcher. In all cases, the research participants reviewed and signed an Institutional Review Board approved consent form, agreeing to take part in the study.

## **Grounded Theory Methodology**

The following section details the rationale behind using grounded theory methodology, instruments used in data collection, theoretical sampling, and data analysis steps of this study. This is a qualitative study following grounded theory methodology. It used qualitative interview techniques (Brinkman & Kvale, 2015) to gather data. In vivo coding, axial coding, constant comparative analysis, and theoretical sampling (Bryant & Charmaz, 2010; Charmaz, 2014; Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Saldaña, 2013;) were used to analyze data and present findings.

**The rationale for using grounded theory methodology.** This study made no assumptions as to why student veterans succeed. Tinto (1993, 1997) is cited as a rationale for initial sampling criteria only, in order to begin gathering data, as recommended by Charmaz (2014). DiRamio and Jarvis (2011) showed, through their research, that student veterans are an important subset of college students and worthy of further study. Their research used extant theories and theoretical models to form the basis of their research. Lincoln and Guba (1985) discussed the use of pre-existing theory by saying, “no a priori theory could anticipate the many realities that the inquirer will inevitably encounter in the field, nor encompass the many factors that make a difference at the micro (local) level” (p. 205).

To uncover those realities in the field, without an a priori theory as a guide, grounded theory methodology was selected for this study—more specifically, constructivist grounded theory methodology, where the aim is to develop an “abstract understanding of the studied life” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 342). Or, as Corbin and Strauss (1990) stated, “Grounded theory seeks to not only uncover relevant conditions, but also

to determine how the actors respond to changing conditions and the consequences of their actions” (p. 5).

Adhering to grounded theory methodology, Glaser, and Strauss, 1967; Bryant & Charmaz, 2010, 2010a; & Charmaz 2014, collected data to conduct “qualitative research that focuses on creating conceptual frameworks or theories through building inductive analysis from the data” (Bryant & Charmaz, 2010, p. 608). One of two types of theories emerged from this methodology, a substantive grounded theory (SGT) or a formal grounded theory (FGT). A SGT is “developed for a substantive, or empirical, area of sociological inquiry” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 32). In the case of this present study, the area is student veterans. A FGT is a “theoretical rendering of a generic issue or process that cuts across several substantive areas of study (Bryant & Charmaz, 2010, p. 608). Glaser and Strauss (1967) recommend developing a substantive grounded theory prior to work on a formal grounded theory to “provide a stimulus to a good idea” and “give initial direction” to development of a formal grounded theory (p. 79).

**Instruments.** Use of the following questions during initial and theoretical sampling allowed the researcher to ascertain information from different aspects of the participant’s strategies for success.

1. Initial open-ended questions (defining success).
  - a. What does success mean to you in terms of success in college?
  - b. What does success mean in terms of outside of college?
  - c. What, if any, are the parallels between successes in and out of college?
2. Intermediate questions (exploring strategies used for success).

- a. What strategies, techniques, and/or models have you used to achieve success in college since enrollment?
  - b. What strategies, techniques, and/or models have you used to achieve success out of college since enrollment?
  - c. What, if any, specific challenges have been faced, and overcome?
  - d. What strategies did you use to overcome them?
3. Ending questions (learning how strategies developed).
    - a. What strategies did you use to succeed and/or overcome problems before enrolling in college?
    - b. How have your strategies for success and/or overcoming problems changed since you have been in college?

These instruments did not change during the first 11 interviews. However, after the fourth interview, focused follow-up questions relating to emerging subcategories were used. Because of these follow-up questions, every interview after the fifth resulted in the emerging subcategories coming into the discussion after the participant introduced dialogue leading to follow up questions.

An additional set of questions was developed as the data began to show signs of theoretical direction (Charmaz, 2014); these are a result of earlier theoretical sampling and were used to pursue new lines of inquiry. Specifically, these questions addressed the accuracy of the category development, and asked about the credibility of the categories developed from the data. The questions were used with two of the original eleven participants, and two new participants. Research participants were asked to provide their view of themselves, and observations of other student veterans and how their college

success related to the statements. They were then asked for their observation of non-student veterans, be they traditional or other nontraditional (definitions were provided) in relation to the statements. The statements used were:

1. You use a continuous cycle of personal development, planning and employment, acknowledging achievements, and assessment of goals, to succeed in college, while assigning life goals a higher priority for achievement.
2. You utilize strategies for success that have developed over a lifetime of continuous learning. Your strategies exist as a set of knowledge, skills, and attributes (KSAs), developed over time through assessment of prior goals and external influence. You are able to adapt and grow because of these KSAs. You believe your ability to succeed in college is a result of the cumulative effect of a lifetime worth of learning, prioritizing, and goal setting.
3. Most of your strategies for success are unique to you, but there is some common ground between you and other students like you. This includes a clear delineation between priorities and goals for your personal life, and for college. You put more emphasis on development of your personal life goals than your college goals. You place a higher importance on the employment of strategies for success in life than you do on employment for success in college. This is central to your success in college.
4. Your goals in life have a greater emphasis than for those in college. These goals tend to be less tangible and more internally focused. Specific, tangible rewards or transactions are not the motivation for your goals in life. You set

your college goals very specifically and your motivation is tied to meeting an externally established standard. You view your goals in college as being tied to greater goals in life more than you see your life goals tied to your goals in college.

The use of these statements allowed the researcher to fully enter the foreground to confirm theoretical direction, and predict where and how data would be available to fill gaps and assist in saturation (Charmaz, 2014, p. 199). This process was very deliberate and was meant to elicit responses that would clearly confirm or deny the comprehensive analysis of data thus far. The first statement represented the findings to that point, while the next three represented the different emerging categories.

**Data collection.** All interviews were conducted one on one with the research participant and researcher only. Recording of interviews took place with two independent audio recording devices with no video. An iPhone 6s© with the Rev Voice Recorder© (version 3.0.2) app was used as one device. The app also allowed for the use of professional transcription services to transcribe the interview. Transcripts were received in generally less than 18 hours from uploading. The other recording device was an Olympus© digital voice recorder, model WS-821 with built in USB device that allowed transfer of digital files to a separate laptop computer equipped with Dragon Dictate© software.

Qualitative interviews allowed for collection of data that sought “knowledge in normal language; it does not aim at quantification” (Brinkman & Kvale, 2015, p. 33). The initial questions broke down into a three-section guide, consisting of initial open-ended questions, intermediate questions, and ending questions (Charmaz, 2014). This

helped determine the research participants' definition of success, explore the strategies they used for success, and learn how their strategies developed over time. The questions and statements used to validate theoretical direction were broken down into four sets. The first set concentrated on the overall view of the emerging theory. The second set looked at the emergence of the skills necessary to successfully adapt and grow. The third set asked about individual strategies for success, and about how those strategies relate to goals. The final set examined motivations towards achieving goals.

This, in turn, led to the theoretical sampling phase of the research. Theoretical sampling is the process of using abductive reasoning to allow theories to emerge, or “earn their way into” the researcher’s analysis (Charmaz, 2014, p. 201). This happened after the fourth initial sampling qualitative interview. Glaser and Strauss (1967) define theoretical sampling as the “the process of data collection for generating theory whereby the analyst jointly collects, codes and analyses [sic] his data and decides what data to collect next and where to find them, in order to develop his theory as it emerges” (p. 45).

Data saturation occurred during the theoretical sampling process as categories began to emerge. Questions from the initial sampling remained valid at this point, but new follow up questions were developed during the coding and analysis phase. These were added to the semi-structured interview questions. Category emergence and data saturation also drove the formulation of new lines of inquiry used in follow up interviews.

**Data analysis.** Data analysis began during the initial sampling process with interviews, memo writing, and first cycle coding taking place after each interview before moving to the next. The constant comparative method of coding (Glaser & Strauss,



1967; Charmaz, 2014), and in vivo coding (Saldaña, 2013) called for data analysis to begin during data collection, and allowed for theoretical categorization during the initial and follow-up interviews (Charmaz, 2014).

The first step in the analysis of each interview involved note taking, time stamping, and listening to the recorded interview after the interview ended. Taking minimal notes during the interview allowed the researcher's full attention to focus on the participants' responses. This is an important point, because paying attention to what the research participant says and how he or she says is a key part in memo writing. Memos allow for interpretation of the data being presented, as well as the researcher's response to stimuli during the interview process. Therefore, the interviewer must be fully engaged (Charmaz, 2014; Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

Memo writing took place within 24 hours of each interview and focused on the interview itself, before coding. Digital recording of memos was transcribed by the researcher either in a Word® document or through construction of visual models in PowerPoint®. Although, initially, memo writing captured thoughts on the interview alone, later in the process, it began to include thoughts on how the collected data compared to previous interviews and the emerging categories. This was the beginning of the constant comparative analysis phase. Each interview was listened to and/or read at least twice, with researcher notes captured in a memo before first cycle coding.

Constant comparative analysis directs that data is collected and then each interview is coded prior to the conduct of the next interview. This allowed for comparison between the data sets and the discovery of possible emerging categories, and for modification of interview questions, in order to compare responses from one

participant to the next (Charmaz, 2014; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). On two occasions, this did not happen due to the scheduling of interviews on back-to-back days, or the same day; however, there was no substantial effect on the ability to code interviews, independent of other interviews. In these cases, the uncoded interviews were not listened to until coding of the previous interview was completed. Then, and only then, the next interview was reviewed, memo completed, transcribed, read, and coded using the constant comparative method.

Categories emerged early on with “certain codes as having overriding significance” from all of the other codes (Bryant & Charmaz, 2010). Thus, data saturation began by the sixth or seventh interview. At this point, follow up interviews with earlier participants were scheduled. Axial coding began around the fifth interview as categories began to emerge. Axial coding is the process of using first cycle codes to form an axis around which categories emerge (Bryant & Charmaz, 2010; Charmaz, 2014; Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Saldaña, 2013). Interviews with new research participants continued until a total of eleven first time participants had been interviewed, with four of those being interviewed a second time.

**Credibility.** Starting with the idea of validity and reliability makes it easier to understand the credibility of this study. Creswell (2013) discussed validation and reliability in qualitative research in detail by presenting the perspectives of many qualitative researchers. First, what is validity and reliability in qualitative research? As Creswell (2013) summarized, it depends on the researcher. In general, validity means to what degree an accurate inference can be made based on the instrument in use, and how it's used. Reliability is the consistency of that measure as it is repeated (Holosko &

Thyer, 2011). In this study, the initial research instrument never changed, even though additions were made to facilitate theoretical sampling. Consistency in the raw data and in vivo codes confirmed the reliability of that instrument.

Eisner (1990) chose to use the term credibility over validity. He said, “we seek a confluence of evidence that breeds credibility, which allows us to feel confident about our observation, interpretations, and conclusions” (Eisner, 1991, p. 110). Here, reliability was found in the use of theoretical sampling to confirm the validity of the data and its consistency across all research participants. Credibility was used to present the argument for the trustworthiness of the interpretation of the data and the conclusions drawn from it.

Employing four strategies to ensure accuracy and completeness of the data collection and analysis added to the credibility of this study. Member checking, peer reviewing, clarifying researcher bias, and presenting negative or discrepant information (Creswell, 2014) accomplished this goal. Member checking took place in the form of follow up interviews where research participants reviewed diagrams representing the interrelationships between emerging categories. They compared their answers to the interview questions with the categories, subcategories, and substantive codes, and offered insights into the relevance and accuracy of the data.

