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A CASE STUDY OF THE TRANSITIONS OF VETERAN STUDENTS TO PUBLIC
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Dedications

This dissertation is dedicated to my family because without them I truly would not have been able to accomplish this incredible feat without their support. To my husband, Joseph, you thought I was crazy to start a PhD journey with young twins at home, but you supported me through the late nights, the homework, the doubts I had in myself and pushed me. You believed in me, and I thank you for allowing me to pursue this dream. Without you, this would not have been possible. Thank you and I love you.

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For anyone reading still reading this dedication, the PhD journey is long but worth it. Keep pushing yourself; you will be someone's inspiration one day. Write every day, keep yourself accountable and find those around who will encourage you along the way. You can do it!

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Abstract

College campuses across the nation are recruiting and admitting veteran students more than ever. Through their service, veteran students have earned a military benefit through their military service that will cover most of the cost of their college education. With these military benefits in hand, veterans are stepping onto campuses to navigate through bureaucratic red tape and enroll in college courses while adhering to the strict guidelines of their educational benefits. In many cases, there is an incredible backlog of benefit payments that have yet to be distributed due to this paperwork.

As the GI Bill has been updated and tweaked over the last almost 80 years, there has been input from politicians, veterans, veteran groups, and stakeholders. Campus administrators and staff who work with veteran students daily have little say in what policymakers put into these bills, acts, and laws which directly affect veteran students. Micro-level problems veteran students, campus staff, and administrators encounter daily can only add to the challenges that veteran students must contend with when enrolling in higher education. These challenges often cause veteran students to drop out of college altogether or to lose their housing because their bills cannot be paid due to delayed payments.

Since the inception of the original GI Bill in 1944, many studies have been conducted; however, most of the research solely focuses on the physical and mental aspects of transition issues veteran students face. Little research tried to fully understand the recruitment efforts and the first-year transition and how experiences conforming to benefit restrictions affect veteran students in higher education. With the Post 9/11 GI Bill being replaced by the Forever GI Bill, further research is needed to identify recruitment

efforts, resources, key individuals, and institutional policy updates that will contribute to furthering and increasing veteran student retention in higher education.

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to examine the recruitment and transition experiences of today's veterans as they are utilizing their Post 9/11 and recently unveiled Forever GI Bill benefits at Public University. For this purpose, this study adopted Schlossberg's (1984) 4S (situation, self, support, and strategies) theory of adult transition as a theoretical framework. Based on the procedure of the case study, interview data was collected from six veteran students who have recently been recruited and have transitioned to Public University. Five staff members who assist veteran students through the recruitment and transition process while using their Post 9/11 educational benefits were also interviewed. The major findings of this study suggest that veteran students with strong family ties have the support to make informed decisions on where to attend higher education. With strategies in place to assist the veteran student in their transition to higher education supported by family and with the assistance of the Post 9/11 GI Bill benefits to fund their educational journey, a strong sense of self must be nurtured once separated from the military. The identity of the veteran as they transition must be supported in their new role as student, civilian and veteran as they navigate the college campus. Findings suggest that transition, either leaving the military or entering higher education must be supported by the veteran, veteran's support network, and by the staff at the institution. The findings reveal that educational benefits while financially advantageous for paying for higher education costs must be accompanied with strong support of staff members to guide the veteran student through their educational journey to ensure success. By viewing the veteran student, the context and the processes needed to

support the veteran student through their transitions from beginning to end contribute to the success of the veteran student throughout their educational career. The study contributes to understanding as to what makes a difference in successfully guiding veteran students through their transition to higher education. An analysis of documents, government reports, policies and articles were reviewed to support interview findings. This research contribution not only expanded the knowledge base in this area but also informed revised institutional policies.

Chapter I: Introduction

Higher education is experiencing an increase of veteran students enrolling on campuses nationwide. According to McBain et al. (2012) and the 2012 American Council on Education report, “Institutions have not faced such a significant influx of veteran students on campus since World War II” (p. 5). Veteran students can be defined 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 G.I. Bill use” (Vacchi, 2012, p. 17). The Post 9/11 GI Bill allows many veteran students the opportunity to pursue a higher education degree for up to 36 months.

For many college campuses, the focus is to retain the first-year freshman traditional student. Tinto (1999) stated that half of all students who do not persist in college drop out by the end of the first year. Due to these students dropping out, more focused efforts by universities have been developed; to cultivate and maintain first-year student services and programs (McPherson, 2007). In contrast, the adult/nontraditional student population is emerging as one of the largest cohorts on college campuses across the country, making up “at least 50% of higher education enrollments” (Brown, 2002, p. 67). For veteran students, the GI Bill funds the “cost of tuition at any institution and lent considerable assistance with other living costs, making it far more possible for students from less advantaged backgrounds to enroll in college and to complete their degrees” (Mettler, 2005, p. 44). As America’s involvement in wars began to slow and deployments began to decline, service members began to pursue educational interests that were previously detoured when joining the military.

Utilizing the assistance of the Post 9/11 and Forever GI Bill, the opportunity to acquire an education for veteran students is now at an all-time high. A 2016 research brief by the Student Veterans of America (2017); projected that the Post 9/11 GI Bill will fund 100,000 degrees each year, but this report is one of a few formal research studies on veterans. This report also stated, that “53.6 percent of the 853,111 veterans using GI Bill benefits who arrived on campus in the fall of 2009 graduated within six years” (Marcus, 2017). Mettler (2005) states that over generations, these adult learners have brought maturity, academic achievement, and leadership to campus. Veteran students bring a wealth of personal experience into the classroom that enhances every student’s experience. However, campus resources are allocated almost exclusively toward the needs and retention of first-year students. These retention efforts include many strategies, such as “special preparation courses, first-year adjustment seminars, academic success centers, advising interventions, tutorial programs, and counseling” (Kim et al., 2010, p. 122). Veteran students often possess many traits that are viewed with great reverence that define them as “unique and disciplined members of the student body with needs that differed from traditional students” (McGovern, 2012, p. 21). Current research (Cook & Kim, 2009; Ford, Northrup & Wiley, 2009; Livingston, 2010; McBain et al., 2012; O’Herrin, 2011; Persky & Olive, 2011; Rumann & Hamrick, 2009; Van Dusen, 2011) focuses on the mental and physical aspects of the transitions throughout college, including the lasting effects of military deployments and they can hinder students from persisting or graduating. This has highlighted the need for higher education to be aware of the needs of veteran students as they are recruited and transition onto college campuses across the nation; therefore, further research is needed into how universities can dedicate

or tweak some of the same resources allocated for first year/traditional students toward the recruitment and retention efforts of veteran students.

Problem Statement

This study sought to uncover the difficulties veteran students face while utilizing government earned educational benefits during the recruitment and transition to higher education. With this information, institutions will have the essential information on how to minimize these difficulties as the veteran students transition onto their campuses. This information is vital to institutions as they seek not only to recruit veteran students for their guaranteed funding but to matriculate them onto their campuses and through to graduation. As of May 2017, “the Post-9/11 GI Bill has paid \$75 billion in tuition, fees and stipends for books and housing” (Gross, 2018, para 4) and while the government funding is an attractive feature to entice veterans to college campuses; veteran students are finding that adhering to the strict guidelines of their benefits is an added challenge to enrolling and attending college classes (Hitt, et al, 2015).

Veteran students are recruited to many campuses across the nation to attend either online or in-person. Being heavily influenced by their Post 9/11 GI Bill educational benefits, veteran students are finding the transition to higher education difficult despite the financial burden mostly alleviated by these benefits. Many veterans report being confused about navigating college (Sander, 2012). Veterans must first choose a college that fits their academic, geographic, and professional goals but also meets the requirements of the Post 9/11 or Forever GI Bill. Steele, et al. (2010) found that veterans in transition had “challenges meeting academic expectations, balancing academic and other responsibilities, relating to nonveteran students, and coping with service-related

disabilities and post-traumatic stress disorder” (p. 2). It is for these reasons that campuses must make a concerted effort to tailor their services to add veteran specific services.

Transitioning from the military to higher education, many veterans seek credit for their military experience. Steele, et al. (2010) found that veteran students “expressed frustration regarding the credit transfer process, with some pointing out how related military experience was overlooked, or relevant course credits were not accepted” (p. 2). In addition to their frustrations, many veterans just lack general knowledge of college campuses, which without proper guidance, can lead veteran students to drop out. McBain et al. (2012) found that there was “great diversity in how institutions serve veterans, the variety of services and programs offered, and where services and programs are housed within the administrative infrastructure” (p. 8). This same report stated that less than half of the institutions (over 600) provided training for their employees; while many institutions specified, they did not have enough staff to serve their veteran student population sufficiently (McBain et al., 2012). Predictably, the American Council on Education reports that McBain et al. (2012) found that “benefit processing issues and financial issues [...] are a major challenge in serving veterans” (p. 33). With so many challenges before a veteran student even steps foot inside a classroom, it is no wonder that many veteran students never finish degrees. The “nation must realize that going to war means not only sending women and men into combat but also providing for those who return from the battle for the rest of their lives” (Korb & Toofan, 2021, p. 4).

Research Purpose and Questions

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to examine the veteran student experience throughout the recruitment and transition to college campuses while adhering to the restrictions of Post 9/11 or Forever GI Bill educational benefits at Public University. Using Schlossberg's (1984) 4S (situation, self, support, and strategies) theory of adult transition as a theoretical framework, the following research questions were examined:

1. What situational factors influence veterans into the recruiting process to their campus?
 - a. What barriers or challenges do veteran students experience during the transition to higher education?
2. How do veteran students cope with their personal and contextual factors during their transition and first year on their campus?
3. What strategies do veteran students have in place to overcome their challenges when they transition to college campuses?

Definition of Terms

Several key terms used in this research may produce different meanings for different readers. Therefore, definitions are provided below to offer an understanding of how the terms will be utilized and operationalized within this study.

GI Bill

GI Bill refers to a federal program passed into law in 1944. First known as the Serviceman's Readjustment Act, it provides many benefits to veterans returning from war. The GI Bill is also commonly referred to as Chapter 33. The Post-9/11 GI Bill offers higher education and training benefits to Veterans and Service members who "served after Sept. 10, 2001, and, in some cases, to their families" (Post 9/11 G.I. Bill, n.d., para 1). Forever GI Bill is known as the Harry W. Colmery Veterans Educational Assistance Act, the most recent revision signed into law by President Donald Trump in 2017, with benefits rolling out in 2018.

Adaptation

Adaptations indicate the characteristics or behaviors that a veteran student has during their recruitment, transition, and educational benefit usage.

Recruitment

For this study, recruitment is the action of an institution of higher education finding and sending material to potential veteran students with the intention of enrolling these veteran students at their institution.

Transition

A transition is any event, or non-event, which results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles. (Schlossberg et al., 1995, p. 27). For this study,

transition indicates a veteran student's recruitment and the first two semesters of enrollment in higher education.

Veteran Students

Veterans indicate a person who has served in one of the military branches (Air Force, Army, Marine Corps, Navy, and Coast Guard). Students refer to a person who is actively enrolled in higher education. For this study, veteran students will be anyone who has served active time in one of the military branches and is currently enrolled in higher education.

Organization of the Dissertation

This chapter has outlined the introduction, problem statement, research purpose, questions, and key terms by discussing the research problem. Chapter Two concentrates on the literature that informs the study. The literature review explains the history of the GI Bill, access to higher education, the rise of student services, a compact review of student persistence and retention, a brief overview of the veteran student as a nontraditional student, the identity of the veteran student, and the transition barriers of the veteran student. Additionally, the Bills, Acts, and Executive Order related to veteran students were examined as well as the GI Bill overview, the benefits of the Post 9/11 GI Bill, veteran benefits beyond those offered in the Post 9/11 GI Bill and finishing with limitations and gaps in the current literature.

Chapter Three focuses on the theoretical framework and how it informed this study. Schlossberg's (1981) transition theory was used to guide research questions as well as help understand veteran student recruitment, transition, and adaptation of utilizing educational benefits. Chapter Four specifies the research design including the

methodology and methods of the study and finishes with a discussion of the case study approach, the research site, choice of participants, data collection methods, data analysis, the role of the researcher and ethical considerations. Chapter Five reviews the Research Findings followed by Chapter Six's discussion including research, policy, practice, and future research suggestions. Chapter Seven finishes with the conclusion.

Chapter II: Review of Literature

Veteran students are a growing cohort on college campuses and with this growth, these institutions are more than willing and “are enthusiastic and welcoming, but aren’t always sure how to meet veterans’ needs, which are distinct from those of other students” (O’Herrin, para 6, 2011). A thorough review of the literature was conducted to gain a better understanding of veteran students in their recruitment and transition into higher education, their understanding of GI Bill policies and their persistence toward graduation. The areas examined in this review are as follows: a history of the GI Bill, access to higher education, the rise of student services, a compact review of student persistence/retention, a brief overview of the veteran student as a nontraditional student, the identity of the veteran student, and the transition barriers of the veteran student. Additionally, the Bills, Acts, and Executive Order related to veteran students were examined as well as the GI Bill overview, the benefits of the Post 9/11 GI Bill, veteran benefits beyond those offered in the Post 9/11 GI Bill and finishing with limitations and gaps in the current literature.