Peer reviewing is the process of having an outside observer play devil’s advocate by asking hard questions and forcing the researcher to be able to explain methods, analyses, and conclusions in plain language (Creswell, 2014). This technique proved highly useful throughout the research and writing process. The peer review process resulted in a simpler, more coherent study that is both understandable and defensible. One peer reviewer reviewed this study at nonspecific intervals.

In grounded theory methodology, the researcher begins to enter the foreground of the data collection at the time theoretical sampling begins (Charmaz, 2014). This is why presenting researcher bias is presented as a method of establishing credibility. The researcher in this study is a student veteran and has definitions for success, strategies for success, and a collection of lessons learned throughout life that helped him build his strategies. His military service is not unlike the experience of some of the research participants that are military retirees with children. Unlike the research participants, he is not a junior or senior enrolled in an undergraduate program. He does not share the same college experiences as his research participants, for he is not in a classroom environment with fellow students that are right out of high school. He shares the fact the military changed him in many ways, and that he struggled to adapt to many aspects of civilian life. He shared his military experience sparingly with the participants, and only when asked directly. He acknowledged that he is a student veteran and a doctoral candidate. The researcher accounted for these facts and did not include his experience in the final coding results shown in the Occurrences of Codes by Subcategory (see Appendix A). In line with constructivist grounded theory methodology, the researcher's experiences as a member of the military, veteran, and student veteran, did guide the analysis of the data to help construct meaning from it (Charmaz, 2014); however, all findings are grounded in the data collected.

The presentation of negative and discrepant information shows how the researcher accounts for data that falls outside of the final categories (Creswell, 2013). Corbin and Strauss (1990) also called for this as a step to explain how this data affected the final theory. These discrepancies showed up as questions of the significance of the data point

for a particular research participant, as opposed to outright examples that are counter to the resultant substantive grounded theory.

Two other techniques ensured a consistent approach to grounded theory methodology and ensure trustworthiness of the data. The first was to read each transcript while listening to the live recording to ensure accuracy of the transcription. This doubled as a way to ensure a deeper understanding of the meaning of what the student veteran was communicating. The second was to rigidly follow the constant comparative method steps with each new interview, and to go back to review notes, codes, and memos from each previous interview session.

### **Chapter Summary**

The findings presented in this chapter used a constructivist grounded theory viewpoint for a number of reasons. First is the foundational assumption that multiple realities exist within the student veteran population, and the data gathered was constructed through interaction with multiple external influences. This belief allowed for the perception of the student veteran research participants as individuals, while also acknowledging their success is not isolated; rather, success was due in part to the student veterans' interaction with their environment. Second, the objective was to create a theory that was credible, original, useful, and that resonated through the field of study that concerned student veterans. Third, with the research participant's assistance, the categories revealed were co-constructed and theoretical direction defined, while maintaining reflexivity throughout the research process (Charmaz, 2014).

Chapter 4 gives the result of the data analysis. It displays the categories and subcategories that emerged from the data. It then gives examples from the data that

support the categories. Finally, a description of the interrelationship between categories with a comparison against extant theories is presented, followed by the substantive grounded theory is presented.

## Chapter 4: Results

This chapter provides the findings analysis of the semi-structured and theoretical sampling interview data and presents the substantive grounded theory that emerged. Extant theory is introduced throughout the chapter as part of the grounded theory methodology literature review (Charmaz, 2014) and as part of the overall credibility strategy of this study (Creswell, 2013). These theories show points of intersection with the data, and areas of divergence where the data disagrees with it. At no time does this study aim to show proof of, or attempt to disprove, any extant theory.

### Research Question

What strategies do Post 9/11 student veterans employ to facilitate success in post-secondary education?

### Findings

Eight subcategories emerged from the data after second cycle coding and initial theoretical sampling. Further theoretical sampling showed that the subcategories merged into three categories. I present the interrelationship between the categories and a substantive grounded theory at the end of Chapter 4.

**Categories.** Table 4.1 shows the three categories—foundations for success, strategies for success, and success defined—and its subcategories. For a model of the process of assessing, which is not including in the table, see Figure 4.1.

Table 4.1

*Categories and Subcategories*

		Categories		
		<u>Foundations for success</u>	<u>Strategies for success<sup>1</sup></u>	<u>Success defined</u>
<u>Subcategories</u>		Awareness of when, where, and how learning occurred	Identifying with a community <sup>2</sup>	Working towards goals in life
		Ability to identify key lessons in life	Understanding one's own strengths and weaknesses	Achieving goals in college
		The ability to adapt and grow personally, academically, and professionally		Being motivated to succeed <sup>3</sup>

*Note.* <sup>1</sup>Strategies for success is the category that eventually answers the research question. The table shows that the strategies for success are not defined in a vacuum.

<sup>2</sup>Identifying with a community is further broken into two distinct communities: the community as experienced in college, and the community of life outside of college such as family, work, and friends.

<sup>3</sup>Being motivated refers to both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 1985).

For details on coding and the occurrences of codes by subcategory, see Appendix A. Note that a higher number of occurrences of the codes in each subcategory does not imply greater importance. The number of occurrences allows for ease of understanding when describing the subcategory or code with terms such as all, most, and more than half. No conclusions should be drawn simply by looking at the number of occurrences; when developing subcategories and categories, abductive reasoning led to more weight being given to each in vivo and axial code.



*Foundations for success.* The category of foundations for success was made up of three subcategories: the awareness of where, how, and when learning occurred; the ability to identify key lessons in life; and the ability to adapt and grow personally, professionally, and academically. These subcategories are discussed in the following passages, and an analysis of the category is at the end of this section.

*Awareness of where, how, and when learning occurred.* Student veterans are nontraditional students and share many common traits, yet each has his or her own unique identity (Vacchi, 2012). The military experience of each research participant varied greatly, and early in the data collection process, it became apparent that military experience was not the central focus of the student veterans' foundations for success. None of the participants placed the military first when asked about the main influences in their learning and development. All said it was important, just not the most important. Family members, early mentors in high school, and the communities in which the participants grew up and/or currently lived in had a greater impact on learning how to succeed in college, the military, and life. Charles, an Army veteran said, "learning [took place] not only in college but [from] my learnings, from my time in the military, my time in other career paths, [and] from mentors."

The impact parents have on the learning process is apparent through all of the research participant interviews. When asked about how he learned to be successful, Neil, a former member of the U.S. Army, mentioned "date night," which was one of he and his spouse's strategies for making time for one another: "I think the whole unwinding and date night thing was definitely learned as a kid. It was something my parents were very insistent on, making sure they had time for each other." Date night allowed Neil and his

spouse to maintain a perspective of what was important in life—their marriage—and it encouraged them to be better time managers. At the same time, Neil identified where he learned these lessons, for use later in life, and carried that with him to college.

Continuous learning is another element that emerged from the data collection and analysis process. In a follow-up question with Oscar, a former Marine, about how he continued to grow as a student and as a member of his community, he described it as a never-ending process:

You're going to need somebody somewhere along the way. Whether it's a brother, whether it's a sister, mother, father, significant other, friend, relative, professor, coworker, you name it. You're going to have to lean on somebody. Somebody's either been there before, they've done it before.

Oscar also mentioned his father as someone who taught him important lessons in life. When asked about when and where he learned lessons that helped him both in the Marine Corps and in college, he noted that he learned more from his dad about being adaptable and persistent before joining the Marines than he learned while serving:

Dad was pretty good at teaching me that stuff, so I kind of already had a little bit of a basis for it before I left for the military. It got affirmed, and strengthened in the military. Then, the other thing that I learned from my father is being okay with asking for help, and being okay with failure.

Parents, teachers, coaches, military commanders and supervisors, peers, and subordinates, all mentioned as sources of learning. Regardless of the setting in which the research participants found themselves, learning occurred through and with others. The strong sense of their belief in learning as a lifelong process is important to the

understanding of how student veterans succeed. Paul, a retired Army non-commissioned officer said, “I have developed my knowledge, skills, and attributes over the course of my life. The Army and the people I met in it have assisted in that development.” Bob, an Air Force retiree, talked about learning important lessons early on in life. “I had a paper route from the age of 11. You had to manage your time to do that, to go to school and to do your homework or chores or whatever”. He went on to say that as a participant in both team and individual sports that “the team is the most important” part of any endeavor. Those lessons served him well in the Air Force and college.

*The ability to identify key lessons in life.* Learning takes place throughout life and many external influence help to shape the lessons. Of these lessons, research participants said some were more impactful on their ability to succeed in college than others. Time management was the most frequently discussed lesson, with each participant bringing it up at least once. Empathy, or the ability to look at others from a perspective outside your own personal bias, was another lesson frequently mentioned.

Alex, a former Army medic, currently serving in the U.S. Army reserve while in college, completed six years of active duty service. She stated time management was the most important aspect of military service that applies in college. She spoke of how she first learned the importance of following schedules in order to “get the job done” and later how to make time schedules for others to follow. It was this process, of growing as a leader, that showed her the importance of time management. It is the process of “backwards planning [starting the process of building a schedule from the due date and working back to the present] that the Army taught me that gives me flexibility” and by not wasting time “that helps me be successful” in school and in life. Time management

skills are tools to support an overall strategy for success for many of the research participants in this study.

Other participants talked about learning how to use time management skills outside the military also. Charles spoke of his career from the time he left the military until he went back to college. He said time management was key to “knowing how to get through different chores . . . knowing how to make every step work so I'm getting the best bang for my buck.”

Learning to feel empathy was a key lesson over half of the research participants noted as being an important part of their development. There is no one distinguishing factor that can be attributed to the participants who were the most passionate when discussing the importance of empathy. Most talked about how they learned to be empathetic early on in their college experience or military career, and the lessons were unique to each participant.

Alex learned about empathy early in her military career. She noted that when she was the new private (the lowest rank in the Army enlisted soldier rank structure), she felt out of place because she did not always “know what was going on” in the day-to-day schedule. She learned from peers and leaders, over time, to read daily and weekly schedules, which allowed her to “be more at ease and feel informed.” As she gained experience, she would see new soldiers arrive to the unit and sense that they felt the same way she did at that point in her military career. This allowed her to better understand and mentor new soldiers, by relating to their feelings.

David, a Marine Corps veteran said he too learned the qualities of empathy early in college. He felt a lot of pride in being a Marine and believed he could carry that pride

into the classroom to help him succeed. He quickly learned to “check his pride at the door” because it caused him to feel aloof and distant. It also got in the way of his learning because he did not want to ask for help. Once he realized that he had a lot in common with his fellow students, he was able to see that asking for help was ok, and it actually set a good example for others. He maintained his pride as a Marine, but he learned that being proud and being prideful were two different things.

Other research participants often referred to their traditional student counterparts as “kids” and spoke of their initial interactions with them. The term “kids” was used by all but two of the participants when referring to their traditional student peers. It never appeared to be derogatory and all who used the term spoke as if they were referring to mentees. However, there was a general acknowledgment that having empathy for those that they could not relate to was a challenge.

Bob, talking about the life experience gap between traditional students and student veterans, voiced this sentiment: “[it is hard] especially with the kids that don't have life experiences like we've had in our military careers or even before that, after that.” Bob went on to explain the importance in understanding, as Neil did, that everyone in college was going to have different backgrounds, for better or worse, and that it's important to carry that lesson and pass it on to others. Understanding this difference in the end is what made it easier to relate, and show empathy towards fellow students.