History of the GI Bill

Dating back to the authorization of the Morrill Land Grant Act of 1862 which established land-grant colleges, higher education and the military have been linked together. The purpose of the land-grant colleges was:

Without excluding other scientific and classical studies and including military tactic, to teach such branches of learning as are related to agriculture and the mechanic arts, in such manner as the legislatures of the States may respectively prescribe, to promote the liberal and practical education of the industrial classes in the several pursuits and professions in life (The Morrill Acts, 2015, para 4).

With land set aside for the industrial classes to pursue an advanced degree something long denied to them, access to higher education was opened to many Americans. Higher education was opening up to the working-class Americans, mainly the white working class at this time. During World War I, an aid program was tested on veterans who were disabled by their service. During this test program, providing rehabilitation assistance to returning veterans for employment opportunities was a goal and while the results of the test program were not ideal, “it did set a precedent for the use of education as a means for veteran rehabilitation” (Mosch, 1975, p. 15). The original GI Bill “was proposed largely out of fear of high post-war unemployment, and it passed despite the reservations of leaders of many of America's most prestigious universities” (Hunt, 2006, para 2). On June 22, 1944, President Roosevelt signed the Servicemen's Readjustment Act, today this Act is commonly known as the GI Bill of Rights (Howell, 2014). When the GI Bill passed, “many educators opposed it as a threat to higher education standards” (Greenberg, 1997, p. 12). It was not a straightforward bill to pass, and it took many adjustments before it was brought to President Roosevelt. These adjustments were due to the reservations of those on the committee and the unsatisfying outcomes from the pilot programs. At the time, the bill allowed servicemen to obtain an education that frankly was not an option for many service members before this bill. Greenberg (1997) detailed, “close to eight million veterans received education benefits” (p. 37); today, this number is exponentially higher.

Paths to Military Service

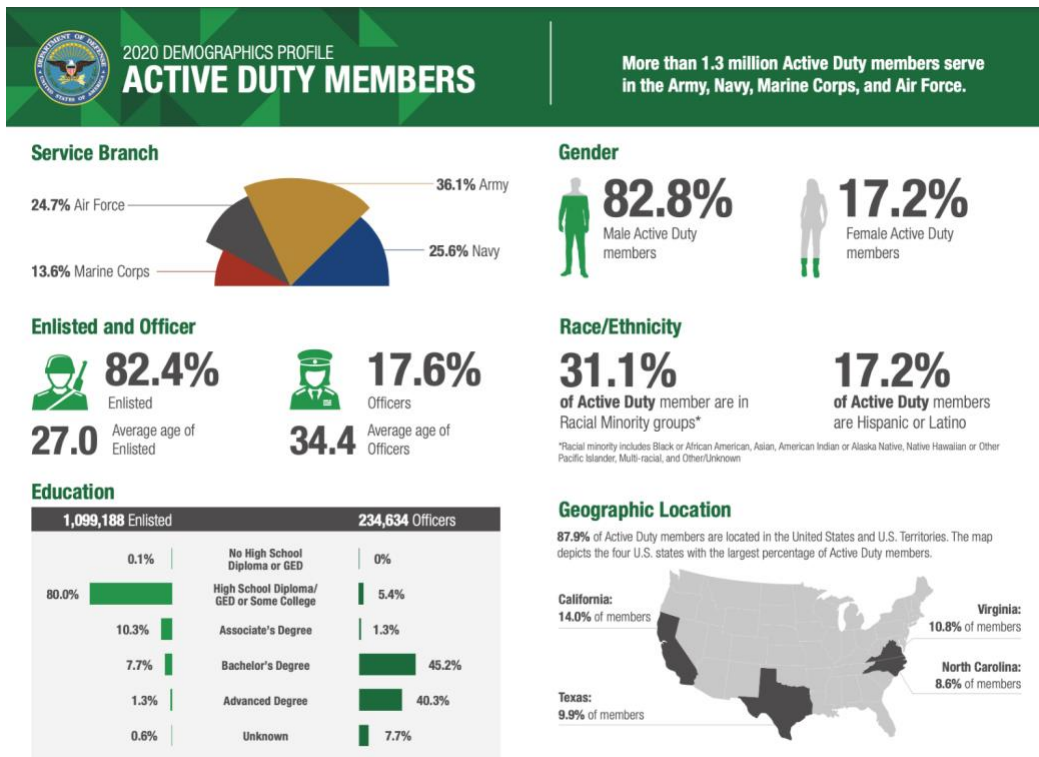
Dating back to the Civil War and the First World War, the U.S. instituted a wartime draft to ensure that the military had a strong presence. “The first peacetime draft

was initiated in 1940, prior to U.S. entry into World War II. It enabled the U.S. response to the attack on Pearl Harbor” (Carafano, 2017, para 1). The draft was a necessity for previous wars but that is not true today. Today, the Selective Service System is in place since the military has been all volunteer based since 1973 (Selective Service, 2022). If the U.S. were to have a “national emergency or war that the all-volunteer military can't adequately support, Congress and the president can reinstate the draft and force male citizens to serve in the military” (Absher, 2022). With an all-volunteer-based military, individuals can choose to enlist into the military either as an officer or an enlisted person.

There are two paths, which an individual can take when enlisting in the military. The difference between an officer and an enlisted individual makes “a significant impact on the type of experience and training a recruit receives” (“Enlisted,” 2022). To be an enlisted individual, one would need a high school diploma or a GED (General Educational Development Test) exception and “enlisted careers do include infantry roles, most jobs involve hands-on training for mechanical, transportation, human service or office fields that transfer well to the civilian world” (“Enlisted,” 2022). While each branch will work toward placing an enlisted individual in their choice of career, it is not a guarantee, as they will use everyone's skills where it is most needed. All officer positions require a four-year degree; these positions will be the “managers of the military, acting in leadership roles that require planning, directing operations and making critical decisions” (“Enlisted,” 2022). Officer positions can also include advanced degrees in Law and Medicine and have the option of “a guaranteed post-college career, Reserve Officers' Training Corps (ROTC) cadets commit to serve as officers in the Military after

graduation” (“Enlisted,” 2022). Each path comes with different pay structures and career paths. For those who can attain a degree prior to joining the military will have an entirely distinct experience than those who are joining to have opportunities when their service ends.

In Image #1, a visual breakdown of the demographics of the active-duty military members is given. In this image, it represents 82.4% of all members are enlisted while 17.6% are designated as officers. The gender gap is still quite extensive with 82.8% males and 17.2% females. Reviewing the breakdown of service members by branch shows that 13.6% are represented in the Marine Corps, 24.7% in the Air Force, 25.6% in the Navy and 36.1% are in the Army out of the 1.3 million active duty members. It is in this image that it will become evident that this study does not represent the demographic representation of the active duty members currently serving.



Source: 2020 Demographics Profile of the Military Community (Department of Defense); <https://download.militaryonesource.mil/12038/MOS/Reports/2020-demographics-report.pdf>

Image # 1: 2020 Demographics of Active Duty Military Members

When the GI Bill began, any service member who served at least 90 days was “entitled to one year of full-time education plus a period of equal to their time in service up to a maximum of forty-eight months” (Greenberg, 1997, p. 37). The bill was extremely generous to those who served our country. However, while the GI Bill gave many veterans a generous start upon returning from the war, it did discriminate against non-Caucasian veterans. “In many cases, benefits were administered by an all-white Veterans Administration at the state and local level” (G.I. Bill, 2018). Frydl (2009) detailed that the “GI Bill simply did not hold the same opportunities for African American veterans who desired education, training, home loans, unemployment benefits, or an untroubled stay in a Veterans Administration (VA) hospital for medical care” (p.222). African Americans and other minority veterans may have had a false sense of hope when the GI Bill passes that they would be entitled to the same benefits upon returning home from war. The “post-World War II GI Bill and Black veterans’ reveals overwhelming evidence of discrimination against veterans of color and non-White ethnic minorities” (Ottley, 2014, p.82) which continued to suppress the minority veterans from using their earned GI Bill benefits at the institutions of their choosing for many years to come.

The GI Bill was a “political response to legitimate fears about the sudden return to civilian life of nearly 16 million veterans, most of whom had been drafted” (Greenberg, 2008, para 6). America was in a time of racial segregation, of the 16 million who were drafted in World War II about one million were African American according to Höhn (2018). At the time of the GI Bill, the access to even finishing a high school education

created better job opportunities to these servicemen. Therefore, “access to higher education, especially adult education, [was] paramount to returning Black servicemen for societal mobility and general wellness as they reintegrate into their community” (Ottley, 2014, p.80). In a time of need, America needed the African American men to help fight the war but did not want to give them the benefits they earned by serving their country. Americans were drafted into the wars in a time of military need and the GI Bill was put in place to help with the overwhelming unemployment that soldiers returning from war were facing. Discrimination was still very much a part of the American culture, and it was another battle that needed to be fought upon returning home from war, not just World War II but the many wars following. “Through the Bill's purposeful design requiring decentralized administration of the education benefit, the federal government subsidized white colleges and universities that adhered to racist admissions policies that denied admission to black students” (Perea, 2013, p. 595). Herbold (1994) likened the bill to be “interpreted one way for blacks and another way for whites” (p. 104) thus keeping those who could use educational benefits from the GI Bill to limit universities who would accept Black American veterans. Discrimination in the GI Bill further widened the gap between white and black veterans' socioeconomic status upon returning from war, which has continued across generations of wealth (Perea, 2013).

Frydl (2009) stated “beneficiaries of the bill secured significant forms of generational wealth, assets that could be inherited or leveraged to create wealth for descendants” (p. 24). After the Great Depression, the possibility and access to obtain an education for many that did not have previous access was astounding. “The GI Bill turned veterans and their families into a privileged group” (Bennett, 2000, p. 241), and it

was an unanticipated benefit of the bill that helped build the economy and the education of the society.

To give greater detail into how the GI Bill discriminated against certain members of society, I will describe how the GI Bill was interpreted when first introduced in the state of Oklahoma. In 1946, the Black population in Oklahoma was restricted to enrolling in higher education at the only Historically Black Colleges/Universities (HBCU) in the state (Hubbell, 1972, p. 370). Being restricted to the only HBCU, Langston University; the Black population wanted the opportunity to study at other universities within their own state. It took a determined individual and a lengthy court battle before the University of Oklahoma admitted their first black student in 1948. While the first black student was admitted, the university was still operating under very segregated practices (Hubbell, 1972, p. 377). By 1949, 26 Black students had enrolled at the University of Oklahoma, but they were still actively segregated away from their White counterparts.

Revisions to GI Bill

There have been many revisions of the GI Bill in the last seventy-plus years. Each time the US entered armed combat, the bill was updated, and President Reagan declared the following as he was signing a GI Bill test program in 1984:

Since June 1944 over 18 million veterans and service personnel have received educational assistance under three prior GI bills, including 7.8 million under the World War II GI bill, almost 2.4 million under the Korean conflict GI bill, and over 8 million trainees under the post-Korean Vietnam-era GI bill scheduled to end on December 31, 1989 (Peters and Woolley, 1987, para 2).

By June of 1987, President Reagan had taken the GI Bill test program and signed it in a new law. This new GI Bill “provided a program of education benefits not only for service personnel and veterans but also for reservists” (Peters & Woolley, 1987, para 3). Adding

the reservists to the bill was a new addition that aided in educating more of the veteran population. This bill is often referred to as Montgomery GI Bill Active Duty, Montgomery Bill Selected Reserve. What makes this bill different from others is that the military members had to pay upfront for their benefits for at least 12 months. There are four categories in which a veteran could utilize their benefits under the Montgomery GI Bill, but all veterans had to have at least a “high school diploma, GED or 12 hours of college credit” (Education and Training - Montgomery Bill, 2019).

In 2017, the GI Bill saw another revision with the passing of the Harry W. Colmery Veterans Educational Assistance Act, also known as the ‘Forever GI Bill.’ “This latest GI Bill has the potential to have as significant an impact on higher education, the U.S. workforce, and national competitiveness as its 1944 predecessor” (Gilbert & Griffin, 2012, p.2). This revision eliminated the 15-year time limit to utilize the educational benefits (Education and Training – Forever GI Bill, 2017) but only for “individuals whose last discharge date is on or after January 1, 2013” (Education and Training – Post 9/11, n.d.).

The GI Bill has been a constant benefit that was needed during times of war. Frydl (2009) stated, “by 1960, 60 million Americans were either a veteran or a member of a veteran's family” (p. 365) and GI Bill benefits; for education, housing loans or VA hospital stays were being used to better many of these families. It “forged a new kind of compact between citizen and state” (Frydl, 2009, p. 365) and each new version of the GI Bill reflects how society has changed (Mosch, 1975, p. 131). The contributions to the country resulting from the GI Bill are immeasurable because there is no way to know how many lives the GI Bill has touched in the 70 plus year history. The GI Bill did

however give access to higher education to many who would not have been able to afford higher education without these benefits.

Access to Higher Education

The purpose of higher education is to prepare the minds of those enrolled and create tomorrow's leaders. In the beginning, higher education was exclusively for upper-class males, but as the 20th century approached, higher education moved from a private system to a more publicly funded system (Goldin & Katz, 1999). In the process of becoming more public, higher education became increasingly more available to male and female students of wide-ranging backgrounds. As previously discussed, with the passing of the Morrill Land Act in 1862, Congress thought that education "should be widely accessible (with states underwriting higher education so that it is affordable for many) and practical" (Staley, 2013). This Act directly correlated to an increase in the population becoming educated beyond high school diplomas.

With the success of the Morrill Land Grant Act, a second version of the act was passed in 1890 that "was aimed at the reconstituted Southern states and included provisions that eventually led to the funding of seventeen "historically black colleges and universities" (HBCUs)" (Staley, 2013, para 18). These two Land Grant Acts paved the way for the establishment of the GI Bill in 1944 by showing Congress there was public support for higher education. "A system of higher education, that is uniquely ours and creates tolerance, a sense of history and the ability to deal with local and global complexity, will produce a democratic governance system that will stand up to challenges, whether from within or outside society" (Zaman, 2018, para 7). The GI Bill simply gave many the option of an education due to their service to their country. As

previously discussed, the original GI Bill did not fully provide educational opportunities equally to all veterans returning from service. Black Americans and other minority groups who had served side by side with White American servicemen simply did not benefit in the same way from the GI Bill.

Access to higher education is not always feasible to every high school graduate for a variety of reasons. Higher education, unlike high school (which is compulsory and publicly available) remains optional and must be funded by the individual. Students may not have the financial means to attend college. According to Nora & Horvath (1989) “financial need plays a part in admissions decisions and enrollments” (p. 301). They further explain, “having financial assistance is not making more students attend college but denying financial aid to needy applicants does prevent those students from enrolling in higher education institutions” (Nora & Horvath, 1989, p. 301).

In addition to financial resources, students may rely on families for emotional support. Roska & Kinsley (2019) discuss how family emotional support is an important predictor of “student success, including grades, credit accumulation, and persistence” (p.431). Once a student matriculates onto campus it is not the end of their transition, they must seek out advice on how to navigate how to financially afford their education and will rely on their family members plus those that they have recently met on campus to support them and give advice.

Students may also come from rural areas, where students from these communities may lack exposure to the larger community of a university (Tinto, 1988). Students from rural areas may also be a great distance away from a university near their hometowns and

can struggle to adapt to a new larger campus community that has different values and norms than their smaller communities they have grown up in (Tinto, 1988).

For veteran students, they may be these students needing financial need, family support and coming from rural areas that are choosing to pursue a career in the military to fund their educational goals later in life. Veterans represent every possible demographic population that may matriculate to higher education. Veteran students can come from rural areas, they are first generation students, they are low-income students needing financial aid, they are racial minority students, they are nontraditional students, they are adult learners, but also come to higher education with the added experience of military service. Understanding the growth of higher education in the United States is important to comprehending the ways in which colleges operate today.

Brief History of Higher Education

This is a brief history of how the higher educational system came to be in the in the United States. It is to give you as the reader a foundation for veteran students in higher education today. The major eras that will be addressed include the beginning of higher education in the U.S. and move through 330 plus years to understand the impacts that each era had and how each era built upon the previous eras into what we now know as higher education.

During the Colonial Era (1636-1789), the establishment of higher education began in the U.S. when universities were being built on the Old-World models (Cohen & Kisker, 2010). The Old-World models refer to the universities that were already established in Europe and were the blueprints for the first universities being built in America. Following the Colonial Era, the Emergent Nation Era (1790-1869) began with

the establishment of small colleges, which increased educational opportunities for U.S. citizens (Cohen & Kisker, 2010, p. 6). The University Transformation Era (1870-1944) saw “the greatest shifts in higher education” (Cohen & Kisker, 2010, p.111) as the number of “colleges quintupled, and enrollments increased by several thousand percent” (p.111). During this period, it is worth highlighting that access to higher education was only available to virtually all white, elite, and male applicants only (Cohen & Kisker, 2010). Access to mainstream institutions for other groups was systemically denied and discriminated against (Cohen & Kisker, 2010). The building of HBCU’s (Historically Black Colleges and Universities) began in 1837 in the North with Cheyney University and prior to the Civil War, Black Americans were “prohibited in most Southern states and often discouraged in Northern states resulting in only a few Black schools being in existence” (*HBCU history timeline*, 2022). HBCU’s were the only source of education for Black Americans during this era as “they often provided primary, secondary, and postsecondary education” (*HBCU history timeline*, 2022). With the rise and addition of HBCUs, Black Americans were able to finally seek out education.

The Mass Higher Education Era (1945-1975) was considered the golden age of higher education. Everything in higher education expanded including enrollments, finances, and institutions (Cohen & Kisker, 2010, p.187) due to the American population growing through the 1950s (p.189). It was during this era that the veterans on campus became a prominent population in which student affairs professionals should have been aware of and to target with their programming. With the GI Bill Servicemen’s Readjustment Act being passed in 1944, the veterans utilized the educational benefits aspect of the act and began enrolling on college campuses in 1945. Still to this day,

veterans are a growing population on college campuses because of these benefits. This was a brief history of the rise of higher education in the United States up until the point of veterans enrolling onto college campuses. It was a necessary history to understand the growth of veteran students in higher education and how they fit into the larger campus community.

Rise of Student Services

Across many college campuses, students can utilize services such as: the financial aid office, academic advising office, mental health counseling, career centers, health care centers, writing centers, language centers, tutoring centers, libraries, computer labs and college specific services. While many colleges may have these types of services, not every college has veteran specific offices to address the veteran student needs when it comes to these types of services. There may be one person assigned to the task of processing all the veteran educational benefits funding or one person certifying the veterans on campus to the VA so that the veteran student can be paid their room and board funds.

Many universities are increasing their development for transitional support programs for military students to assist them in the transition phase. Steele, et al. (2010) found that veterans in transition had “challenges meeting academic expectations, balancing academic and other responsibilities, relating to nonveteran students, and coping with service-related disabilities and post-traumatic stress disorder” (p. 2). Campuses are doing this knowing that the veteran student will need assistance in the beginning months (Rumann & Hamrick, 2009) of arriving on campus to ensure their persistence toward graduation. In Cook & Kim’s (2009) study of veteran students on college campuses, they

surveyed 723 institutions and found that: 74% of four-year public and 66% two-year institutions are more likely to have programs designated for military or veteran students compared to the 36% private, not-for-profit colleges. Any campus that accepts VA benefits will have an office or a point person on campus where a veteran student can discuss the use of their benefits. Cook & Kim's veteran student study revealed that 82% of post-secondary institutions have VA education counseling on their campus followed by financial aid counseling at 57%, then employment assistance at 49% and academic advising at 48%. On the other end of Cook & Kim's study (2009) was the least offered services that veteran students were looking for on college campuses: veteran students seeking veteran-specific orientations with only 4% of campuses offering, only 12% of campuses offered a veteran specific student lounge, and only 22% of campuses had a college transition assistance program. As the veteran student population continues to grow on college campuses, it would be in the best interest of these campuses to tailor their programming and create spaces on their campuses for their veterans to congregate.

An important connection for any student matriculating to campus, "academic advising and support services available on campus are critical elements in a retention strategy" (Habley, 1981, p.45). The academic advisement process has been called the "cornerstone of student retention" (Habley, 1981, p.45) and it is for good reason because it is this connection that the student is able to bind themselves to their campus. Advising is an important service offered on college campuses, but it was not always a service offered. In the 1970s, student services departments began to form to what we know today, this includes the addition of academic advising offices (Gordon et al., 2008). Academic advising is heavily influenced by the need to improve the enrollment,

retention, and graduation rates (Gordon et al., 2008). When advising began, it was the faculty that provided most of the services to students, which included advising and instruction. Today, having a top-notch advising program on a college campus “can assist students in the exploration of goals and abilities which, in turn, provides students with a firm basis for the selection of appropriate academic programs” (Habley, 1981, p. 49). Academic advisors play an important role in a student’s progression through their academic career. Veteran students can use every ally on the campus that they choose to assist them in their persistence to graduation. The rise of student services has only enhanced the student experience and in turn, the veteran student experience should the veteran student choose to use such services on the campuses which they inhabit. These student services gave rise to the student persistence and retention efforts that will be described in the next section.

Student Persistence and Retention

The measurement of institutional effectiveness can be found when reviewing an institution's student retention, persistence, and completion efforts. The outcome of higher education can be quantified by student success. Astin (1977, 1993) poses the persistence or retention rate of students, is significantly affected by the level and quality of their interactions with peers as well as faculty and staff. It is imperative that veteran students make connection(s) on campus whether that is with their peers or with faculty and staff.

Persistence is defined as a “continuation of effort and striving in the face of difficulty, opposition, or failure” (Persistence, 2016, para 1). Persistence and retention are often used interchangeably within the higher education setting. According to Bean (n.d.):

Both experiences before entering college and academic abilities are important; the way students interact in the social and academic environment once at college are important, as are factors from outside of the institution, particularly the cost of attending the college; and the attitudes a student forms about the institution and about his or her role of being a student at a particular institution (Do I fit in? Am I developing? Am I validated?) are also important aspects of a student's decision to remain enrolled. (para 23)

It is with these experiences that a student can persist and be retained at their university. The academic staff and faculty are key people in a student's journey and whether they will persist to graduation. Persistence and retention are not to be used interchangeably. The National Center for Education Statistics makes the distinction that retention is an institutional measure while persistence is considered a student measure (Hagedorn, 2006).

Perna and Thomas (2006) describe student success as linear, with the student progressing from enrollment through to graduation. DeLaRosby (2017) noted that "retention research suggests that an estimated 75% of college students who leave higher education institutions without obtaining a degree do so within their first two years of college" (p. 146). This in turn leads those students who do not persist to have a lower earning potential than their graduated counterparts (Leppel, 2002). Leppel (2002) further explains that "it takes four students who leave prior to their sophomore year to produce as much tuition revenue as one student who stays for four years" (p. 433). Students who persist to graduation will earn a higher wage on average than students who do not persist and earn a degree. As Leppel (2002) describes the research also shows college graduates will have better quality jobs with higher pay and benefits.

Wardley et al., (2013) found nontraditional students participated less in orientation activities while also utilizing less university support resources compared to their traditional student counterparts. When comparing nontraditional students with

traditional students, it is more of a comparison of “higher education experiences [that] are characterized by less involvement with the university environment: less interaction with faculty and peers, less participation in extracurricular activities and use of campus services, and greater interaction with the environment external to institutions of higher education (Southwell, et al., 2018, p.398). It would be ideal if all students were able to enroll and follow through to graduation but that is simply not the fact for many college students, including veteran students. The journey towards graduation is often winding and gapped (Cox, 2016; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Perna & Thomas, 2006).

For veteran students, they learn through their military service many qualities that align with the higher education persistence. “One trait we may be able to attribute to most veterans is that they are acquainted with the concept of accomplishing the mission. They are used to handling challenging situations, and a university degree is just another mission that they will accomplish” (Carlson, 2012, para 6).

With the measured number of months in which a veteran student can use the Post 9/11 GI Bill benefits, veteran students must decide their degree plan and path to graduation very quickly. Student retention and graduation rates are strongly corresponded with pre-college characteristics such as personal motivation and academic preparedness (Kuh et al., 2005). Much of the programming set up on college campuses cannot necessarily modify pre-college characteristics, interventions can be put in place to offset the deficiency from which many college students utilize (Reason, 2009). Veteran students are used to a structured system that has many check-ins, goals and accolades that encourage them along the way. Many institutions of higher education have these services available but veteran students are either not utilizing them or they are not publicized

directly to veteran students. Veteran students as well as traditional students are more likely to persist when they feel they have a connection on campus with their academics and in their social lives. Their unique perspective on life and the world around them is an asset to any classroom and campus.

The Nontraditional Student

Veteran students are considered nontraditional students, as they do not enroll immediately from high school. “Traditional students are also typically financially dependent on others, do not have children, consider their college career to be their primary responsibility, and are employed only on a part-time basis if at all during the academic year” (A fresh look, 2004, p. 2). Higher education is designed to serve both traditional and nontraditional students but many of the services focus exclusively on the traditional students. By having these labels associated with them as students, the nontraditional student is placed into this other category. Being placed outside of the main group can be stigmatizing to the student. These labels also do not predict retention or persistence to graduation.

Many veteran students have various responsibilities and dependents to take care of upon returning home from service. “The National Center for Education Statistics defines nontraditional students as meeting one of seven characteristics: delayed enrollment into postsecondary education; attends college part-time; works full time; is financially independent for financial aid purposes; has dependents other than a spouse; is a single parent; or does not have a high school diploma” (Pelletier, 2010, p. 2). Many veteran students are older than the traditional-aged student, and this can lead to them feeling isolated on campus. Veteran students described a “discernible difference in

age and maturity compared to students who continued to college immediately following high school” (Grimes et al., 2011, p. 70) in a 2011 study.

In the 1940’s “as veterans returned from war, they sought out jobs in an uncertain economy. Returning to school delayed this job search and lowered the number of unemployed veterans, thus reducing the chance of an economic crash” (Remenick, 2019, p. 117). The National Center for Education Statistics also indicated that, “age acts as a surrogate variable that captures a large, heterogeneous population of adult students who often have family and work responsibilities as well as other life circumstances that can interfere with successful completion of educational objectives” (Nontraditional undergraduates, n.d., para 1). As nontraditional students, veteran students must seek out a point of reference upon enrolling in higher education. Remenick (2019) concluded that it “may not be easy to change university practices in ways that meet the needs of nontraditional students, but the reality is that nontraditional students are now the majority population” (p.124). As a growing population on many college campuses, serving nontraditional students must adapt from first-year programming and include specific programming to address changing needs of the adult student on campus.