Kevin's response to a question about his feelings towards traditional students showed more understanding, primarily because of some shared characteristics with them. “I don't really mind being in the class with traditional students . . . I'm a single student, so I feel like I more fit in with the traditional student environment.” This is an example

of Kevin realizing that he has a lot more in common with his younger college peers than he does with some of the older student veterans. Kevin is active in both non-veteran and veteran activities at his school, and he points to this as another reason for his self-proclaimed easy transition to college life.

Empathy that is specifically directed towards fellow students, most notably traditional students, plays a key role in the success of many of participants in this study. Participants cited this as a tool that improved their ability to engage with other students. Research shows that student veterans who have a difficult time engaging on campus with their peers, tend to also struggle outside of the classroom (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011; Kim & Cole, 2013). The research participants in this study specifically referred to being empathetic towards their traditional student peers. Mike, a nine-year veteran of the U.S. Navy, described it like this when referring to his classmates: “they’re right on time for their lives, just like I’m right on time for mine.” He was talking about the age and perceived maturity gap that he had heard about before he started college. He realized that the key lesson to be learned was that he was the one who needed to adjust to college. College would not adjust to him.

There is one data point that disagrees with the others regarding empathy. Susan, a married Army veteran with children, did not express empathy as much as she did sympathy, when asked about her traditional student peers. She said, “younger first time college students do not have the same skill sets for dealing with school or, in general, realizing that there are other goals once school has been accomplished.” This view of traditional students seems to put a gap between the student veteran and the traditional student that will not be closed until one takes a step forward to close it. Whereas other

research participants appeared willing to be the ones to close the gap, this is one outlying data point that disagrees with the rest of the body of data.

*The ability to adapt and grow personally, academically, and professionally.* The data shows this subcategory was the most agreed upon, with all but one participant discussing something from their military experience directly supported this subcategory. The research participants all said something to the extent of having initially struggled in college, yet because of their life and/or military experience, they were able to maintain a positive attitude and persevere.

Edward, a former U.S. Army soldier who also has a mild learning disability, discussed his initial struggles. He tended to learn slower in reading than his peers and learned better by repetitive activity. His service in the Army helped him learn to adapt to new ways of learning. When discussing what learning in the Army looked like, he said:

It's just doing the same thing over and over again. All the battle drills are exactly the same pretty much. The weapons are very mechanical like. I was an armorer [a weapons repair specialists] for my platoon so I got to know the weapons really well just from screwing around with them all the time. It's a lot of hands on stuff.

When asked how this applied to college, Edward discussed working with the student disabilities office and with his professors directly:

For school . . . I have to come up with a little bit [*sic*] more clever ways of doing things. I'll be going through and let's say I'll start out at the beginning of the year

by trying to just read the book but it takes me so long to read the book and I don't necessarily pick up a lot of information by actually reading the book. Instead I go through and [try a new way] . . . most of the teachers will give you important subjects to brush up on or something so I'll read that paragraph. Depending on what class it is, I'll put the key terms that they have on note cards and then use them as flash cards to try to remember those because it takes me forever to remember definitions.

Edward says these are all signs of “perseverance,” “maintaining a positive attitude,” and “willingness to change,” and that he also is “looking forward in life.” Instead of getting frustrated, he seeks additional help and budgets more time when necessary.

Paul summed up the concept of continuous learning, and identified key lessons in life around adapting and growing:

Having spent so long in uniform [30 years] it has given me the ability to adapt to anything and that has caused me to grow while using the knowledge, skills, and attributes [I] learned, to ease the transition. I absolutely believe that college was easier for me than for the younger students because of the cumulative effect of a lifetime of learning as a soldier. As you are well aware, we learned to become an expert at prioritizing, organiz[ing] and personal goal setting.

Paul and Edward are examples of how military service can develop or hone skills and that allow for success in college by making student veterans more adaptable. While none of the participants said they only developed knowledge, skills, and attributes in the military, it was apparent throughout the data, the most practical and applicable lessons for success in college came from their time in the service. This does not contradict what was



previously pointed out regarding where military service ranks in order of importance of lessons. Rather, this simply states lessons on adaptability and empathy from the military are easy to identify and apply towards college success.

*Analysis of foundations for success.* Foundations for success were built on learning and identifying key lessons learned. These, in turn, were translated into the ability to adapt and grow. That subcategory, the ability to adapt and grow, was the equivalent to what the military refers to as the decisive point. The decisive point is defined as a specific key event(s), critical factor(s), or function(s) that, when acted upon, allows one to contribute materially to achieving success (Department of Defense, 2012). It is at this point where the participants in this study all pointed to the one critical thing they needed to figure out: how to grow and how to adapt.

Edward stated very concisely that “over the years, I figured out ways that work for me and I’ve always been compensating for that.” That “figuring it out” attitude, or ability to keep moving forward, came across in every interview. Kevin, a U.S. Air Force veteran, spoke about his use of many of his college’s resources to help with math and writing. Bob, a U.S. Air Force retiree, talked about his challenges with some of the liberal arts’ core courses that he felt he “would have had an easier time in when I was younger.” However, it had been a long time since he had been exposed to much of the material. In all cases, the student veterans simply looked at their challenges and decided to work harder and smarter in order to get past them.

In almost all instances, this sense of resolve and willingness to move forward in spite of academic challenges, was directly linked to looking beyond college. In the case of the younger student veterans, it was the desire for opening up career options. The

older research participants, generally those that were married with children, it was also a sense of setting a positive example. Bob and Lois (also an Air Force retiree) both spoke of wanting to find good jobs; however, it was more important to both of them to show their families the importance of hard work and a good education. Lois noted that she wanted her children to know if “I can go to college, so can you.”

Notably, not a single research participant felt college was the most difficult thing they had ever done in life. Alex likened the difference between college and the rest of his life by saying “in college, you have a syllabus and you follow it. In life, there’s no syllabus, but it would make it easier if there were.” Neither did any of the participants say that their military experience was their most challenging experience. In almost all cases, the participants’ greatest challenges came from maintaining a solid family foundation. The challenge of being a good spouse, parent, or sibling was greater than college. Many simply wanted to make their families proud of them.

The ability to adapt and grow allowed all of the participants to succeed at transitioning from the military to college. As Ryan et al., (2011) and this study show, student veterans have already made a major transition—from civilian life to the military. Leaving the military is like joining it, in that it affects everyone differently. The same can be said for the social and support systems that student veterans develop. Each is unique, and each is meant to allow the individual to cope with transitioning in his or her own way (Goodman et al., 2006).

Using Bandura’s triadic reciprocity of social cognitive theory as a basis for examining foundations for success allows one to look closer at the codes that emerged from the data and supports the statement about student veterans being lifelong learners.

The three elements of the Bandura's (1989) triad are "behaviors, cognitive and other personal factors, and environmental influences" (pp. 23-24).

The social cognitive view of people states they are "(n)either driven by inner forces nor are the automatically controlled by external stimuli. Rather, human functioning is explained in a model of triadic reciprocity" (Bandura, 1985, p. 18). Humans have the capability to use symbolism to operate in multiple environments. They have the capability to use forethought in order to regulate behavior. They can learn both by directly performing and vicariously through observing. Lastly, they possess the capability to be self-reflective and self-regulatory (Bandura, 1989). There is nothing in the findings of this study that is in conflict with any of these concepts.

The subcategory the ability to adapt and grow personally, academically, and professionally, shows a linkage to the idea of forethought. The codes that the subcategory is built on are maintaining a positive attitude, demonstrating resolve, willingness to change in order to achieve goals, and looking forward in life. These codes are rooted in behavior that is based on cognition and personal factors (Bandura, 1989) and they show that action equals doing something in order to achieve something else. It is important to realize that the ability to adapt and grow is where the student veteran also reaches his or her decisive point, for this is the point at which decisive action can lead to achieving success.

The ability to identify key lessons in life closely relates to cognitive and other personal factors. This also demonstrates the capability to be self-reflective and learn both vicariously and through performance. The codes that support this include the willingness to continue moving forward when life is difficult, knowing the importance of personal

and professional relationships, and showing gratitude for mentors, peers, leaders, and subordinates. When failure was discussed with participants, they all accepted personal responsibility.

Awareness of when, where, and how learning occurred demonstrates how environmental influences shaped student veterans. Viewing learning as a symbol of growth and the ability to reflect are seen in the following codes: acknowledging lessons throughout life, wanting to learn from self and others, and accepting failure as part of life. Parental/family influence is the most important factor involved in self-development to a majority of the research participants and is where most lessons are learned. Even then, the degree of influence differed from participant to participant. As observed in the data, military service was also a common influence; however, it did not have the impact of parental or familial influence, even though the lessons in adaptability and empathy are the most identifiable and applicable to college success.

To show the triadic reciprocity (Bandura, 1989) between the preceding subcategories, one can substitute environment for awareness of when, where, and how learning occurred; cognitive and other personal factors for ability to identify key lessons in life; and behaviors for ability to adapt and grow personally, academically, and professionally. These relationships to social cognitive theory revealed themselves in the data because of the abductive reasoning process, not by an a priori assumption.

As stated earlier, the student veterans in this study all acknowledged they are lifelong learners even though some did not excel academically early on. Neil and Oscar both shared how high school academic excellence was not a priority. Oscar had actually failed to maintain a grade point average sufficient for him to remain on his school's

wrestling team. This caused him to lose daily contact with an early mentor of his. Neil also talked of high school in terms of a low priority and of graduating with little to no idea of what he wanted to do afterwards. He ended up drifting from job to job for the next nine years before finally enlisting in the Navy. For him, the motivation to finally get himself on track was that his father was a retired U.S. Navy non-commissioned officer.

Both Oscar and Neil exhibited behaviors they claimed were detrimental to their success in high school. Both grew up in environments that provided them with lessons on how to succeed. Whether it was a positive role model in the form of a mentor or a parent, the tools to learn were there. What each admittedly failed to do at the time was to identify those lessons through cognitive process that would allow them to modify their behaviors.

Using Bandura's (1989) idea developmental determinism, Oscar and Neil would predictably have had a lesser chance of succeeding later in life, due to past patterns of counter-productive behavior. It takes a fortitude and social support to overcome stresses that may otherwise lead an individual down that is less than optimal for success. Also, environmental factors, such as socio-economic status, can influence the ability to succeed. However, the reciprocal nature of their behaviors, along with environmental influences, cognitive and other personal factors, can account for their positive change (Bandura, 1989). Both men were able to acknowledge their learning in the environment they grew up in. They had to identify the key lessons from key individuals and processed them internally. Because of this, they were able to grow and modify their behaviors later in their developmental process to become successful student veterans.

*Strategies for success.* Strategies for success was broken down into two subcategories. These were identifying with a community and understanding one's own strengths and weaknesses. Identifying with a community can be further broken down into the college and life communities.

*Identifying with a community.* Identifying with a community started with identifying with one's life community, which was defined by the research participants as everything and everyone outside of the student veteran's college community. The participants detailed this more in their discussions; however, because this study is focused on the student veterans' success in college, the definition remains broad. Therefore, coding and theoretical sampling showed it is best to bifurcate the communities in which the student veteran exists into college and everything else, or life. This does not assume the two are mutually exclusive. They are interdependent, with countless links between the two. The data from this study clearly demonstrates those linkages, while showing a conscious effort to prioritize life over college.

Time management was discussed by each participant as an important way to maintain balance in their personal lives. Among the married participants, this boiled down to two areas: quality family time and the ability to deconflict schedules. Going back to what Charles said earlier regarding time management and "getting the most bang for the buck," he further discussed how staying on top of, or getting ahead of his school work opened up more time for him and his spouse. This accomplished two important things. First, it ensured that he met the standards set by his college for getting his work in on time, while also allowing him to use the required organizational skills to meet or achieve the task standard. Second, and more importantly, it allows him and his spouse

the time they need to unwind, accomplish tasks around their home, and get their affairs for the week in order.