The Identity of the Veteran Student

At the point of the veteran student’s enrollment in higher education, they must now accept who they are without the military structure or identity. “People possess multiple identities because they occupy multiple roles, are members of multiple groups and claim multiple personal characteristics, yet the meanings of these identities are shared by members of society” (Burke & Stets, 2009, p. 3). Veteran students step onto campus inhabiting many identities. Many veteran students choose different paths when

they arrive on campus: some choose to self-identify as veterans, some choose to keep their veteran status hidden, and others only identify on their financial forms and in the veteran student services office. Hammond (2015) states that veteran students are often thought of as holding multiple roles in our society: “the role of veteran, civilian, student, brother, sister, spouse, and/or parent, etc.” (p. 147). Inhabiting multiple roles/identities can be a challenge for any veteran student, and it may take some time to adapt to these roles/identities. They are adapting to their new normal, they must maintain their grades, their home life, a job, and countless other aspects of their lives. All these changes and adjustments can add stress to an already challenging transition.

The term veteran student can be limiting (Grimes et al., 2011) and is just one aspect of their identity. As this study was conducted, finding one’s identity is just part of the veteran student’s transition to campus. Finding and understanding their identity and how it relates to them in each role they inhabit is important aspect to the veteran student. In a time of transition, it is up to the veteran student to rely on their support network, find a sense of belonging whether on their campus or within their own network and focus on their next task at hand, which is their academic journey ahead of them.

Transition Barriers for Veteran Students

Understanding their new identity roles within the confines of higher education, veteran students then must face their transition from military life to collegiate life. Anderson, Goodman, & Schlossberg (2012) defined a transition as any “event or non-event that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles” (p. 39). Veteran students are transitioning away from the structure of military life and into an (almost) unknown life of being a full or part-time student. Goodman, Schlossberg, &

Anderson (1997) suggested “moving through a transition requires letting go of aspects of self, letting go of former roles, and learning new roles” (p. 23). It is in their transition that veteran students must find their place in their new roles and makes steps to acclimate to their new environment.

Veteran students must understand their place on campus and how to navigate this transition as a civilian. “For the helping professional on campus, understanding how a student’s roles, relationships, routines, and assumptions have changed as the result of his or her military experiences is vital” (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011, p. 9). Understanding the experiences that veterans bring to campus is essential to those working with the veterans on campus because they can provide support to the veterans during their transition.

Carlson (2012) specified, “the key for any veteran to earn a degree is often the transition period immediately following his or her active service” (para 2). As veteran students’ transition, the basic need for support is imperative. Early on in the transition phase of a veteran, when leaving the military and enrolling onto a college campus, there should be some support provided by the higher education institution “to increase the probability of his or her academic and personal success” (Home alone, 2011, p. 9).

As veteran students are transitioning, one of their top challenges was their academic retention/persistence toward degree completion (Cook & Kim, 2009). For veteran students, their connection to the staff, faculty and other students on campus will only assist them in persisting toward graduation. It is these vital contacts that veteran students are making connections to, and the academic advising office is one of the first places where veteran students can begin this connection. Academic advising is an integral part of the academic retention and degree completion stages of any student. Having that

contact on campus to encourage a student can be the difference between a student leaving or staying. Quality advising according to Tinto (1993) can bolster student learning and promote student involvement at their institution, which are predictors of academic persistence.

With the skill of academic advising, other campus resources such as tutoring services, financial aid office, mental health services, etc. can add integral pieces to assist and encourage the veteran student to persist. Creating a sense of community with their veteran student peers on campus because they have shared experiences from the military but also, they are now on this campus together going through very similar experiences. Military service “is a bonding experience because individual safety and security often depend on cohesive group efforts” (Summerlot et al., 2009, p. 72). Giving them that connection is vital to their success as a student.

Veteran students are “altering their roles, routines, and relationships at home, in the community at large, and in the educational setting” (Schlossberg et al., 1989, p. 14). As veteran students are making the transition to higher education, they need important relationships on campus and at home. Research by Sargent & Schlossberg (1988) and Schlossberg, Lynch, & Chickering (1989) denoted four broad categories of the transition process: (a) situation, (b) self, (c) supports, and (d) strategies. Taking veteran students into consideration, their situation is the transition from the military to (or back into) higher education. For veteran students, the self can be different for each student contingent upon their length of service, deployments, and commendations. Support can come from their family support system or from the institution in which the veteran student is enrolled but it is essential to the transition of the veteran student and can

influence the probability to persist in higher education. Lastly, strategies are those set-in places in the higher education setting to assist veteran students as they navigate a college campus. “No matter where one is in the transition process, no matter what the transition is, one deals with it differently depending upon the 4 S’s” (Schlossberg, 1984, p. 28). Veteran students have a distinctive outlook on this world and their input in the classroom should be nurtured.

Higher education has its own exceptional challenges that college students must navigate. Some veteran students arrive on campus with “service-related injuries, whether visible or invisible, [that] will likely impact all facets of a veteran’s post-service life, including their academics” (Cate, 2014, p. 7). Each veteran student, based on the duration between serving in the military to arriving to campus may still be dealing with lasting effects of deployment. These effects may manifest in a physical, emotional, or behavioral way. “Though physically survivable, however, disabilities connected to traumatic brain injuries (TBI) and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), major depression, and related complications of alcohol abuse and troubled family relationships, among other challenges, often test a student veteran’s ability to successfully complete a college education” (Tinoco, 2014, p. 30). Veteran students are very different than the traditional first year college student because they have these experiences and are dealing with more responsibilities. The length of time between high school, military time served, and the time that veteran students enroll differs from veteran student to veteran student. If it has been many years or even decades, veteran students must relearn how to study, and reacquaint themselves to the routine of being a student. “Many veterans have spoken to the sense of alienation they feel upon beginning class and often allude to feeling confused

and overwhelmed during their first terms because they aren't sure where to turn for assistance" (O'Herrin, 2011, para 21). Due to the limited amount of time (up to 36 months) that the Post 9/11 GI Bill covers the cost of attendance for veteran students, there is not much time to discover the finer points of higher education.

Coping with their visible or invisible injuries, veteran students must also address the financial burden of affording higher education. "Another transition stressor exists because most student-veterans reported that military educational benefits do not provide enough resources to attend college full-time" (DiRamio et al., 2008, p. 86). Many veteran students have families, other responsibilities, and the GI Bill offers funding for veteran students to obtain their degree but sometimes that funding is not enough to cover the cost of living to attend college exclusively without having an additional source of funding as I found out through my research in this study. Numerous veteran students are attending higher education full time, working full or part-time, and tending to their families. "The way in which G.I. Bill benefits are processed, which is that the money often arrives well after a semester has started, can be a huge stumbling block" (Elfman, 2015, p.18). Due to some of the policies, veteran students are attending classes for quite some time (up to months) before their benefits/funding are ever dispersed. Since most veteran students are nontraditional, this financial weight can cause family stress as well as obstruct the veteran student's aptitude to perform well in the classroom. For veteran students, "knowing what is expected of them also allows veterans the opportunity to anticipate potential problems, reduce[ing] anxiety, and giving them a sense of control" (Cleary & Wozniak, 2013, p. 3). The GI Bill extends many veteran students the ability to obtain an education for the advancement of themselves and those that depend on them. "While these increased

enrollment numbers are encouraging, recent reports, news articles, and statements from government officials point out that veterans are now more likely to leave college with significant debts instead of degrees” (Griffin & Gilbert, 2012, p. 5). The limited amount (up to 36 months) of time offered to obtain a degree confines the exploration in major choice therefore veteran students must enter higher education with a clear-cut goal of what degree they want to pursue. Each semester they must plan, enroll, and get their coursework certified/approved by the VA to receive funding. If they make any changes to their schedule of classes, the VA, thus further delaying payment or causing repayment, must recertify veteran students. The stress of having to check and recheck classes, sending in forms to the VA for certification, and then waiting 30-45 days for every form to be approved or sent back with notes to make changes can be discouraging when waiting for funding. Veteran students want to start a new life away from their military lives or enhance their military careers with the use of their benefits. The transition can be smoother with proper planning and assistance from the veteran students, from the support staff and family support along with other benefits that may assist them with their transition and persistence to graduation.

Summary of Student Affairs and Veteran Affairs

As veteran students make their way to college campuses across the nation, they are seeking a sense of community. It is with student services and the support that comes along with these services that veteran students can make connections and persist toward graduation with the assistance of their educational benefits. As nontraditional students, veterans are placed into this other category, which is unfairly placed on anyone who does not fit into the traditional student definition. This unfair categorization adds to the how a

veteran student views their own identity and the barriers that a veteran student faces during their transition to higher education. The barriers that veterans face does not begin once they arrive on campus but while many are still serving in the military. Veteran students with the support of those on campus can face their transition barriers and persist toward graduation.

By understanding the veteran student in transition plus how they understand their identity while in transition can assist the support staff and program services specifically for veteran students. In the next section, I will delve into how veteran students have been discussed through the passing of Bills, Laws, Acts, and an Executive Order. This legislation through time is important to understand because with each revision and update brought our veteran students to today and how they can utilize their benefits and be protected as a veteran through their civilian lives.

Bills, Laws, Acts, and an Executive Order

The Morrill Land-Grant Acts of 1862 and 1890 were important pieces of legislation that served as a foundation that eventually led to the Servicemen's Readjustment's Act of 1944. The Servicemen's Readjustment Act has evolved into the GI Bill that is used today with the current Forever GI Bill. There have been both federal and state-level bills that have been passed that affect our country's veterans. This section will focus on federal laws. I centered my focus on the legislation that affects how veteran students are regarded and whether the bills or acts have been passed or have been proposed at this point. It is crucial to understand how these laws came into existence and how they have grown through the years. Each section is grouped by decades and shows

how each bill and act was built upon through the last 60 years to what veteran students are experiencing today.

1970 - 1980

During the 1970's & 1980's many bills and acts came to pass through the U.S. government but the following two are important to recognize as integral steps in guiding veteran students to higher education. All the acts and bills prior to the 1970's is also important to the veteran student journey but with the establishment of the Vietnam Era Veterans Readjust Assistance Act (VEVRAA) in 1974, veterans became a protected class by the United States to stop employment discrimination against veterans returning from war. The act is an important place to begin with because it really is a starting point at which previous legislation did not address. With the passing of the Act, the Department of Labor job training programs mandated that any organization in contract with the government "take affirmative action to employ and advance employment of qualified covered veterans" (p. 66) while also establishing that the U.S. "assist career servicemen and women to move into a meaningful second career in civilian life through improved counseling and the application of computer technology" (Hartke, 1974, p. 34). By making veterans a protected class, they were able to follow their civilian pursuits without discrimination upon returning from service.

As the 1970's ended, the 1980's brought a new version of the GI Bill. The Montgomery GI Bill, also known as Chapter 30, was an updated version of the GI bill that passed in 1984. The 1952/1966 GI Bills were used as the foundational pieces of the 1984 Montgomery GI Bill to evolve with the changes in time. Implemented with changes and updates due to the military becoming volunteer-based, this bill was an

incentive to all men enlisting in the military. There were two options: the MGIB-Active Duty and MGIB-Selected Reserve. For MGIB-Active-Duty veterans to receive benefits, they needed to buy into the programs. They had to “enroll and pay \$100 per month for 12 months and are then entitled to receive a monthly education benefit once they have completed a minimum service obligation” (Education and training – Montgomery GI Bill, 2019). MGIB-Selected Reserve is for “reservists with a six-year obligation in the Selected Reserve who are actively drilling” (Education and training – Montgomery GI Bill, 2019). One of the differences of the Montgomery Bill compared to the Post 9/11 GI Bill is the way that payments were given out to the veterans. Montgomery GI Bill recipients were paid directly and then responsible for paying the schools whereas Post 9/11 GI Bill recipients only receive their housing payments while tuition and fees payments are paid directly to their school of choice. The Montgomery GI bill was the foundation for the updated Post 9/11 GI bill that is used today.

Both the Vietnam Era Veterans Readjust Assistance Act (VEVRAA) and the Montgomery GI bill were essential in assisting veterans who had served when they returned home from their tours of duty. As each bill or act was passed, it was built upon the previous legislation that needed to be addressed as more military members assimilated into civilian life or to higher education. It was improving the lives of the veterans in small ways that had not previously been addressed by earlier legislation.

2000 – 2009

As the 21st century began so continued the veteran legislation. The Higher Education Relief Opportunities for Students (HEREOS) Act of 2003 was enacted to help active military members who are pursuing higher educational goals. “This law was

created to make sure military members receiving federal student aid will not be penalized for military service or have their educational journey adversely affected by military service” (The HEREOS Act, 2019). This act allows for waivers for the veteran student in cases where they are called away for military duty. With this waiver veteran students could come back to their higher educational pursuits without being penalized for having to leave mid-semester to fulfill their active-duty obligations and continue once their military obligations are completed.

The Supplemental Appropriation Act of 2008 (Public Law 110-252) was passed in June 2008. This provision was far more generous than previous GI Bill’s. Previous GI Bill’s had been paying the veteran directly to then have the veteran then pay the institution where they were attending. The Post 9/11 GI Bill not only started paying institutions directly but also gave veterans the option to attend private and Ivy League institutions. The Supplemental Appropriation Act also allowed service members who qualified to choose between the Montgomery GI Bill or to opt into the Post 9/11 GI Bill. Essentially giving veteran students the best option available to them while both Montgomery GI Bill and Post 9/11 GI Bill were both available to service member. Cost of living stipends were increased to potentially allow veterans to live on and attend school full time. The main difference between the Montgomery GI Bill and the Post 9/11 GI Bill is that the veteran does not have to pay into the system from their base pay to receive educational benefits (McGrevey & Kehrer, 2009) of the Post 9/11 GI Bill. The veteran made the decision to utilize the Post 9/11 GI Bill during their first few months into their service, which would be used once they were honorably discharged or retired from service.

Both the HEREOS Act and Supplemental Appropriation Act were important steps for veteran students in their journey to higher education. Both acts removed barriers for veterans as they enrolled in higher education. Each act gave veteran students a better opportunity to finish the degree programs while using their educational benefits. As the first decade of the 21st century ended, the next decade proves to be much more legislative as I will mention seven more Acts that are fundamental in getting veteran students through higher education and into their civilian occupations.

2010 - Present

In the last decade, more acts have passed regarding veterans. The following acts were needed to improve the transition into their civilian lives. The S. 3447 Post 9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Improvements Act of 2010 (Public Law 111-377) was passed in January 2011. This act was made into a public law and made small but substantial modifications to the Post 9/11 GI Bill so veterans would have more access to all types of training. When the Post-9/11 GI Bill was first introduced it did not include active-duty guard members, but this act includes guard members and allows eligible recipients attending fully online programs to receive a monthly stipend (Akaka, 2011). With these modifications, it made it possible for veterans to use their GI Bill for non-college degrees, apprenticeships, on the job training and flight training programs (Akaka, 2011).

The H.R. 1383: Restoring GI Bill Fairness Act of 2011 was an act for non-public institutions for veteran students utilizing their Post 9/11 GI Bill benefit. The Fairness Act denotes that “during the period beginning on August 1, 2011, and ending on July 31, 2014, the greater of \$17,500, or the established charges payable under a VA maximum

payments table published on October 27, 2010” (Miller, 2011, para 1). Miller (2011) details the Fairness Act that “those attending private institutions would be able to exceed the \$17,500 maximum if they were enrolled before April 1, 2011” (Miller, 2011). This Act established the ability to support veterans at private institutions within a certain spending limit should they choose the private college route.

In 2011, the VOW Act was signed into law. The VOW (Veterans Opportunity to Work) to Hire Heroes Act of 2011 was needed to assist those service members as they began their civilian job search in federal positions. It allowed federal agencies to consider separating military members who still have not yet fully separated with the proper paperwork. With the passage of the VOW Act, the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) is now a requirement for all service-members who are separating from the military (Transition Assistance Program, n.d.). Each branch of the military has their own version of the Transition Assistance Program; for instance, the Air Force TAP program’s goal is to “provide information, tools, and training to ensure service members and their spouses are prepared for the next step in civilian life, whether pursuing additional education, finding a career, or starting their own business” (Air Force Transition, n.d.). The program was put into place to help service members’ transition to civilian life. This act was a necessary distinction that needed to be addressed to assist the veteran as they transitioned to their civilian job opportunities or educational pursuits.

The H.R. 4057: Improving Transparency of Education Opportunities for Veterans Act of 2012 was needed so that institutions must have specific information to accept funds from the GI Bill. It “requires such information to: (1) include accreditation information and a description of available federal aid programs, and (2) be provided

through hyperlinks on the VA website” (Bilirakis, 2013, para 3). H.R. 4057 was passed and became a law in January of 2013. This act was needed to assist institutions as well as veterans as they make their choices on where to use their GI bill funds for higher education. Transparency is of the utmost importance when veterans are seeking an institution in where they will use their government earned benefits.

The H.R. 4632: Military and Veterans Education Protection Act was an act that Representative Jackie Speier introduced to the House of Representatives on February 2012 [H.R. 4055] and was reintroduced [H.R. 4632] in December 2017. This act if passed, would “require proprietary institutions of higher education to derive at least 10% of their revenue from sources other than title IV or federal educational assistance programs for military personnel and veterans or become ineligible for Title IV funding and participation in those programs” (Carper, 2012, para 1). At the time this act would go into effect, the 90/10 rule determines whether an institution would receive federal financial aid (90% federal/10% non-federal), GI Bill funding is not included as part of the 90% federal. Representative Speier and her co-sponsors re-introduced this Act to the House in December 2017. As of 2018, the act has not passed but pieces of this bill have been incorporated into other acts and bills since 2017. The language in this act was needed due to the actions of for-profit schools taking advantage of the veteran student population and their guaranteed educational benefits. For-profit institutions took advantage of veteran students who were left with diplomas and courses that do not transfer to accredited universities. While this act was not ultimately passed into law, it was necessary to go through the process and to make the language available to build

other acts that would eventually be passed and have an effect of veterans of the U.S. military.

The S. 2241 GI Bill Consumer Awareness Act of 2012 was intended “to ensure that veterans have the information and protections they require to make informed decisions regarding the use of Post 9/11 Educational Assistance” (Murray, 2012, para 1) to make veteran students aware of the institution that they are choosing and how using their benefits at that institution will look for a veteran. This provides information based on their college choice, primary choice, location, and other factors so they can make an informed decision on where they would like to attend college while using their benefits. While this act was not passed, it is still essential to know that many are trying to keep the veteran’s best interest in mind.

The S. 1908: Protecting Financial Aid for Students and Taxpayers Act was introduced in July of 2015 and would restrict how educational institutions use federal funds, including marketing or recruiting efforts utilizing those funds. “Federal educational assistance funds include federal student aid under Title IV (Student Assistance) of the Higher Education Act of 1965, education benefits for military personnel and veterans, and grants for workforce development programs” (Brown, 2015, para 1). Each year, every institution of higher education must comply and be certified to receive their Title IV funding. In the findings of the bill, the co-sponsors wrote, “An analysis of 15 publicly traded companies that operate institutions of higher education shows that, on average, such companies spend 28 percent of expenditures on advertising, marketing, and recruiting” and that “eight out of the 10 top recipients of Post- 9/11 Educational Assistance funds are for-profit institutions of higher education. These eight companies have received \$2,900,000,000 in taxpayer funds to enroll veterans from 2009 to 2013” (Brown, 2015, para 4). The hope is

that for-profit colleges will spend less money on advertising to veteran students and more money on helping the veteran students graduating with a degree that will be useful to them. This bill still has not been passed and is likely not to pass because it would apply to public, non-profit universities as well.

Summary of Acts

The seven acts just described were enacted to further protect and assist the veteran as they transition away from the military. These acts were needed as veteran earned benefit dollars were being exploited by different entities. For instance, the VOW to Hire Heroes Act of 2011 was needed to assist veterans who were beginning their job search while still enlisted but also to put programming into place to assist veterans who were leaving service. This Act was needed to clarify and support veterans in a way that they had not yet been previously. The acts also updated previous legislation that needed to be addressed to further support the veteran in their transition and to give the veteran all the necessary information to make informed decisions on their future education and employment options.

Executive Order No. 13607

This was an executive order issued by President Obama in 2012. President Obama felt the need to address the reports of the deceptive and aggressive targeting of veterans by for-profit colleges and their families once the Post 9/11 GI Bill became law. The Executive Order is also known as “Establishing Principles of Excellence for Educational Institutions Serving Service Members, Veterans, Spouses, and Other Family Members” (Obama, 2012, para 1) and was designed to help veterans make informed decisions about

their educational benefits, to help prevent them from attending schools who are only out for their GI Bill dollars, and to assist veterans in navigating available support services (Griffin & Gilbert, 2015). Another critical element to the Executive Order requires institutions “take all appropriate steps to ensure that websites and programs are not deceptively and fraudulently marketing educational services and benefits to program beneficiaries, including initiating a process to protect the term "GI Bill" and other military or veterans-related terms as trademarks, as appropriate” (Obama, 2012, para 25).

These bills, acts, and laws do not represent every veteran-related bill, act or law that has been passed or brought before the House of Representatives or Senate, but these were pertinent to understanding veterans in higher education. Many started with great intentions but ended up potentially hindering the veteran. Veterans must be aware of their benefits, and when new bills, acts, and laws are passed that may affect them so that they can make informed decisions about their future. President Obama stated in 2009 that, “we want to be inclusive rather than exclusive. We want to encourage more people to use the [GI Bill] program rather than less” (Obama favors, 2009, p. 29) when asked about including all service members to include National Guardsmen. His goal was to encompass all service members so they would be eligible to receive Post 9/11 GI Bill benefits.

An In-Depth Look at the GI Bill

Many beneficiaries of the GI Bill have had a significant impact on governmental policy and social legislation; in 1960 almost 60 percent of the members of the United States House of Representatives were veterans (Mettler, 2005, p. 132). During the tenure of the GI Bill, the benefits, and transitional programs available to veterans have been

modified and updated through the policy process. With the Post 9/11 GI Bill, the influx of veteran students enrolling in higher education has been steadily climbing nationwide. The Post 9/11 GI Bill had substantial changes made in its policy base to increase funding, program availability, and support and for life after service.

The GI Bill of Rights gave numerous veterans and their families the opportunity to better themselves. The GI Bill “was responsible for democratizing higher education and homeownership” (Murray, 2008, p. 974) for those who took advantage of the benefits. It provided an education to so many that never would have even had the option. Mettler (2002) describes the GI Bill as a program that “operated through impersonal, routinized rules and procedures rather than the invasive scrutiny and means-testing associated with public assistance” (p. 354).

For veteran students to use their benefits, the college and the veteran student must adhere to strict guidelines. When a veteran student arrives on campus, they must declare a major and then enroll in a campus advisor and Veteran Affairs approved degree applicable course load. The Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits cover “full tuition and fees” that are “paid directly to the school for all public school in-state students” (Education and Training – Post 9/11, n.d.). For private schools, there is a cut off on what the government will pay for, and it depends on the school and state in which it is located. Due to service relocations, many veteran students are considered out of state students by public universities, and often they choose to relocate to attend the school of their choice to utilize their educational benefits. The Yellow Ribbon Program states that “the institution can contribute a specified dollar amount of those expenses, and [the] VA will match the contribution, not to exceed 50% of the difference” (Veterans benefits administration,

2014). Due to the strict guidelines of GI Bill benefits, the government routinely inspects veteran student records.

According to GI Bill Policies:

Recipients of GI Bill education benefits are advised that the VA routinely seeks reimbursement from or prosecutes those whom it deems to have committed fraud intentionally; typical examples include receiving benefits when no longer eligible, receiving benefits from more than one VA program, or retaining overpayments for personal use. (GI Bill compliance policies, 2017)

If a veteran student does not qualify for the full 36 months of benefits, then they are given a percentage the 36 months to utilize their benefits. At any time, the VA may audit any college and determine whether a program is eligible or not. So, any veteran student may be pursuing a major that has been previously approved but may be told that their program is now being denied and they can either choose to pay for the remaining classes in the major of their choice or choose a new major that is approved under the post-9/11 GI Bill. This puts a lot of pressure on the veteran student as they must be constantly aware of their program status, whether their classes will be covered by their benefits and with a fixed amount of time, they need to stay on track so that their benefits do not run out. The fact is “many veterans take longer than traditional students to graduate, earning their associate degrees within 5.1 years on average and completing bachelor’s programs within 6.3 years on average” (Hicks, 2014, para 5). When veteran students only have 36 months of financial assistance but are taking on average 5-6 years to graduate, the financial stress to finish before their benefits run out is always present. Today’s veteran students are doing what they can to get as much of their education paid for due to the rising costs of higher education.

The Benefits of the Post 9/11 GI Bill

Today, the Post 9/11 GI Bill “provides education benefits for service members who have served on active duty for 90 or more days since Sept. 10, 2001” (Howell, 2014, para 1). The Post 9/11 GI Bill has had numerous military families tapping into educational benefits. According to Howell (2014), the Post 9/11 GI Bill allows eligible service members to transfer their unused benefits to family members (para3), therefore offering the opportunity to educate the next generation. Recent research has revealed that since the Post 9/11 GI Bill “took effect in 2008, 877,000 people, mainly veterans, and their dependents, have received benefits costing the government \$23.7 billion” (Dao, 2013, para 10). The benefits are being utilized and to better assist these veteran students, more resources, and people need to be assigned toward the veteran student population. With the Executive Order by President Obama requiring that all colleges to be more transparent, veteran students can now have confidence in using their benefits to enroll in higher education. This call to action provides students with better information before enrolling and will give them a better opportunity at completing their degree (Dao, 2013, para 6). With President Obama on their side, veteran students are tasked more than ever to complete their degrees.

Eliminating the time limit on benefits, now with the Forever GI Bill allows the veteran student or their dependents ample time to make the decision to return to school, but it does not necessarily give them the necessary amount of time necessary to complete a degree. The 36 months offered are for those veterans who qualify but leave little room for significant exploration when all courses taken from the first day of arrival must be a degree applicable and a major must be declared from the first day of arrival.