Goals and priorities outside of college were broadly defined by most of the research participants. To the contrary, college goals and priorities were narrowly defined—spelled out specifically in college catalogs, syllabi, and rubrics. As Alex said, “there’s no syllabus for life.”

Neil, a former Army officer who was pursuing a second bachelor’s degree in a professional field, said, “Obviously in college it’s a very narrow success window. You either have this or you don’t. Go or don’t go.” In life, one has to maintain one’s own balance, and scheduling is a key component of this. Staying ahead in college work allows for focus on personal life. Neil continued:

Scheduling has definitely become a major part of how I accomplish this whole college education. One thing I learned, actually from the military is long range, and short range planning. A lot of that has come into play here. Setting goals for what can wait until later, verses what has to be done now . . . it’s not hard because if you go one at a time in priority order, that has a lot to do with staying successful.

Being able to accomplish work for college on time or ahead of schedule is one of Neil’s priorities because it supports his and his spouse’s home life better. It also supports his pursuit of a college degree.

Faith is an area that was discussed by a few of the research participants that helped define life outside of college. David spoke openly about how his faith helped him manage the day-to-day stresses of his college and work life. He spoke of how it gave him

perspective and allowed him and his spouse to continue growing closer. He was proud of the work he was doing in college, but said, “that it would be horrible to finish college with a broken marriage.” David also spoke of other ways to enjoy life, such as living healthy and regular exercise.

Staying involved with veterans’ activities is another important area a number of participants brought up as important in their life outside of college. Kevin is active in his college’s veterans’ group on campus; he also volunteers at the local veterans’ outreach center. Gregg, a former enlisted soldier, now enrolled in the Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) program at his college, also volunteers. Gregg and Kevin both find comfort in their dealings with fellow veterans; they feel that giving back to other veterans, especially those in need, is the right thing to do, since both of them feel “blessed” to have what they do. Gregg uses his connection with his fellow ROTC cadets to help him succeed. He says, “Through ROTC and everything, it causes you to get up early, to stay up late, to do what you've got to do to be successful at what you're trying to achieve.”

The definition of the college community varied from participant to participant. The areas each had in common was that the classroom was the center of it all. The sense that there was an intense focus on the academic part of college was very clear in the data. One of the most common comments made was about how easy college was if one just follows directions and meets deadlines.

When asked which is harder, life or college, Gregg said life was, because in college “you do have that grade marker you're able to hit. You have the standard that you're able to shoot for.” Bob added that college is not too difficult because “with the



faculty I feel like I have a personal relationship that I can delve into to kind of have them help me understand what they were talking about.”

“There is not much difference between a college campus and an aircraft carrier” sums up how Mike feels about his college community. He pointed to the idea that everything is linked together and contained in ways. Classes have schedules, syllabi, instructors and students. There is a hierarchy of professors, staff, and administration. There are other extraneous activities such as sports and clubs. There is research and recruiting. Yet it all comes down to classes. To him, everything is built around producing graduates with degrees. As he explained, aircraft carriers are similar in that everything focuses on the aircraft operations. There is a hierarchy. There are many other important activities necessary to run the operations of an aircraft carrier. Yet it really boils down to aircraft operations, it’s *raison d’être*.

Both the college and life communities are where goals and priorities are set. Goals, such as graduating from college and getting a good job that relates to one’s college degree tend to be on the lower end of priorities when compared to life goals such as have a happy marriage or be a good parent. Locke and Latham (2013) disagreed with this concept, stating instead, having vague goals tends to lead to lower performance towards those goals. As David pointed out earlier, “finishing college with a broken marriage would be horrible.” David continued to say his first priority was his family, even though he had no concrete, tangible goal to aim for, it was where he would put his efforts first. Bob, Paul, Lois, and Susan also pointed to their children’s happiness and health as being much more important than their respective college degrees. Lois said it best when she

said that her top priorities were “teaching my kids responsibility” and “taking care of my home.” This is where she focused most of her effort.

*Understanding one’s own strengths and weaknesses.* The research participants spoke confidently about their abilities to succeed in college, and none of the participants conveyed any doubt or fear that they would not successfully complete their college degree. Most even talked openly about how they had earned at least a 3.5 (out of 4.0) grade point average at the time of their interview. Charles, Neil, David, and Oscar went as far as saying they were somewhat disappointed in their grade point average because it had dropped to roughly 3.5, due to the increased difficulty of their course load.

Not everyone started that way; Oscar and Edward both admitted they had a difficult time transitioning from the military to college and that their grades had suffered early on because of it. However, as discussed earlier, both recognized their respective shortcomings and both actively sought help. Oscar talked about learning how to set goals and get organized and ask for help. He best states this as:

Asking a professor to, some of my mentors that I've had here in this school, “What do you think? How can I do this? Is this possible?” Then asking a couple students too, that I know that are full-time learners, “Hey how have you been doing this’?”

Lois, Alex, and Bob all used their professors as additional resources to get used to doing college level work. All three knew upon arrival to campus they “would be behind” their peers that were right out of high school. They knew it would take extra effort. They also knew what they lacked in current classroom experience they more than made up for in “life experience.”

Gregg is currently enrolled in his college's Reserve Officer Training Program and hopes to return to the military as a commissioned officer on active duty. He also knew what he needed to do to succeed in college, and what he would draw on to get the skills to do it. He said:

Well, personally, I've got a deep drive to go for the best grades I can achieve.

When I was in high school, I was a high C or a B student. I know when it came time for college, once I actually had the drive and the motivation to be able to actually say that I want to do something . . . the military actually gave me is that drive and that focus because, as you know, the higher your grades are and everything, the better chance of getting. . . everything after that. So I've been going from a C and a B student to almost a straight A student right now.

According to over half of the research participants, the ability to self-assess one's actions or performance in college and life is critical to success. Alex discussed this, using an anecdote about running: "when I set a goal for a time and you don't make it, I look back at my training program and see where I can improve in order to make it the next time." This is a simple example, yet it shows what many participants said, that one has to be honest with one's self and be able to look critically at oneself.

Mike recalled the events leading up to him first joining the Navy. He had had a series of jobs, mostly to do with commercial painting and as a musician, and he didn't feel like he was going anywhere. He said, "The day I woke up on a cot in the back room of a bar that I was working and living at, with my hair plastered to my face in sweat, was the day I knew I needed to do something else." That something else was the U.S. Navy. Mike's father was a retired Navy chief petty officer and Mike had learned a lot from his

father growing up. Mike shared that he didn't always take his father's advice. After Mike served his enlistment in the Navy and entered college, he finally thanked his father for showing him the meaning of hard work, and the rewards that he could get from applying himself towards something good.

*Analysis of strategies for success.* There were two components to the analysis for success. The first was the concept of goal setting; the second was self-efficacy. Goal setting in both one's life community and college community begins with the conscious decision on which one takes priority. In all case in this study, all research participants, chose life community for their priority of effort and resources. Many of the codes in Appendix A are defined by the development of skills and routines to achieve goals. The specific skills and routines that led to the development of the codes vary, yet, in general, they rotate around individual and collective capabilities provide for success in and out of college.

The ability to separate life strategies and goals from those of college is the key to understanding student veterans' strategies for success. This is what is referred to as the center of gravity of this study's finding. In military terms, the center of gravity is the source of power that provides moral or physical strength, freedom of action, or will to act (Department of Defense 2010a). The term applies in this case because the participants all point to the balance of priorities between life and college as that which gives them strength.

Not all research agrees with this focus on life over college as it contributes to student success. Tinto (1997) said, "For students who commute to college, especially those who have multiple obligations outside the college, the classroom may be the only

place where students and faculty meet, where education in the formal sense is experienced” (p. 599). Every research participant in this study except Gregg was a commuter student; they lived with family (spouse, children) or on their own. They all said it was the influences and goals outside the classroom where they learned the most and it was these things that would allow them to achieve their goals in life. Tinto (1997) uses the term “formal education” (p. 599); however, the data in this study points to education, or learning, as something that is more broadly defined, with classroom learning being a relatively small part of it.

Susan and Paul confirmed this broad definition of education when they were asked about where they put most of their effort, either in setting and achieving life goals or college goals. Both said life goals. Paul was asked to compare his observations of non-student veterans, student veterans, and himself, and he stated:

There seemed to be a huge difference between the veterans and non-veterans. All of the vets placed more emphasis of their personal goals and family than they did school. . . I believe as vets that we learned to place a higher importance to things that really matter to us, like family time. Having learned how to prioritize and set short and long term goals allows us to accomplish more with the same amount of time.

College was a short-term goal in all cases within this study. This combination of long term goal focus, where the goals are broadly defined, and the relative ease that research participants view their college experience is in contrast to goal setting theory. Locke and Latham (2013) stated “there is a linear relationship between the degree of goal difficulty and performance” (p. 5). They said further that “specific, difficult goals led to

higher performance than no goals or vague goal such as ‘do your best’” (Locke, & Latham, 2013, p. 5). Applying this argument, it would seem more appropriate if the research participants in this study placed college at the top of their priorities, due to the perceived difficulties of completing a college degree, and the clear measurable goals associated with it. That was far from the case.

As stated earlier, student veterans in this study all made the transition from the military to college with some level of success. This appears to be based on their perceived ability to adapt and grow. The “transition from high school or work to college is an exceedingly complex phenomena” (Terenzini et al., 1994, p. 61). According to the data in this study, the transition from the military to college is at least equal to, if not more complex, than either of these. Alex and Oscar talked about the loss of a support structure in the military that provided assistance whenever one was in need. Alex referred to her chain of command and “NCO chain of concern” [the military leaders that directly supervised her] as those who mentored her and gave her guidance when she needed it. That loss of mentorship and guidance can be difficult to deal with. Oscar said, “nobody cares in the real life what's going on in the background. It sounds callous, but nobody truly does. The only person who truly does care is you.”

Somewhere in life, or throughout their lives, the student veterans in this study learned to adapt. Jerusalem and Mittag (2009) called this a form of self-efficacy and stated that:

Within this stressful transitional adaptation to the new societal living conditions, self-efficacy can function as a personal resource protecting against deleterious experiences, negative emotions, and health impairment. Perceived efficacy itself

can undergo changes as a result of cumulative experiences in coping with complex demands in the new environment. (p. 179)

In spite of the complexities of the transition, the research participants have adapted to college life and have overcome any real or perceived challenges. They did this by establishing or relying on networks of family and friends outside of college.

***Success defined.*** The two subcategories that defined success were working towards success in life and achieving success in college. The main difference between these two subcategories is not just the arena, life or college, but the finality of the codes that made them up. In the subcategory of working towards goal in life all of the codes are continuous and never ending; whereas achieving success in college has a final end state in each code definition.

*Working towards success in life.* Working towards success in life included having a satisfying job or career, a good family life, and setting a positive example for others. In setting a positive example for others, others were defined as family members, fellow students, and/or members of one's community. Carse (2013) would describe these views as infinite games; where there is no beginning or end associated with the activity and the activity is engaged in for the sake of engaging in it.

Examples of working towards success in life are seen in the research participant's statements about their families. Charles talked about finding the elusive "perfect balance" between schoolwork and quality family time. As stated earlier, David felt it would "be horrible to finish college with a broken marriage." These are examples of where success can never be fully achieved, but when effort is put in and there are positive

steps along the way, the student veterans can feel successful for simply being on the journey.