Veteran Benefits beyond the Post 9/11 GI Bill

The GI Bill is not the only assistance program that a veteran student can utilize to fund their educational goals. “Institutions of Higher Learning (Degree-Granting Institutions) may elect to participate in the Yellow Ribbon Program to make additional funds available” (Education and training – Yellow ribbon program, n.d., para 3) without taking away from their benefits of the GI Bill. Each school must enter an official agreement with the VA to offer the Yellow Ribbon Program on their campuses. A veteran student can choose to add the benefit of the Yellow Ribbon Program if the institution and the VA have an agreement. According to the government-issued Yellow Ribbon Program pamphlet (2014), the “VA will choose the amount of funds they will contribute toward your tuition and fees,” and the “VA will match that amount and issue payment directly to the institution on your behalf” (p. 2). It should be noted that this program is not for active-duty members or their spouses, but only veterans and/or their dependents may be able to take advantage of this assistance if they qualify.

“The first 10 years of the Post 9/11 GI Bill will cost taxpayers up to \$90 billion, it's estimated” (Sander, 2012, p. A1). With a new administration and the Forever GI Bill being rolled out, time will tell how lasting of an effect it will have now that the time limit has been removed. “Among the many lasting legacies of the GI Bill of Rights is the acceptance of continuing lifelong education, of the continuous upgrading of skills and the joining of government, employers and workers in making educational opportunities available” (Greenberg, 1997, p. 62). Creating a legacy within a family that may not have had the opportunity to pursue an education. Veteran Affairs offers an eclectic range of educational programs to benefit the veteran and their family members. These programs

include: “Montgomery GI Bill, Selective Reserve GI Bill, Reserve Education Assistance Program (REAP), Vocational Rehabilitation and Education (VR&E), and Veterans Education Assistance Program (VEAP)” (Howell, 2014, p 191). While many of these programs may not be available to every veteran student, there are other avenues besides the GI Bill that a veteran student can use while pursuing their degree or supplement along with their GI Bill to cover all costs. Today, with the Forever GI Bill removing the 15-year time limit and being able to transfer educational benefits to either a spouse or dependents (Educational and training – Forever GI Bill, 2017), the benefits really improve the social economic status among their family and in their community. Through the financial assistance granted by the GI Bill and other programs, veteran students are a rising population on campuses across the nation. Carter (2014) stated “79.2 percent of student veterans enrolled in public institutions, [with the] majority studying business, public service, health science, and engineering” (p. 30). All these majors apply to civilian life and with a military background, and corresponding leadership skills may make veteran students’ standout in the hiring process.

Limitations and Gaps in Current Literature

With the latest revision of the Post 9/11 GI Bill, the Forever GI Bill, which still has portions being implemented well into 2022, more research will be needed to track the long-term effects of removing the 15-year time limit. Transferal of benefits to spouses and dependents in the wake of removing the time limit and in general, will see an increase in veterans, dependents, and their spouses to higher education knowing that they have more time to make the decision. By removing this time limit, it is creating potential generational wealth in future generations who will now acquire an education that the

former GI Bills tried to create. There is a large amount of research on advising in college. As a first point of contact on campus, advising is one of the most important contacts a veteran student can have on campus.

Gaps in literature include limited large-scale studies on veteran students done by the U.S. government, Post 9/11 GI Bill research is still being conducted on how to assist the veteran student prior to arriving on campus so they are better prepared for their educational journey and how higher educational institutions can be better prepared for the veteran students and their unique needs while the new legislation is being rolled out. Further research is needed to ensure that veteran student voices are heard, and that their needs are being met. They made a choice to serve their country and as partial thanks this country passed the GI Bill that includes educational benefits.

Summary

This literature review provided an analysis of current and historical literature concerning the GI Bill and veteran students in higher education. A brief discussion to access to higher education, the rise of student services, a compact review of student persistence/retention, a brief overview of the veteran student as a nontraditional student, the identity of the veteran student, and the transition barriers of the veteran student. Additionally, the Bills, Acts, and Executive Order related to veteran students were examined as well as the GI Bill overview, the benefits of the Post 9/11 GI Bill, veteran benefits beyond those offered in the Post 9/11 GI Bill and finishing with limitations and gaps in the current literature and the need for future research.

The Forever GI Bill research is just now in the early stages. Veteran students who are utilizing their Post 9/11 GI Bill benefits still need to be researched as this cohort is still in the process of completing their degrees. The next group of veteran students can

learn how to navigate and successfully complete their degrees in higher education based on what information is gathered from the Post 9/11 GI Bill veteran students. The use of Schlossberg's theoretical framework is necessary to understand the recruitment and transition experiences of veteran students and how these experiences affect their intent to persist through their educational careers. By understanding these aspects, I, as the researcher, can be prepared to ask suitable questions to the veteran student participants.

Chapter III: Theoretical Framework

As a researcher, I approached this study from a theoretical perspective grounded in the epistemology of social constructionism. By establishing this qualitative case study in social constructivism, it will emphasize the meaning making and acknowledge the veteran student experiences that cannot be understood through quantitative survey data only. Crotty (1998) stated that, “meaning is not discovered, but constructed” (p. 9) and that is why I employed a constructionist base while applying a case study perspective to describe the veteran student experience as they are recruited and transition into higher education while navigating the bureaucratic policies supported by their Post 9/11 GI Bill benefits, as told by the participant’s experiences of the phenomenon (Merriam, 2002). The present study will be grounded in Schlossberg’s Transition Theory (1981). It is appropriate to utilize this theoretical lens in this study to examine the veteran student as they are recruited and transition into higher education because it provides a basis of the veteran student in transition.

Schlossberg’s Transition Theory was first proposed in 1981. Having knowledge of Schlossberg’s Theory of Transition can be quite useful for any person working in higher education. This is an appropriate lens to view to examine veteran students who are transitioning into higher education because they are shifting away from their military life toward student life. Examining veteran students within this lens provides a structure that will make it possible to classify individual components of the transition and to be able to organize these components in a meaningful and thoughtful way. This can be particularly true for those working with veteran students because it “provides insights into factors related to the transition, the individual, and the environment that are likely to determine

the degree of impact a given transition will have at a particular point in time” (Evans, Forney, & Guido-DiBrito, 1998, p. 107). When one is investigating the transitional experience of veteran students one must look at how veteran students viewed themselves within the confines of the military. Anderson & Goodman (2014) stated that “being a part of a team is integral to military culture, and each member of the team is essential” (p. 42) to military members. Anderson et al., (2012) defined a transition as “any event or nonevent that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles” (p. 39). Schlossberg’s Theory of Transition guides an individual’s ability to adapt, move through, and analyze their transition that they may be confronting.

When discussing transition, it must be examined in terms of perspective, context, impact, and type. By knowing these factors, it can sway the transition toward failure or success of an adult to acclimate to their transition. Keeping in mind the perspective of the transition, an adult in transition would need to be aware of the type of transition. Types of transitions can include nonevents, anticipated events, and unanticipated events (Anderson et al., 2012). Looking at perspective, a veteran who has served 20 years is anticipating their retirement from the military and transitioning to civilian life because they have planned for this is an anticipated event. Whereas, a young military service member, who was injured on deployment and is now unable to perform their duties; is honorably discharged at 25 years old who planned a career in the military is an unanticipated event.

Contextually, factors that can influence transition include socioeconomic status, ethnicity, gender, geographical and historical setting (Anderson et al., 2012). The impact of the transition can be described as the difference between a person’s pre-transition and post-transition routines, relationships, roles, and assumptions (Anderson et al., 2012).

Anderson et al., (2012) assert that the transition may not have an end point but that it is a “a process over time that includes phases of assimilation and continuous appraisal as people move in, through and out of it” (p. 59).

The four components of Schlossberg’s theory Four S system include: situation, self, support, and strategies (Anderson et al., 2012) were used to focus on the transition of the veteran to higher education as a framework. Within these four areas, veteran students in transition “navigate the transition by taking stock of the situation and the available coping resources” (Ford & Vignare, 2015, p. 5). *Situation* concerns the scale of the transition that a veteran would be going through when exiting the military and entering higher education. This describes how the individual would perceive the transition and understanding their sense of control of what is happening during the transition.

According to Anderson et al., (2012), the situation variable addresses seven questions:

- (1) Trigger – what set off the transition?;
- (2) timing – how does the transition relate to one’s social status?;
- (3) control – what aspects of the transition can one control?;
- (4) role change – does the transition involve role change?;
- (5) duration – previous experience with similar transition?;
- (6) concurrent stress – what and how great are the stresses facing the individual now, if any?;
- and (7) assessment – does the individual view the situation positively, negatively, or as benign? (pp. 67-68)

Veteran students are leaving a very structured space (the military) and entering a less structured space (higher education). In this less structured space, they get to decide where, when and how to spend their time. When transitioning “from an organized military base to a college campus, where individuality was praised and abundant unstructured time was often difficult” (Cunningham, 2012, p. 16), veteran students find themselves in a difficult position.

Self refers to how one would cope with their affairs and how they would execute personality traits during this transition that give them the ability handle this transition

(Anderson et al., 2012). This focus is on the strengths and weaknesses related to the individual's life during the transition (Schlossberg, 1984). An individual's self-related reasons that affect how internal means and personal qualities influence their ability to cope. Self has two dimensions: personal characteristics and psychological resources (Evans et al., 2010; Griffin & Gilbert, 2015). Age, gender, socio-economic statuses are personal characteristics that can shape and manage the change. Psychological resources specify personality characteristics and internal conditions that can influence ways in which individuals manage or handle transitions (Goodman, Schlossberg & Anderson, 2006; Griffin & Gilbert, 2015; Schlossberg, Waters, & Goodman, 1995).

Support describes the outside entities that are encouraging or motivating the veteran during their transition. These outside entities usually manifest in the form relationships with their family members, friends, coworkers, or any individual who encourages the veteran and add positive reinforcement (Anderson et al., 2012). This is primarily a social component that addresses ways that positive, affirmative, and caring feedback can ease transitions (Evans et al., 2010; Goodman, Schlossberg, & Anderson, 2006; Griffin & Gilbert, 2015; Schlossberg, Waters, & Goodman, 1995). Often feeling frustrated and that they do not fit in, veteran students when compared to other students in general, there is usually an age gap, difference in maturity and this can cause a social distance (Bauman, 2009; Elliott, Gonzalez, & Larsen, 2011; Griffin & Gilbert, 2015).

Lastly, *Strategies* would be specific approaches; plans or methods that the individuals would be using guide them during the transition process (Anderson et al., 2012). Furthermore, Ryan, et al. (2011) defined strategies as “the development and utilization of support networks” (p. 56). There are three ways of coping used within the

strategies portion of the 4S system: modifying the situation, controlling the meaning, and managing stress after transition (Evans et al., 2010; Goodman, Schlossberg, & Anderson, 2006; Griffin & Gilbert, 2015; Schlossberg, Waters, & Goodman, 1995). The 4S system can be applied to veterans in any stage of their transition. See Figure 1 to understand how the 4S system works.

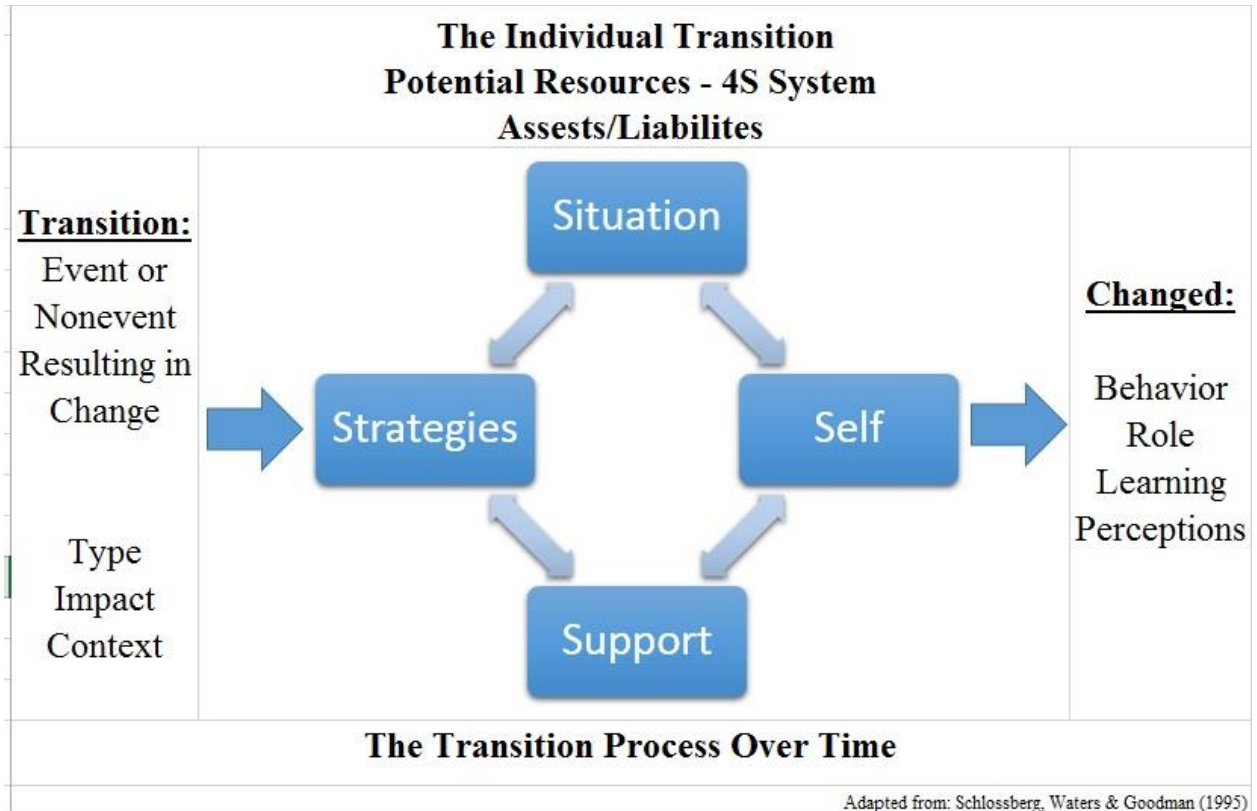


Figure 1: A Visual representation of Schlossberg's 4S System

The 4S system is easy to follow and apply to adults in transition. Since this theory was created with adults in mind to understand transition, those working with adults in transition can work together and plan for the transition to minimize or plan for unforeseen circumstances that may arise during their transition. Veterans have been transitioning out of the military for hundreds of years. They have been transitioning to higher education with their educational benefits for 75+ years and being able to plan for these transitions is

just one step in assisting them in successfully transition back into civilian life.