An example of working towards setting a positive example and putting in the effort to improve one's community as a whole comes from Bob. When asked what success outside of college meant, Bob replied, "being a good parent, being a good husband, being a good steward to society, paying my taxes, doing the right thing." Oscar replied to the same question by talking about how he volunteered with a local veterans' service organization because he had had a positive experience the military and want to give back. He also said:

Being successful is being able to get up out of bed in the morning everyday on your own. Being able to take care of the stuff that you have to do on your own. You don't have to have somebody watching over your shoulder. Being able to take care of those things you need to do, whether it's children, an animal, what not.

These are more examples of what Carse (2013) would refer to as infinite games, where the student veterans in this study continually work towards goals that have no definitive end state, yet they find feelings of success by simply working towards them.

*Achieving success in college.* College success entails defining success in what Carse (2013) call finite games; these are games designed to win, with definitive end states. By using the term win, Carse (2013) does not imply there must be a loser, as in sporting contests. Rather, he acknowledges one can win in a sense that positive outcomes can be achieved by all who participate. Participation is voluntary in finite games and the end state is defined before one begins (Carse, 2013).



College is viewed in these terms by all of the research participants. While some participants like Gregg, Edward, and Mike, referred to learning for the sake of learning as one of their criteria for success, all stated that getting good grades and a degree was their primary concern. Good grades were defined by all as exceeding the standard for graduation. Neil said:

I think because in order to achieve the end goal in college you have to meet the requirements. You have to have the number grade that's associated with it. In order to achieve the end goal you really have to have those numbers in place. Obviously if you don't have a high enough GPA, you don't get the degree, you don't graduate. There's no possibility of success.

He went on to say standards are “more self-defined outside the college . . . I also view it as a matter of narrow verses broad standards as well. Obviously in college it's a very narrow success window. You either have this or you don't. Go or don't go”.

The ability to define success in college was not challenging to the research participants. The metrics are laid out as Alex said “in the syllabus.” She went on to say everything is spelled out, and if one doesn't understand, one simply needs to ask.

A challenge some of the research participants faced when defining success in college was learning how to manage expectations of themselves. Charles addressed this when asked whether or not he was a perfectionist. He said:

I find it very frustrating. This semester, with the major and trying to carry a minor, it's produced some challenges. Coming into [transferring into this college], I had a slight under a 4.0 GPA. That has found itself sliding down a slippery slope ending in the mid 3's currently. Yes, the perfection unfortunately has definitely

been an enemy. It just gets into some of the wrong things perfection will draw you towards. It will take you off on a tangent on something that really don't [sic] matter.

He went on to discuss how he just went back to what were his priorities in life, and how that helped mediate those feelings of frustration. He knew he did not need to be perfect at anything, in order to be successful. He simply needed to meet the standards set forth by his college in order to graduate. However, he remained driven to exceed the standard because of the values instilled in him throughout life.

*Analysis of success defined.* The codes in Appendix A, Occurrences of Codes by Subcategory, show that the data is very specific about generalized, vague goals for life, and tangible, easily defined goals for college. Life goals revolve around family and self, in that order. College goals are mostly externally defined, with the exception of working hard to maintain academic priorities. The motivation to succeed in life is all about feeling satisfied internally. The motivation for succeeding in college centers on being awarded a degree from an external source, and earning respect. Put another way, life goals tend to be established to transform the student veteran, while college goals are viewed as a transaction between the student veteran and the college.

Data in this study demonstrates student veterans identify transformational influences and transactional ones. Bass and Avolio (1993) and Burns (1978) differentiate between transformational and transactional leadership by saying transformational leaders change people's behaviors by influencing them through words and actions that affect their internal processes that drive their action. Transactional leaders provide reward in terms of external influences such as pay, protection, or other types of exchanges based on

a transfer of some good or service between leader and follower (Bass & Avolio, 1993; Burns, 1978).

Student veterans have been exposed to many leaders, both in and out of the military. Some of these leaders made lasting impacts. Sometimes those leaders that have had the biggest impact are family members. Gregg said “I have a really strong family support. They've always been very supportive. My mom and my dad and my sister and everybody, they've always been very supportive of me.” Bass and Avolio (1993) stated transformational leaders are characterized by four factors including “idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration” (p. 112). The support that Gregg talked about suggested his family continued to have an impact on his development even though he no longer lived at home or under his parent’s rules. It motivated him to succeed and made him work hard to achieve his goals.

Mike had similar comments in regards to his father, who was also a Navy veteran. “I always looked up to my dad, even though I didn’t always take his advice. When I finally decided to join the Navy, I did it as much for him as I did it for me.” The influence that Mike’s father had on him helped him get out of a place in life that wasn’t the best. He said his father never pushed him into joining the Navy; he only taught him to make his own way in life.

The need for leadership in any organization is apparent. Most of the examples of leadership influence the research participants discussed were closely associated with transformational leadership. Hetland H., Hetland J., Andreassen, and Notelaers (2011) showed that “transformational leadership revealed substantial relationships with fulfillment of the needs of relatedness, autonomy and competence, when controlling for a

component of transactional leadership” (p. 516). Those concepts of relatedness, autonomy, and relatedness, are also the foundation for Deci and Ryan’s (1985, 2000) self-determination theory.

Self-determination theory posits that people are motivated either by intrinsic factors or extrinsic factors. The “distinction is between intrinsic motivation, which refers to doing something because it is inherently interesting or enjoyable, and extrinsic motivation, which refers to doing something because it leads to a separable outcome” (Deci & Ryan, 2000, p. 55). Student veterans in this study clearly defined success in college is motivated by the separable outcome of receiving a degree. Further, class work was generally associated with the separable outcome of getting a good grade, even though many respondents referred to learning for learning sake as part of their experience.

Success outside of college was defined as doing things that were interesting or enjoyable such as being with a spouse, partner, children, and/or friends. Even career goals were discussed, such as being in a job the participants enjoy and receive fulfillment from. Clearly, these are goals to be worked towards, without any definitive end date or outcome, goals that are intrinsically motivated.

### **Interrelationships Between Categories.**

A social science theory “predicts and controls action through an if-then logic; explains how and/or why something happens by explaining its causes; and provides insights and guidance for improving social life” (Saldaña, 2013, p. 250). Thornberg and Charmaz (2012) said that “a theory states relationships between abstract concepts” and it “may aim for either explanation or understanding” (Thornberg and Charmaz, 2012, p.

41). The findings presented below show (a) how the categories revealed in this study interrelate with each another and with other extant research, (b) how if-then logic is used to explain the relationship between the decisive point and the center of gravity and the student veterans' success, and (c) how codes were used to build the study's categories and subcategories.

This study showed student veterans used a continuous cycle of personal development, planning and employment, acknowledgment of achievement, and assessment of goals, to succeed in college, while assigning life goals a higher priority for achievement. These results both agree with, and dispute, extant theory. Bandura's (1989) social cognitive theory describes what is discovered in the beginning of the model by offering parallels to what he refers to as "triadic reciprocity" of "behaviors, cognitive and other personal factors, and environment influences" (pgs. 23-24). Banduras (1995) theory of self-efficacy theory offered a guide to the process of employing strategies for success and points to the center of gravity. It supported self-determination theory from Deci and Ryan (1985, 2000) through demonstrated signs of intrinsic motivation present in student veteran's highest priority goal pursuits.

The relationship between the Student Veterans' codes can be seen in Figure 4.1. This diagram represents a view of the data, as described by the research participants over time. The loop in the diagram is continuous; it represents the flow of experiences, instead of a determined beginning and end.

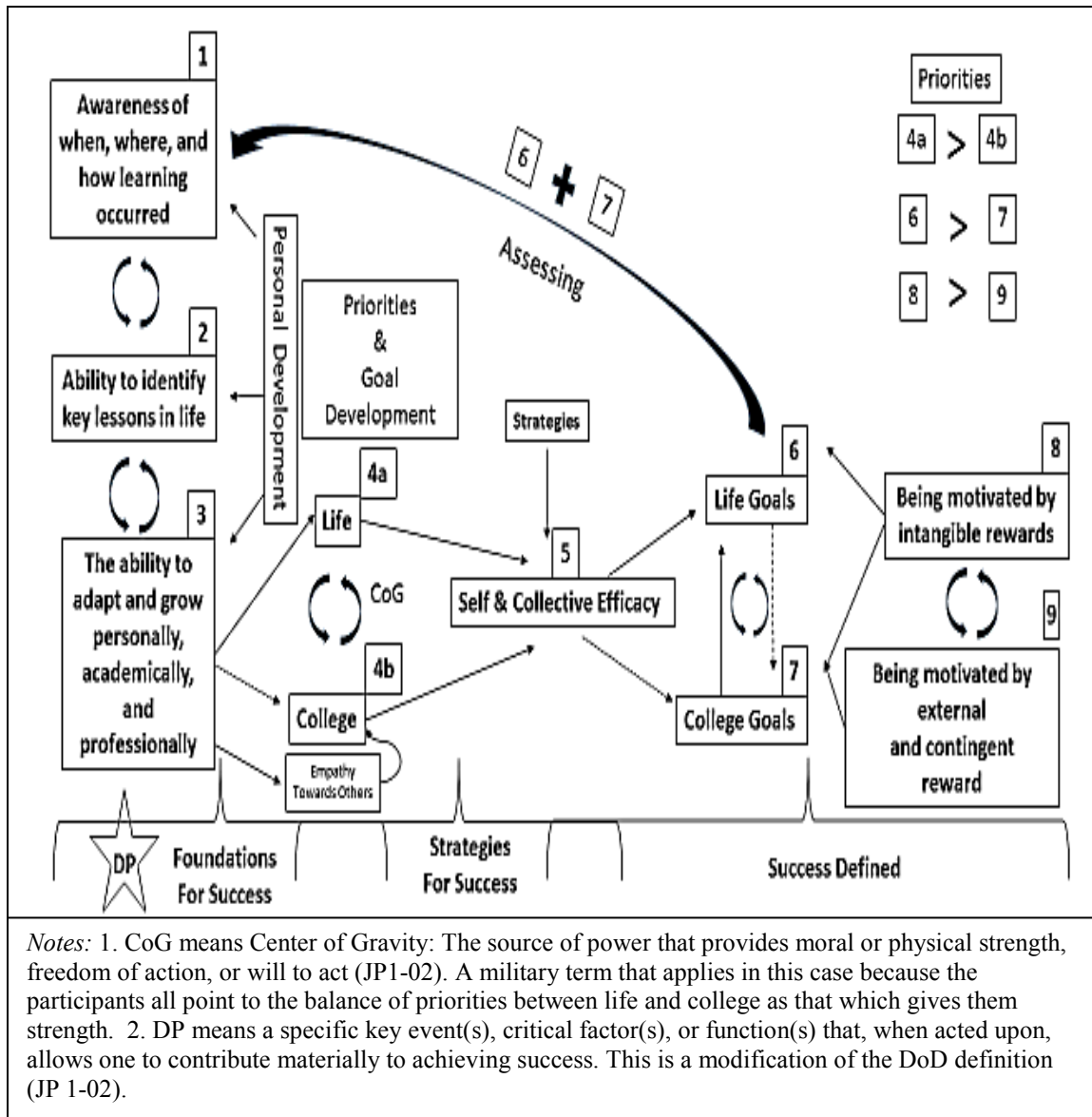


Figure 4.1. The Interrelationship of Categories and Subcategories.

The model in Figure 4.1 disputes Locke and Latham’s goal setting theory (1990, 2013) because it shows the greatest amount of effort is directed towards goals with the least tangible rewards. The model also contradicts Tinto’s (1993; 1997) student persistence model, in that student veterans are shown to succeed even when not highly engaged in their respective campus communities; while supporting his assertion that

nontraditional students may fill social needs differently than the traditional students in his studies.

In Figure 4.1, Foundations for Success is made up of three subcategories that are depicted in a linear fashion, yet are represented in the study's findings as a continuum that has no beginning or end. This category is decisive in the model because, without this continuity, the rest of the model would cease to function properly. This is because lifelong learning and the ability to adapt are represented by all of the research participants as a key factor in their success.

Strategies for success means the ability to develop and prioritize goals and apply specific strategies to work towards and achieve them. In Figure 4.1, the center of gravity (CoG) is the ability to develop and prioritize goals, defined here as the source of power that provides the strength to employ active strategies for success. Self-efficacy is having the confidence and knowledge to do something that is beneficial to oneself or others. This category overlaps with foundations for success and success defined. Two key elements from foundations of success are the ability to adapt and grow, and to show empathy towards others. These are the key to prioritizing and developing goals. Success defined is dependent on the existence of goals, in order to be able to apply the necessary motivation towards their accomplishment.

Student veterans in this study used strategies for success that have developed over a lifetime of continuous learning; and foundations for success are based on learning. Indeed, the study participants showed awareness about the circumstances of their learning and readily offered insights into what they viewed as key lessons. The most important aspect of this learning was the students' ability to adapt and to grow as people. A key

component of this growth was their ability to show empathy towards others. This not only helped the student veterans adapt to military life and return to civilian and college life; it also allowed them to work well with others in the classroom. This is represented in Figure 4.1 as the decisive point in the cycle. It was a critical factor because it allowed the participants to contribute more to their success, by not bogging them down by frustration rooted in a lack of healthy adjustment to the college environment.

Although specific strategies for success differed for each research participant, there were many commonalities. The ability to adapt and show empathy were common and there was little variance in how each participant described their strategies for both. Being able to differentiate between priorities and goals for their personal lives and for college revealed itself as the participants' center of gravity, while the priorities and goals were unique. Center of gravity means where the participants draw their strength to succeed. Life goals have a greater emphasis and remain loosely defined. They include goals such as remaining happily married (as applicable), having a successful career, raising healthy and happy children (as applicable), and feeling as if they have accomplished something good. This agrees with the findings of Elliot et al. (2011), who stated that the presence of a social support system was an important factor in maintaining one's health. Barry et al., (2012) and C. J. Bryan et al. (2014) also showed maintaining one's mental health and preventing alcohol abuse had positive effects on grade point average and a more positive college experience. The findings from these studies support the data in this study by confirming that good relationships with one's self and others is a component of success strategies in college.



College goals are simply defined as learning, achieving or, more often, exceeding established standards, and attaining a degree. The research participants put more emphasis on development of their personal goals than their college goals. Self-efficacy for the research participants was based on the cumulative effect of learning, prioritizing, and goal setting. This is the key to the model in Figure 4.1 and directly answers this study's research question.

This study looked at how each participant defined success. The data showed they defined success by examining internally- and externally-motivated goals. College goals tended to be narrowly focused and motivated by contingent reward or external sources. Life goals were very often motivated by internal factors.

### **Substantive Grounded Theory**

Neither age, gender, marital or family status, nor branch of service, appeared to play a major role in how student veterans learned, adapted, developed goals, or achieved, defined, or assessed their success. Nor did this study find a significant difference amongst research participant's responses to any questions, according to gender, age, branch or length of service. An explanation for this may be found in the words of former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Martin Dempsey:

All service men and women belong to the profession from the junior enlisted to our most senior leaders. We are all accountable for meeting ethical and performance standards in our actions and similarly, accountable for our failure to take action, when appropriate. The distinction between ranks lies in our level of responsibility and degree of accountability. We share the common attributes of character, courage, competence, and commitment. We qualify as professionals

through intensive training, education, and practical experience. As professionals, we are defined by our strength of character, lifelong commitment to core values, and maintaining our professional abilities through continuous improvement, individually and institutionally. (Department of Defense, 2013)

Student veterans served as professionals, with common values and ethical standards. This does not mean that demographic categories are unimportant, it simply means student veterans have served in an organization that looks beyond any of those characteristics and focuses on mission accomplishment. More specifically, the organization looks at the individual's earned rank and contribution to mission accomplishment as more important than demographic identifiers.

Small differences existed in the relative weight student veterans assigned to goals in life and in college. Those who were married, with children, and/or retired after 20 or more years of service, put more emphasis on family goals and to setting a personal example for others. They did this while focusing slightly less than younger student veterans on their own personal aspirations.

Successful student veterans defined success in college as completing their degree, while learning about themselves and their respective field of study. These students prioritized success in college below their overall goals in life. Student veterans in this study broadly defined life goals as a series of experiences that collectively defined their success as human beings, and included college as only one of those experiences.

Students believed that the tools necessary to achieve college success were the same as the tools necessary to be successful in their previous military experience or career, and life as a whole. The ability to manage resources, with time being the most valuable, topped

most of their lists. The ability to empathize with fellow students was difficult at first, but necessary to get the most out of the college experience. The ability to adapt, along with internally-driven motivation, was critical to success. Contingent rewards, such as a college degree, were only important for attaining the next goal. .

**The theory.** The theory formed by this study is this: If student veterans have a level of self-efficacy that allows them to adapt to changing conditions in life—to empathize with college peers, prioritize their available resources (particularly time), to complete clearly defined college tasks, and to continue to learn and grow—then they are more likely to be successful in their post-secondary education goals. This is predicated on the student veterans’ ability to assess themselves, while concentrating the majority of their efforts and resources towards broader goals that are motivated by internally focused rewards.

## **Chapter 5: Discussion**

### **Introduction**

This is the first study to examine student veteran success as opposed to student veteran challenges and deficits. The ability of student veterans to succeed in college is based on their ability to adapt, empathize, prioritize efforts, and learn both in and out of college. Prioritizing goals in life allows student veterans to more efficiently allocate limited resources and apply them towards succeeding in college. College is not always the number one priority in a student veteran's life. To better serve post 9/11 student veterans, college faculty, staff, academic researchers, and student veterans' groups must develop a more complete understanding the student veteran populations at their colleges. Post 9/11 student veterans, to improve their chances of success in college, must continually assess themselves and their goals.

The following chapter discusses implications and limitations of this study, and makes recommendations for groups and organizations involved with student veterans. Recommendations include those for academic researchers, colleges and universities, the Departments of Defense and Veterans Affairs, student veteran groups, and associated nonprofit organizations. At the end of the chapter is a summary of the study.

### **Implication of Findings**

The substantive grounded theory in this study allows different stakeholders, such as academic researchers, student veterans groups, and higher education faculty and staff

to change their narrative on student veterans—from one that looks at the challenges and deficits of student veterans to one that looks at their capabilities. The theory states:

If student veterans have a level of self-efficacy that allows them to adapt to changing conditions in life; empathize with college peers; prioritize their available resources, particularly time; to complete clearly defined college tasks; and continue to learn and grow, then they are more likely to be successful in their post-secondary education goals. This is predicated on their ability to assess themselves while concentrating the majority of efforts and resources towards goals that are motivated by internally focused rewards.

This theory is a “theoretical interpretation” of the “delimited problem” in the area of student veteran performance in post-secondary education (Charmaz, 2014, p. 344). It addresses strategies for succeeding in college. It can be applied in wider contexts, with a broader range of participants, to develop a formal grounded theory.

The findings in this study present a challenge to researchers who wish to study student veterans and their ability to succeed in college. There is a need to look at student veterans’ self-efficacy, not just their limitations. Student veterans succeed in post-secondary education in the face of challenges that are in some ways unique to them. Transitioning from the military to college is one such unique challenge. PTSD, problems with alcohol and drugs, and neurobehavioral disorders, on the other hand, are not unique to student veterans.

This study demonstrates that Tinto’s model (1993; 1997) of student persistence and success might not apply to student veterans. Tinto (1997) showed persistence to be an outcome of attributes, commitments, effort, and experience (p. 615). The model

discovered by this study shows persistence is a subset of adaptability and is an input to a system of goal setting, self-efficacy, and motivation that has no real output because it is a continuous loop. Tinto (1993) addressed nontraditional students by stating his model of persistence may not account for how all subsets of college students fill certain social needs. Older students, in particular, may fulfill social needs in ways other than through involvement in college campus communities (Tinto, 1993). This indeed seems to be the case with student veterans in this study.

This study demonstrated the applicability of extant theories future researchers can use to define their theoretical rationale to support further studies exploring student veteran success. Bandura's (1989) social cognitive theory applies to this study's theory in the area of continuous learning. The research participants all discussed how learning lessons early in life, to include before and during their service in the military, affected their ability to adapt and learn while in college. The reciprocal relationship between their environments, learned behaviors, and personal and cognitive learning, allowed them to show empathy for their fellow students and adapt to their new environment (Bandura, 1989).

Bandura's (1997) theory of self-efficacy applies to the development and implementation of success strategies for the research participants. Each participant discussed the confidence in their ability to succeed in college. They all also pointed out that college was not the most difficult undertaking that they had ever been through, or were going through at the time of their interview. This confidence and ability to put college into perspective was an important aspect of the ability to employ strategies for success (Bandura, 1997).

Finally, Deci and Ryan's (1985) theory of intrinsic motivation can be applied to examining why student veterans prioritize their efforts towards success as well as what drives them to persist in college. The "distinction is between intrinsic motivation, which refers to doing something because it is inherently interesting or enjoyable, and extrinsic motivation, which refers to doing something because it leads to a separable outcome" (Deci & Ryan, 2000, p. 55). Student veterans in this study clearly defined that success in college, and life, is motivated by the separable outcome of receiving a degree.

This study expanded the idea of what success means to student veterans. Success in college is defined in this study as attaining a college degree while meeting, or more often than not, exceeding, the standards set by the college for degree attainment. The research participants themselves established these criteria, which are based on contingent reward (Bass, Avolio, Jung, & Berson 2003). That is, if the student veteran completes his or her work based on a prearranged agreement and standard, he or she is rewarded with a grade, and eventually a degree. Kamens (1977) says colleges and universities operate under an ideology that creates "membership categories" such as "college graduates," attaches "rights" and "meanings to these groups," and certifies members of these groups (p. 208). These are symbolic contingent rewards and reframe the discussion of college as merely a tool to achieve something greater. None of the research participants stated or suggested that they were transformed by their college experience. They all mentioned, but did not dwell on, the challenges they faced. This is an important point because it demonstrates that college is only part of what makes a student veteran feel successful.

Sportsman and Thomas (2015) discussed the challenges student veterans have when transitioning to civilian life. As with other research in this area (Griffin & Gilbert,

2015; Livingston et al., 2011) the focus of this transition is on the negative. The simple fact is, student veterans, by definition, have already transitioned to civilian life. Getting to college is a success in and of itself, because it shows that the student veteran successfully completed his or her term of service, and was successful in being accepted at his or her college or university of choice.

Student veterans are nontraditional students (Vacchi, 2012) who bring a wide range of experiences to their college community. Academic researchers, college faculty and staff, the government, and student veteran groups, can benefit from the findings in this study and in continued research on the student veteran population. With nearly a million student veterans (National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics, 2015b) and over \$14 billion dollars (United States Department of Veterans Affairs, 2015b) of taxpayer funded educational benefits, this is a population that is well worth the effort to examine. In addition, the moral obligation to assist those that have served the nation has been well documented and widely agreed upon (Altschuler & Blumin, 2009). The theory and model presented in this study allows academic researchers, college faculty and staff, the government, and student veteran groups, to view student veterans as people who can succeed and as individuals to be emulated by others.