Applications in Higher Education

Schlossberg's Transition Theory (1984) and specifically the 4S System (Anderson et al., 2012) will be used as the theoretical framework for this research study to understand the transition of the veteran student as they are recruited and enrolled into higher education at Public University. There have been numerous applications of transition theory in higher education (Evans et al., Schlossberg, Lynch & Chickering, 1989, Goodman, Schlossberg, & Anderson, 2006). An example can be found in Pearson & Petitpas' (1990) article where Schlossberg's Transition Theory was used to develop programs aimed at the needs of student athletes in their transitions. Student athletes in transition whether it is an anticipated transition, such as retiring from one's sport or an unanticipated transition, such as injury forcing permanent removal from their sport (Pearson & Petitpas, 1990). This model of student athlete transition could easily be translated to the veteran student population as they share very similar needs in identity and transition barriers.

DiRamio et al. (2008) used Schlossberg's model of adult transitions to study student combat veterans. In his study, him and his researchers grounded their theory utilizing Schlossberg, Lynch & Chickering's (1989) theory *moving in, moving through, moving out, and moving in*. In this study, DiRamio et al. (2008) describes the *moving in* phase as the motivations for why the veteran students joined the military. This led to the *moving through* phase, which was the actual deployment of the veteran students. Then the *moving out* phase was the when the veteran student described their time from deployment, returning home, and preparing to return to college. In the final *moving in*

phase, the veteran student was going through their college transition and gaining their familiarity with college of choice and trying to build that sense of community among their new peers (DiRamio et al., 2008). It was from their research that DiRamio et al. (2008) was able to create a more holistic model for assisting veteran students based on his research using Schlossberg's (1981) original Transition theory as well Schlossberg, Lynch & Chickering's (1989) *moving in, moving through, moving out* and *moving in* model. His model tracked the veteran student as they re-enrolled and by tracking them, DiRamio and his researchers were able to coordinate student services toward veteran students. His model included key student services such as: academic advising, counseling, financial aid support, student organization involvement, disability support, faculty support and institutional research (DiRamio et al., 2008). A combination of all of these services should operate together to serve and assist the veteran student once on campus and aid in their transition.

Both examples listed are ways in which Schlossberg's theory of transition has been used previously in higher education. Adults in transition have been researched in many ways throughout higher education. What makes Schlossberg's theory so appealing is that it can be applied to many different populations in very different ways as seen above. These are just two examples of how Schlossberg's theory has been used. I used Schlossberg's 4S system (Anderson et al., 2012) to guide my study and formulate my research questions.

Summary

Applying the use of Schlossberg's Adult Transition Theory is relevant to veteran students who have been recruited, transition and adapt to the restrictions of their Post

9/11 or Forever GI Bill educational benefits at a Public University's main or online campus because veteran students are transitioning away from the military to higher education. Schlossberg's Transition Theory adapted in adult development is an applicable lens to analyze veteran student recruitment and transition because it will provide a structure in which to understand and sort the factors of their transition in a significant way. Including the 4S system (Situation, Self, Support, Strategies) provided additional support to Schlossberg's Theory of Transition with ways to cope with the transition.

Assumptions

There will be several assumptions regarding the proposed veteran student population. I, as the researcher, am assuming that the participants will be truthful in their responses to the surveys and in the semi-structured interviews. An additional assumption is that the transition process outlined by Schlossberg's 4S's will be universal and applicable to military veterans during the recruitment and transition into higher education.

Chapter IV: Research Design

With a global pandemic spreading across the United States and across the globe throughout 2020 and 2021, my research design had to adjust to the constraints of what was happening around the world. This chapter discusses the qualitative case study to understand the veteran student experience as they are recruited and transition into (or back into) higher education at a Public University. This chapter will explain the benefit of the qualitative case study research design, methodological approach, the case study setting, and research site. A discussion of the participants represented in this study, the data collection process, and data analysis. Lastly, the chapter will conclude with my role as the researcher, ethical considerations, and contribution to the field.

Qualitative Study

A qualitative research design was used for this study to understand the recruitment and transition experiences of the veteran students while utilizing their Post 9/11 or Forever GI Bill educational benefits at Public University. Savin-Baden and Major (2013) defined qualitative research as “social research that is aimed at investigating the way in which people make sense of their ideas and experiences” (p. 11). Veteran students are not just a statistic to be counted but a population worth being heard on every college campus they inhabit. Zoroya (2014) identified, two out of three veterans do not earn a bachelor’s degree or higher, even though many are receiving financial benefits from the Post 9/11 GI Bill. The choice to apply a qualitative study stemmed from the minimal research pertaining to veteran students utilizing their Post 9/11 GI Bill benefits. Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009) identified that:

A qualitative research interview is often described as ‘a conversation with purpose’. This purpose is informed, implicitly at least, by a researcher question.

The ‘conversation’ here is also rather artificial; the aim of an interview is to facilitate an interaction, which permits participants to tell their own stories, in their own words. (p. 57)

Berg (1998) enlightens that qualitative research seeks to know “the meanings, concepts, definitions, characteristics, metaphors, symbols, and description of things” (p. 3). Veteran students are a worthy population to understand on a deeper level. The importance of obtaining a higher education degree for veteran students is different compared to traditional students because they have experienced the world before stepping on campus. For as much as they have done for our country, their stories need to be heard. Thus, a qualitative approach allowed for an evaluation of the distinct perspectives from the participant and helping to answer questions that “stress how social experience is created and given meaning” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 8).

Case Study

This study employed a qualitative case study approach to detail the veteran student recruitment and transition experiences. The case study approach was fitting for this study because they are useful “in presenting basic information about areas of education where little research has been conducted” (Merriam, 1998, p. 27). While veteran student research is not a new phenomenon, there is little research that expressly examines the recruitment and transition experiences of the veterans using their Post 9/11 or Forever GI Bill benefits to higher education. Thus, a case study approach was appropriate for describing these experiences.

According to Stake (1995), case study methodology is a strategy of inquiry in which the researcher explores a program, event, activity, process, or one or more individuals through in-depth research. Denzin and Lincoln (2000) described

qualitative research as the “socially constructed nature of reality, the intimate relationship between the researcher and what is studied, and the situational constraints that shape inquiry” (p. 8). Yin (2018) defines case study as an “empirical method that investigates a contemporary phenomenon (the “case”) in depth and within its real-world context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context may not be clearly evident” (p. 15). A case study examines a single system or multiple systems over a period through a detailed report and case description can be written based on themes created from the case study. Cases are confined by activity and time, with researchers collecting comprehensive information utilizing data collection procedures over a specified amount of time. Yin (2018) further explains that a case study must do four things; “it must explain, describe, illustrate, and enlighten (p. 18). Being able to *explain* beyond what a survey could not because it is too complex, to *describe* in the real-world context. *Illustrating* the topic in a descriptive manner and to *enlighten* that a situation has “no clear, single set of outcomes” (Yin, 2018, p. 18). For this case study, I collected data through semi-structured interviews and reviewing documents provided to me by participants, through my own research and publicly accessible records through the university and online.

Case studies may include both qualitative and quantitative research. Quantitative research provides data that encourages the comprehension of research. Stake (1995) denotes the difference between quantitative versus qualitative research, stating that “quantitative researchers have pressed for explanation and control; qualitative researchers have pressed for understanding the complex interrelationships among all that exists” (p. 37). While quantitative case studies can provide valuable data, qualitative case studies

can reveal vast information from a specific person, situation, or event (Merriam, 2009). This qualitative case study is grounded in the interpretive theoretical perspective, which directs the data collection and analysis. Jones, Torres, & Arminio (2006) detailed that having a theoretical perspective in qualitative case study research “adds philosophical richness and depth to a case study and provides direction for the design of the case study research project” (p. 54). For this study, I focused on the qualitative side of case study research.

The history of case study begins in the decade of the 1960s as it was making its argument as a legitimate research methodology (Simmons, 2009). As case study has continued to grow and develop through the years, there are advantages and disadvantages of case study research. One of the main disadvantages of case study research that Yin (1984) described, “too many times, the case study investigator has been sloppy, and has allowed equivocal evidence or biased views to influence the direction of the findings and conclusions” (p. 21). Another common disadvantage of case study is that it is often hard to generalize when working with one subject. The common question that is often raised in case study research is “how can you generalize from a single case?” (Yin, 1984, p. 21). While case study has disadvantages, there are a few advantages to using case study as a research methodology.

Utilizing case study research can have its own set of advantages. The data being examined is often conducted in the context of its use (Yin, 1984), meaning that it is within the situation where the activity is taking place. Case studies can describe real-world data in real-life situations; this type of research helps to explain the intricacies of real-life situations that may not be encapsulated in survey or experimental research.

Stake (1995) explained that there are three types of case studies: the intrinsic, the instrumental, and the collective. Intrinsic case studies are when “we are interested in it, not because by studying it we learn about other cases or about some general problem, but because we need to learn about that particular case” (Stake, 1995, p. 3). Instrumental case studies can be defined as wanting to accomplish “something other an understanding” (Stake, 1995, p. 3), looking at one part of the case study understand something else (Stake, 1995). While collective case studies are the combination of intrinsic and instrumental case studies. Another advantage of case study research is that it allows for both quantitative and qualitative analysis of data. The variations of the types of case studies are a definite advantage.

Researchers at the micro level can further examine data by using case studies. When a large all-encompassing study cannot be conducted, case study research is a great and practical option. Yin (2009) designated five components of effective case study research design: (a) research questions; (b) propositions or purpose of study; (c) unit analysis; (d) logic that links data to propositions; and (e) criteria for interpreting findings. In qualitative case study research, researchers are looking for the “how” and the “why” forms of questions. In the research questions, I have asked how these veteran students view and interpret their situation (as of the day of the interview)? What about their situation putting them on the path to be recruited and transitioning to higher education? Then they were asked to describe their experiences of how they ended up at Public University and how their benefits have helped or hindered their higher educational experiences. The second component of this case study is the purpose of the study, most referred to as the purpose statement. As indicated in this paper, the purpose of this study

is to examine how veteran students are recruited and transition to a Public University on their main campus while utilizing their Post 9/11 or Forever GI Bill benefits.

Unit of analysis is the third component of case study research design. Yin (2009) specified that the unit of analysis as the area of focus that a case study will analyze. The research questions are directly linked to the unit of analysis developed by the researcher. In this study, the units of analysis per Merriam (1998) are the veteran students (cases to be studied) at Public University. Linking the data to propositions is the fourth component of the case study research design. This can be found following the data collection phase, as the researcher is finding themes emerge from the data. According to Yin (2009), it is common to code the data prior to developing themes in case study research. As the data was being analyzed, the researcher was trying to uncover patterns in the data. Themes that emerge should answer the questions that I posed earlier in this paper. The fifth and final component of case study design is criteria for interpreting findings. Once the theme development was completed, I extracted meaning from these themes, and my findings were determining the recommendations for future research and potential policy adjustments.

The case study was chosen as the research design because this technique addresses a place to examine a system bound by time and the process of the decisions behind the phenomenon using various sources of information. This study examined the recruitment practices at a Public University, the policies that are being utilized and navigated and the transition that veteran students face once at a Public University using participant, and Staff/administrator interviews, documentary evidence, internet/newspaper articles and personal observational insights. The primary source of

evidence was participant interviews along with other evidentiary sources that were used to triangulate with the research questions to construct validity.

Research Site

Public University is a tier-one research university that offers three main campuses. The main campus is in the third-largest city in the state, while the other two locations are in the largest city and second-largest city in the state. Embedded within Public University's main campus is a growing trend in the nation, at Public University now has a strong and growing online presence for non-traditional learners. So much, in fact, the U.S. News and World Report (2019) named Public University's online degree programs No. 8 among the best online bachelor's programs for 2019, moving up one spot from the previous year. Being able to offer in-class and online options for traditional and non-traditional students presents veteran students many options when utilizing their educational benefits.