### **Limitations**

This study was limited in its ability to conduct theoretical sampling outside of a small population of research participants. This limited the demographic diversity of the research participants and did not provide a representative sample of student veterans as a whole. Due to time constraints, research participants were selected partially based on a snowball sampling technique (Creswell, 2013), coupled with theoretical sampling



considerations (Charmaz, 2014). This limited the study in two ways. First, it did not result in a group of participants who reflected the demographic make-up of their respective colleges. Second, theoretical sampling procedures were focused inside of the substantive area of research for more data comparison. Data saturation, however, was achieved in the substantive area.

### **Recommendations**

The purpose of this study was to develop a substantive grounded theory that addressed how student veterans implement strategies to succeed in college and to fill a gap in contemporary research that focuses only on challenges and deficits faced by student veterans. The purpose of using grounded theory methodology was to provide flexibility and to avoid being bound by a priori theory, which may have limited the scope of discovering realities in the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Bryant & Charmaz, 2010). Grounded theory methodology also allowed the research to “uncover relevant conditions . . . and determine how the actors respond to changing conditions and the consequences of their actions (Corbin & Strauss, 1990).”

**Academic researchers.** Future research must change its focus from deficit to success. Research in qualitative studies should examine the lived experience of the student veterans that are succeeding or have succeeded. Quantitative studies can propose hypotheses using elements of this study’s theory. These would be extremely relevant and allow more focused efforts in institutions of higher education towards developing programs to support each student veteran’s success, not simply assist them where they are struggling. Three specific areas of future research are recommended for consideration: (a) comparing the transition from civilian to service member with the transition from

service member to civilian, (b) student veterans' perceived ability to succeed, and (c) student veterans' motivation in and out of college.

Future research based on the theory presented in this study must look at student veterans that reflect the demographic make-up of the student veteran body at large, including undergraduates in their freshman and sophomore years, community college, part-time, graduate, and vocational school students. Following is a discussion of each proposed area of future research, followed by a brief summary.

***Comparing the transition from civilian to service member to civilian.***

Entering college after leaving the military is not the first transition student veterans have had to navigate. One other transition all student veterans have in common is the transition from civilian life into the military. Goodman et al., (2006) state that there are four coping strategies (also known as the 4 Ss) used to navigate transitions: self, situation, support, and strategies. Student veterans had to adapt to the military culture, or else they would not have completed their contractual term of service. Although the military has a training program (each branch has its own) for all service members, to provide support and offer strategies for this transition, the individual choice to join the military and the specifics of the timing in life are both voluntarily defined by self and situation (10 U.S.C, 2016). Exploring the transition from the military to college excludes the element of this study's theory, which states successful student veterans have a level of efficacy regarding the ability to adapt that has served them more than once in their lives.

When student veterans enroll in college, they have already lived through at least one major life transition. The 4 Ss of Schlossberg's transition theory still apply (Goodman et al., 2006), particularly in the area of self and situation as the student veteran

is enrolling voluntarily. Current research on transitional challenges tends to focus on support and strategies to help student veterans succeed. Research on transitional challenges by student veterans needs to address the transition from civilian to service member as well as service member to college student in order to compare the two. Instead of simply looking at the “transition to civilian life” (Sportsman & Thomas, 2015), researchers should rephrase the phenomena as transitioning back to civilian life because all service members were civilians before they were in the military.

Successful student veterans are lifelong learners, as the data in this study shows. Bandura’s (1989) social cognitive theory states there is a reciprocal relationship between “behaviors, cognitive and other personal factors, and environmental influences” (pp. 23-24). Unlike the 4 Ss (Goodman et al., 2006), Bandura’s (1989) theory explains a continuous lifelong process and not just a discreet period, such as transitioning from the military to college. Having been through one major transition already has likely taught student veterans how to navigate others.

This type of learning is described by Jerusalem and Mittag (2009) as self-efficacy, which reinforces personal strengths and abilities that protect oneself from negative effects of stress. This support both Bandura’s (1985) triad and Goodman’s et al., (2006) 4 Ss concepts of personal factors, or self, playing a role in successfully navigating transitions. Applying Bandura’s social cognitive theory as a theoretic framework to study student veteran transitions would add to the body of knowledge on student veterans.

***Student veteran perceived ability to succeed.*** Student veterans in this study all demonstrated the ability to succeed in college by completing a minimum of two years of schooling and having a plan in place to complete their studies. They showed that they

had been able to overcome challenges and apply themselves accordingly to achieve success.

Future studies should examine successful student veterans and compare them to those just embarking on their college career. Using Bandura's (1997) self-efficacy theory, it may be possible to determine at what point student veterans feel as if they have reached a level of confidence in their abilities to master the skills necessary to complete their college degree. Using the theory and model from this study, in conjunction with Bandura's (1997) theory, one may be able to posit at what point in the student veteran's life they began to develop those skills.

***Student veteran motivation in and out of college.*** Motivation for veterans attending college is an area that this study's theory shows that there is more research needed. In addition, motivation to succeed in college and in life is an area that has no significant research regarding student veterans. Deci and Ryan (1985) provide the basis for researcher into student veteran motivation.

This study's theory and associated model can be used to pinpoint an area in the student veteran's life where she or he has made a decision to allocate a resource and assess the motivation behind the action. Understanding what motivates learning in general and determining what goals in life are intrinsically motivated, and which are extrinsically motivated, can assist researchers in recommending advising and mentoring techniques that work well with student veterans. Researchers examined the motivation in choosing to act over goal setting because the data in this study showed student veterans established goals based on previously learned lessons, suggesting a clear linkage between the goal and the motivation.

In summary, the focus of future academic research should be to: (a) study transitioning student veterans from the perspective of adaptability and ability to demonstrate empathy towards their future peers in college, using Bandura's (1989) social learning theory; (b) study student veteran success by examining their perceived ability to succeed by prioritizing resources, particularly time, and efforts in college using Bandura's (1997) theory of self-efficacy; and (c) study the motivations of student veterans using Deci and Ryan's (1985) theory of motivation, as a basis of the researcher's theoretical rationale.

**Student veterans.** Student veterans are their own best advocates. They can and should rely on their experience in the military as an asset to their education journey. Applying lessons learned from leaders, peers, and subordinates, can serve them well in higher education. Preparing for college begins once the choice is made to attend an institution of higher learning. There are many tools prospective student veterans can use to assist themselves in getting ready. Many, but not all, are geared towards educators and administrators, yet are useful for prospective students as well.

One such tool is the Veterans Integration to Academic Leadership (VITAL) website. The VITAL program from the VA is designed as a tool to help colleges and universities better serve student veterans and promote cohesion between educators and student veterans. The tool is useful to student veterans because it provides information about the initiatives in which colleges can participate. It also allows the student veteran to be aware of what he or she can expect from their institution (United States Department of Veterans Affairs, 2016).

Other items available include texts and online guides for educators and administrators that can be used by student veterans to equip themselves with an understanding of higher education as it applies to themselves. Writers like Coll and Weiss (2015), DiRamio and Jarvis (2011), and Doe and Langstraat (2014), have all written texts that are geared towards faculty and administration in higher education. The texts are equally as useful to student veterans, and student veterans groups on campus, as tools to better understand how they fit into higher education as a whole. Online resources such as U.S. News and World Reports Guide to Military Friendly Colleges (U.S. News and World Report, 2015a) is a useful tool to see how potential college choices compare to others.

Current student veterans can rely on on-campus resources such as student veteran groups. Student Veterans of America (SVA) sponsors many of these groups and provides resources and guidance for managing chapters. With over 1,300 chapters across the country, SVA is an organization that is growing and expanding along side the growing population of Post 9/11 veterans in higher education (Student Veterans of America, 2016).

Finally, as the data in this study shows, student veterans must rely on existing social support networks while growing other networks on campus. Student veterans that participated in this study all said their family, friends, and associates outside of the classroom had major impacts on their ability to be successful. These associations made it easier to keep college in perspective and maintain a focus on broader life based goals.

In summary, student veterans can: (a) Start exploring programs that support student veterans while still determining what institution to attend; (b) utilize resources in

text and online to find programs that are specifically geared towards student veterans; (c) get involved with on-campus student veterans groups as a way to find additional sources of social support; and (d) rely on existing networks of support that were cultivated prior to attending college, allowing oneself to be better able to prioritize needs and goals that support overall success in life, and in college.

**Student veteran groups.** Student veteran groups are often the first line of defense for student veterans in need. However, as this study shows, the on-campus approach that many student veteran groups take towards outreach may not always be effective. Student veterans are often focused on their lives outside of college. Therefore, an on-campus organization, organized and run like a traditional college club, may have trouble attracting student veteran participants. Davidson and Wilson (2013) addressed this by pointing out that many traditional programs designed to meet the needs of 4-year residential student do not always apply to nontraditional student. They looked to Tinto (1997) and his use of the terms academic and social integration to show that programs to assist traditional students with integration challenges are not as effective with student that tend to commute. The goals of those commuter students regarding social integration were often defined outside of the college community (Davidson & Wilson, 2013). This study reinforces their findings, and also notes Tinto (1997) showed this potential divergence.

Campus groups must have a sense of the needs of their student veterans' peers. Faculty advisors to these groups must understand the nontraditional nature of student veterans (Vacchi, 2012) and provide guidance to group leaders accordingly. Both Coll and Weiss (2015) and DiRamio and Jarvis (2011) have published guides to improve the

understanding of student veterans on college campuses. These guides provide the reader with descriptive information detailing what the student veteran population at large looks like, as well as basic descriptions of student veteran's benefits. The guides discuss challenges faced by student veterans and offer recommended program enhancements for student veterans' services (Coll & Weiss, 2015; DiRamio & Jarvis 2011). These guides can assist student administrators of student veteran groups and faculty advisors gain a better understanding of ways to work with and assist student veterans on their campus.

Gaining a better understanding of one's fellow student veteran's transition process can greatly assist student veterans' groups. The Department of Defense Transition Assistance Program (TAP) has a training module specifically for service members who wish to attend college after separating from the military. There is no way to ensure student veterans who arrive on campus attend that training. Even though the training became mandatory for all service members at the end of fiscal year 2015, an arriving student veteran may have separated before TAP was fully instituted at their respective duty locations, or chosen to attend a training workshop for another track, such as the entrepreneur track (Department of Defense, 2015b).

Student veterans' groups would benefit by reaching out to arriving student veterans with some type of formal introduction, coupled with a brief questionnaire. The questionnaire should ask whether the new student veteran lives on or off campus, is married or single, and what type of needs he or she has. Tinto (1997) and Davison and Wilson (2013) both showed that social needs for nontraditional students are not always met by on campus resources.



Lastly, student veterans' groups should maintain awareness of their campuses' level of support given to student veterans. They should be familiar with the Executive Order 13607 (Executive Order 13607, Fed. Reg., 2012), the 8 Keys to Veteran Success (Department of Education, 2015), and be vocal advocates for their community. They should work in conjunction with their college's registrar, financial aid office, health clinic, and other campus organizations to ensure the needs of the student veteran population are met. Conversely, they must be able to ascertain any special needs of the student veteran community by communicating openly and frequently with its community members.

In summary, student veterans' groups must (a) ensure there is an understanding as to the needs of student veterans, which is based in academic literature and government policy; (b) actively promote their on-campus programs, and; (c) understand that the social needs of many student veterans are met by off-campus relationships.

**Colleges and universities.** Student veterans that have truly learned how to be empathetic are an asset in the classroom because they understand the need to view situations from the standpoint of others. They are participative, eager to learn, and not afraid to ask for help. This gives them the ability to emerge as peer leaders among their fellow classmates. It also allows them to set a good example for other students in terms of classroom and assignment discipline. These recommendations can be separated into two sub groups, staff/administration and faculty. There are a number of areas of overlap, but specific recommendations to a sub group will be noted.

Understanding the life cycle of student veterans is an important step in better understanding them as people and student. To get to college, student veterans must go

through a formal, mandated process. Their transition from the military to college is often reported in academic literature as a challenge. Yet the processes, in place through the DoD TAP (Department of Defense, 2015b) and the Goals, Plans, and Assist Curriculum (Department of Defense, 2015c), are both part of that transition. Transition should not be viewed as a stand-alone event for student veterans. It is, and always will be, an ongoing process that is made easier by those student veterans who have learned to be adaptable. Using the student veteran as his or her own resource, as part of the recruitment and advisement process, can be a key to improving the chances for success in college. Administrators and staff should understand these processes to ensure that the prospective student veterans is a proper match for the institution.

Reaching out to student veterans to better understand them is important. DiRamio, Ackerman, and Mitchell (2008) recommended the use of an “orientation coach” for helping the new student get through the first couple of months of college. Colleges and universities that are part of the 59% that use identification methods other than financial aid information and application data may find this easier (National Center for Education Statistics, 2014). Those that don’t, should look at ways to better identify student veterans, such as voluntary reporting through other campus activities. This orientation process can be the first step in successfully integrating the student veterans into the campus culture. Couple with a focused recruitment and application process, this can better assist administrators in matching student veterans with the right advisor.

Validating the experience of student veterans in the classroom can also benefit them (Rendon, 1994). This process involves first, the acknowledgement of their experiences, and then, their service. Often times, service is acknowledged with a thank

you, and there is no further engagement. This is a danger for faculty because it can be viewed as insincere and cause friction in the student professor relationship. Each student veteran is different and managing the process of validation and acknowledgement is a challenge for individual faculty. Use of models such as the one that this study presents may offer insights as to how student veterans not only succeed, but also develop over time. That insight would be invaluable to faculty members with student veterans in their classrooms.

Student veterans' groups can assist in this process of validation. Acknowledging each member of the student veteran community for his or her service may not be practical, and may not be what the student veteran wants. He or she may wish to remain relatively anonymous. With assistance from campus student veterans' groups, colleges and universities can determine individual needs. Working with student veterans' groups also allows the staff, and administration to have a resource that truly understands the student veteran community and its members' capabilities and needs. Faculty can also be encouraged to take part in student veteran group led events, such as panel discussions and Veterans Day recognition. That participation may be viewed very positively by student veterans as a whole and foster cohesion in the student veteran faculty relationship.

Motivation plays a strong role in a student veteran's capability to succeed. Knowing what those motivations are can assist college administrators and faculty, most notably academic counselors, in guiding student veterans as they navigate higher education. To assume that attaining a college degree or finding employment is the number one motivator for student veterans is misguided. To best serve their student

veteran advisees, academic advisors and faculty must understand what is driving them. Again, student veterans' groups can be a key resource to gaining a better understanding.

In summary, colleges and universities need to (a) increase their awareness of student veterans on campus by improving how they are indentified; (b) promote student veterans groups as advocates for their community; and (c) use the group as a resource to inform faculty, staff, and administration as to the state of the student veteran community and its needs.

**The Departments of Defense, Education, and Veterans Affairs.** The Department of Defense Transition Assistance Program, or DoD TAP, prepares service members as they get ready to leave the military (Department of Defense, 2015b). Currently, the portion of the TAP program that focuses on service members wishing to attend college is centered on financial readiness and use of the Post 9/11 GI Bill. College choice, transferring military training to college credit, and selecting a course of study are also included (Department of Defense, 2015d).

The theory in this study shows that success in college is much more detailed than going through mechanical process of getting to college. Establishing goals, plans, and strategies is another transition program for separating service members (Department of Defense, 2015c). It is this part of the transition program the theory and model from this study can benefit the soon to be student veteran. Giving prospective student veterans the tools to look at theselves and honestly assessing whether or not they possess the level of self efficacy necessary to succeed in college would be a ground breaking step. Exposing the prospective student veteran to this model would not be meant to discourage college

attendance. It would open their eyes to what success looks like so they themselves can look to model themselves after those that have gone before them.

The VA offers continuing education counselling and support for veterans after they have separated from the military (United States Department of Veterans Affairs, 2015a). As with the recommendations for the military, the theory and model this study produced can guide program improvements in this area. Ensuring veterans are prepared for the challenges of college goes beyond taking care to ensure the prospective student veteran can handle the administration and financial aid aspect of higher education.

To summarize, the Department of Defense must: (a) develop training for the higher education track of TAP that goes beyond selecting a college, accessing GI Bill benefits, and transferring military experience to college credit; (b) add an overview of the Department of Education's tools such as the 8 Keys to Veterans Success (Department of Education, 2015), applicable Internet based resources from the VA like the VA's education and training homepage (United States Department of Veterans Affairs, 2015a); (c) introduce commercial tools for evaluating college choice, such as U.S. News and World Report's ranking of colleges and universities (U.S. News & World Report, 2015) and Victory Media's © Military Friendly website (Victory Media Inc., 2015) to assist in choosing a college that is right for the prospective student veteran; and (d) develop academic resources to prepare the prospective student veteran to include a series of vignettes that show what both academic success and failure look like, with discussions of both in an after action review format (Department of Defense, 2010).

The Department of Veterans Affairs needs to: (a) study the feasibility of adding social work support for student veterans to assist in meeting social needs, begins when

they request their GI Bill benefits and continues until the student veteran opts out or stops going to college; (b) study the feasibility of adding student veterans to a higher priority listing for veterans medical and dental care while enrolled in college in order to alleviate any financial hardship from a lack of medical or dental insurance; and (c) strengthen the integration of local and regional veterans centers with all colleges within their coverage area, and through interagency coordination with the Department of Education, maintain a roster of all enrolled student veterans within said area.

The Department of Education will provide guidance to colleges and universities, as well as regional and national accrediting agencies, aimed at increasing the awareness of student veterans enrollees at each school receiving Title 38, Chapter 33, Post 9/11 GI Bill funds in order to provide better access to educational data on student veterans that would support continued research.

The Department of Education must coordinate with the VA to determine a better way to track student veteran attendance rates at colleges across America. Few sources accurately track current information as shown by the 2014 report by the Services and Support Programs for Military Service Members and Veterans report. It reported that out of the 1,522 institutions surveyed, 91% identified service members and veterans by financial aid information, while 80% used admissions data also. Only 59% of surveyed schools used self-identifying options (NCES, 2014). This relatively low number of schools that ask veterans self-identify may cause information to be available only to financial aid, and possibly admissions staff only. Unless the institution has a system for sharing student veteran data across all staff and faculty areas it could be difficult to increase visibility on the population.

For the student veterans, less than 40% of the polled schools had educational and academic support programs for military affiliated students. Thirty-two percent of schools offered mental health counselling specific to service members and veterans and 68% had off-campus referral services. A small number, 30%, of all schools reported awareness training for faculty and staff regarding service member and/or veteran total health needs. Thirty-two percent of institutions provided some type of mental health awareness training for faculty and staff, only 2% made it mandatory (NCES, 2014).

To review, the Department of Education must: (a) work to increase awareness of student veterans and student veteran issues with colleges across the country; (b) coordinate with the VA to determine a way to use other than financial aid data to track student veteran attendance rates; (c) determine how to increase training and awareness of student veteran specific needs for college faculty, staff, and administration.

## **Conclusions**

The aim of this study was to add to the body of knowledge on student veterans in postsecondary education. Its purpose was to develop a substantive grounded theory that addresses how student veterans implement strategies to succeed in college. It achieved that aim by proposing a social science theory that contained an if/then logic, examined why and how something happens, and provided guidance for improving it (Saldaña, 2013).

The theory states the strategies used by student veterans to succeed in college are the ability to adapt to changing conditions in life, show empathy towards others, prioritize their available resources to complete clearly defined college tasks, and continue to learn and grow holistically. This is accomplished while concentrating the majority of

efforts and resources towards goals that are motivated by internally focused rewards as defined by the individual.

This study also provides clear direction for continued research into student veteran success in college. It offers recommendations for college faculty and administrators. It gives recommendations for student veterans groups. Lastly, it offers suggestions to the military and the VA for better preparing prospective student veterans for college.

The study revealed where student veterans, in pursuit of a college degree, reached the decisive point in their journey, and allowed their efforts to contribute greatly towards their success. The study also illuminated the fact college is not the most important aspect of a student veteran's life and showed that, the better student veterans are at prioritizing resources and efforts, the more likely they are to believe in their ability to succeed in college.

The United States has a vested interest in seeing its veterans succeed after leaving the service. There is both a moral (Altschuler, & Blumin, 2009) and economic impact (Berger & Fisher, 2013) component of this interest. Increasing the breadth and depth of student veteran research and outreach will benefit both student veterans and the nation.



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## Appendix A

### Occurrences of Codes by Subcategory

Category		Codes	N
Foundations for Success	Sub Category		
	Awareness of when, where, and how learning occurred	1. Acknowledging lessons throughout life 2. Wanting to learn from self and others 3. Accepting failure as part of life	12 11 8
	Ability to identify key lessons in life	1. Willing to continue moving forward when life is difficult 2. Knowing the importance of personal and professional relationships 3. Showing gratitude for mentors, peers, leaders, subordinates	13 11 11
	The ability to adapt and grow personally, academically, and professionally	1. Maintaining a positive attitude 2. Demonstrating resolve 3. Willing to change in order to achieve goals 4. Looking forward in life	13 12 12 11

Category		Codes	n
Strategies for success	Sub Category		
	Identifying with a community outside of college	1. Involving family and friends in decisions related to achieving goals	13
		2. Seeking counsel from those closest to them	11
	Identifying with the college community	1. Working with others to include students, resource centers, professors, to set goals	11
	Understanding one's own strengths and weaknesses (Self efficacy)	1. Developing individual and collective routines & skills for use in life to achieve goals	13
		2. Understanding own strengths and weaknesses	13
		3. Seeking out resources that make up for perceived shortcomings to assist in achieving goals	12
		4. Understanding the importance of humility	10
		5. Developing specific, individualized routines for use in college in order to achieve goals	10
		6. Having empathy for others	9
		7. Promoting teamwork	7

Category		Codes	n
Success Defined	Working towards goal in life	1. Having a satisfying job	12
		2. Living a good family life	12
		3. Setting a positive example for others	10
		4. Working hard to maintain priorities	8
	Achieving goals in college	1. Completing degree	13
		2. Getting good grades	13
		3. Working hard and maintaining academic priorities	11
	Being motivated by intangible rewards	1. Feelings of excellence	13
		2. Feeling self-satisfaction	13
		3. Loving one's family and being loved back	12
		4. Learning for learning's sake	11
		5. Feeling accomplished	11
		6. Fostering friendships	10
Being motivated by external and contingent reward	1. Exceeding the standard	11	
	2. Receiving rewards (honors)	8	
	3. Being respected	8	