With three main campuses, a robust online campus that they call their 'Extended Campus,' Public University recruits many veterans to all three campuses each year. Through this Extended campus, Public University can reach students across the world, on military bases in-person and online; stating that "our programs are open to all military I.D. cardholders in Europe, to include family members, civilians, contractors, and members of the Department of Defense and Department of State" (Extended campus Europe, 2019). While the focus is to recruit many students to all their campuses each year, what is Public University doing specifically to recruit veterans to their main campus for the more traditional in-class setting? In addition, what are Public University's efforts to recruit veteran students to their online degree programs? Many policies are in

place to retain and recruit students each year, but veteran students have certain unique qualities and standards that must be met in accordance with their educational benefits.

Participants

All six veteran student participants were chosen based on their utilization of the Post 9/11 GI Bill or Forever GI Bill benefits during the 2020-21 academic year at Public University. The veteran students were also within their first two semesters of transitioning onto campus so that the recruitment experience was still fresh in their mind. As the interviews of veteran students began to wind down, my focus began to shift to interviewing staff members. Staff members at Public University who work with the veteran student population. This backup option became a necessity, as the veteran student response rate was lower than I anticipated. The reality of the pandemic was still a constant and the option to interview staff members became a reality. Their unique perspective was a welcome addition to the veteran student voices because they are meeting and working with veteran students every day to ensure their benefits are used correctly.

Shifting my focus to staff members in the Fall 2021 semester was to gather more information regarding the veteran student experience. Originally, I spoke with four staff members at Public University who work with veteran students. I was able to gain a more holistic understanding of how veterans transition to campus. This shift in my study not only changed the outlook of the study but gave the veteran student descriptions more context. I contacted three individuals who work at Public University, of those three, two responded and one gave me two more names to reach out to which proved to be my last two interviews. I did reach out to one participant who did not respond but it was clear that

they did not want to participate and handed me a book that is given to veteran students at Public University to review. This book, “Straight Talk for Veterans, A Guide to Success in College” edited by Dr. David Vacchi, who had recently visited Public University to speak with the veteran students. This staff member had the longest tenure at Public University so I was hoping that they would make the decision to be interviewed. After a few weeks, the final staff member decided to grant me an interview. I was able to interview five full time staff members who directly work with veteran students. Each staff member was given their own pseudonym, I chose the end of the military phonetic alphabet as their pseudonym plus adding staff to their name so that their accounts would be distinguished from the veteran student accounts.

Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009) stated, “participants are selected on the basis that they can grant us access to a particular perspective” (p. 48). I utilized purposeful sampling throughout this study. Merriam (2009) enlightens that purposeful sampling is “based on the assumption that the investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight, and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned” (p. 77). Once I was approved by IRB (Institutional Review Board) for this study; I contacted the veteran student services office on campus with my participant specifications to compile a list of veteran students. The parameters were: any veteran student as identified by the veteran student services office using their Post 9/11 GI Bill or the new Forever GI Bill benefits during the 2020-2021 academic year. The participant must be an actual veteran; not a dependent or spouse of a veteran and enrolled in their first or second semester at Public University.

I utilized purposeful sampling, which is a “technique widely used in qualitative research for the identification and selection of information-rich cases for the most effective use of limited resources” (Patton, 2002). The number of participants seems small, but I wanted to capture the in-depth conversations. Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009) indicated, “there is no right answer to the question of sample size” (p. 51). It is the richness of the data that I was eager to gather. Bogdan & Bilken (1998) recommend that conducting interviews allows the researcher to uncover descriptive data from the subjects, which provides information on how they “interpret some piece of the world” (p. 94). These interviews allowed each veteran student to express their experiences concerning their recruitment to Public University and transition experiences into higher education while utilizing their educational benefits.

The veteran student services offices sent my approved recruitment email communication (Appendix A) to those who met my specific parameters on my behalf. Thus, keeping the list secure within the veteran student services office and only those who were interested in participating in my study would be made known to me as the researcher. Once interested potential participants contacted me, I began email/phone communication with those veteran students. See Table 1 below to view the timeline of what the participant was asked to complete during the duration of the study.

	Task	Time	Setting	Method of Administration
1	Email acceptance	2-5 minutes	Personal Public University Email	Email delivery
2	Demographic Survey	15-25 minutes	Qualtrics link delivered through email	Email delivery upon acceptance of being a participant and setting up interview time

3	Interview	30-60 minutes	Zoom or Phone call interview	Depending on participant's agreed upon method of interview, it will be administered accordingly
4	Post Interview - Transcription review	30-60 minutes	Personal Public University Email	Email delivery

Table 1: Veteran Student Participant Recruitment – Interview Timeline

Interviews were set up in the location of their choosing; with the on-going pandemic, most chose to conduct their interviews via Zoom meetings or telephone calls to maintain the social distancing practices and at the comfort of each participant.

For the initial meeting, the participants were emailed a link to a pre-interview survey, and the participants were asked to complete the survey prior to our meeting. The survey instrument (Appendix D) that I prepared was to collect demographic and qualifying information from the veteran students who had recently been recruited to higher education due to the utilization of their Post 9/11 or Forever GI Bill benefits; and those that have recently transitioned and enrolled onto the campus of Public University. I employed the online software Qualtrics to collect and manage the research data for the descriptive analysis that I gained with the demographic information. All demographic surveys were completed prior to our zoom or telephone meetings for the semi-structured interviews. Reminders were sent to participants to complete the survey as the interview date approached and many times, we had to reschedule due to the participant’s busy schedules.

At the time of the meeting, the participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time and that pseudonyms would be used to protect their identities. At the completion of each interview, all participants were notified that there

would be a follow up by email to give each participant an opportunity to clarify any statements made and to add any documents that may be helpful in my further research. With six participant interviews completed and no other responses, I made the request to the veteran student services director to redistribute the recruitment email. After two more recruitment emails had been sent with no further response, I had come to the realization that I may need to implement the backup option of interviewing staff members. I pivoted my focus to seek out more detailed experiences to guide my research and to gain the voices of those who work with the veteran students each day.

Data Collection

During the data collection stage, I was able to gather in-depth experiences from each participant as to why they chose to attend Public University while using their educational benefits. The staff interviews were a welcome addition after the low participant response and added another voice to give a holistic view of the veteran student recruitment and transition experience. Through my transcribed transcripts of the interview recordings and reflective memos, I was able to find emerging themes about the participants.

I used a Qualtrics survey instrument (Appendix D) to gather demographic information on the veteran students as well as other necessary background information for those participants who met the criteria for the participants in the study. This survey was distributed and to be completed prior to the interview so that I had time to review and make any notes to correspond with my interview questions. As the participants responded to the interview questions, I could probe with some of their background

information to expand on their original answer. This was helpful in getting them to open up as the interview progressed.

I conducted semi-structured interviews by phone or Zoom video conferencing. An in-person interview was not an option during the pandemic to maintain social distancing and to keep everyone healthy and safe. It proved to be quite an undertaking each time I sat in front of my computer to begin the Zoom interviews. An analysis of documents, reports, policies, and articles were also reviewed. Utilizing the demographic survey instrument allowed me gain crucial demographic characteristics prior to the initial meeting. The survey answers assisted me in keeping the interview running smoothly and to inquire about some of their answers throughout the interview. The semi-structured interviews were used to recognize the veteran student's recruitment and transition experiences at Public University while using their GI Bill benefits.

For this study, my original plan was to interview 10-20 participants or until saturation was met. Interviewing Staff/Administrators who work with the veteran students on campus was always a possibility as I included their interview protocol (Appendix C) in my original IRB plan and approval. I did end up contacting three staff members on campus to assist in gaining a wider perspective of the veteran student transition to higher education. Of those three initial staff contacts, I finished with five interviews. Due to the pandemic and most classes moving to the online format, the responses were scarce. With only six student participants making it through the entire process, I have a limited scope on what I set out to uncover from the participants, but I was able to uncover a different aspect with the staff responses.

Yin (2018) described that the interview can be one of the “most important sources of case study evidence” (p. 118). He further details that there are three types of interviews: prolonged interviews, shorter interviews, and survey interviews (p. 119). The first component is a *prolonged interview*, which “takes place over 2 or more hours, either in a single sitting or over an extended period of time covering multiple sittings” (Yin, 2018, p. 119). This interview type is more in-depth and allows the interviewee to be a part of the research, their role “may become considered one of an “informant” rather than a respondent” (Yin, 2018, p. 119). *Shorter interviews* “may be more focused and take only about 1 hour or so” (Yin, 2018, p. 119). I conducted shorter semi-structured interviews for my study as I was “following [my] case study protocol (or a portion of it) more closely” (Yin, 2018, p. 119). Due to the limited number of participants who were willing to tell their stories during a pandemic, the semi-structured interviews were the best fit for those who responded. The final type of case study interview is the *survey interview*, “using the structured questionnaire” (Yin, 2018, p. 119). By creating and utilizing a demographic survey, it “could be designed as part of an embedded case study and produce quantitative data as part of the case study evidence” (Yin, 2018, p. 120). This demographic survey only added rich data to accompany the participant’s descriptions of their experiences during their recruitment and transition to higher education.

Before, during and after each interview, I reviewed documents, government policies related to veteran students in higher education, books and articles that aided in supporting the participant’s experiences. With a change in Presidential leadership through my doctoral journey, it was essential to as Yin (2009) discusses that, “for case studies, the

most important use of documents is to corroborate and augment evidence from other sources” (p.103). In January of 2021, H.R. 7105 became a law (P.L. 116-315). This new law is set to give veterans more protection as they venture into higher education. The Veterans Health Care and Benefits Improvement Act of 2020 is updating the requirements for the In-State tuition to remove the three-year limit to enroll in higher education from discharge date (Department of Veteran Affairs-Isakson, pg. 1, 2021). Many of the updates were immediate while others were to be rolled out throughout 2021. Another highlight in this Act was creating a dual certification for those using their Post 9/11 benefits; this Act states that, “the school will certify the student’s enrollment after the add-drop date, and then each month thereafter, the student would be required to electronically verify with VA their continued enrollment in that school. If a student fails to certify for two consecutive months, VA will withhold monthly housing allowance payments until the student certifies” (Department of Veteran Affairs - Isakson, pg.2, 2021).

Documentation beyond the interviews and survey data added to the richness of the data “because of their overall value, documents play an explicit role in any data collection in doing case studies” (Yin, 20019, p.103). As I researched the Regent’s Minutes from Public University, I was able to locate the first mention of the use of the GI Bill at Public University. See Image # 1 below.

President reported on the enrollment of civilian students, stating that of the 2,300 enrolled, the University now has the largest number of freshman girls in the history of the University. He stated that our quota for the V-12 program is 695; 63 pre-medical students; and that there are approximately 200 in the seventeen-year-old group.

He reported that there are 67 veterans, 31 of whom are enrolled under the Rehabilitation Program and 36 under the GI Bill; 5 additional applications are now pending.

Image #2: October 1944 Regent's Minutes, first mention of GI Bill at Public University (President's name removed)

By understanding the dynamic of Public University throughout time, I can understand the GI Bill, while advantageous to some, was also restrictive or nonexistent to others who should have had the full benefits awarded to them for their time served.

Each participant was a veteran student utilizing their Post 9/11 GI Bill or Forever GI Bill benefits pursuing their degree at Public University within their first two semesters of enrollment. Through the recruitment process, I had a small response from the recruitment email with ten individuals responding. Of those ten respondents, six made it through the entire demographic survey as well as the full interview. Once all six interviews were transcribed and I began the coding process, it became clear to me that I needed to implement the veteran staff option. I decided to reach out to the staff members to gain their perspective. Due to the small participant response, I was able to add another layer of experiences by including the staff perspective.

Prior to each interview, each participant was asked to fill out a short demographic survey (Appendix D) to gather data about their military background and other pertinent information that proved to be useful for me as the researcher prior to the in-person or phone interview. To make the participants feel comfortable, each interview took place in a setting of their choosing but all chose Zoom or phone interviews due to safety concerns as well as geographic locations of some participants. While meeting over Zoom was the safest way possible to meet, it did have its own challenges as many interviews had delays in responses, internet connection issues as well as the meeting completely closing out and having to restart the entire process of reconnecting. It was clear that some participants

were frustrated or distracted during their interviews. Two participants were driving vehicles during their interviews, so the background noise became an issue at certain times. In other interviews, significant others popped in and out of the screen during the interviews as well. I did not have their full attention like I could have had with an in-person interview in a more comfortable setting.

The interview is considered an “important source of case study evidence” (Yin, 2018, p. 118). Case study interviews “resemble guided conversations rather than structured queries” (Yin, 2018, p. 118). Each interview was projected to last 30-60 minutes depending on the participant’s answers to the semi-structured interview questions. Researcher memos were kept throughout the duration of the study to keep track of the progress of each individual interview. These memos served as a reflection of my initial thoughts on each interview but also provided data. Along with the interviews and survey data, I researched documents, articles and government policies pertaining to veterans who are seeking to enter higher education. The data collection was appropriate as I sought to understand the recruitment and transition experiences of being a veteran student in higher education.

Data Analysis

Utilizing the inductive character of case study designs, requires that data analysis involves the examining of sources: 1) to identify the prominent patterns, 2) laying out the evidence that is supported, disproved, or qualified emergent and interpretations and themes (Yin, 1994) and 3) develop participant’s narrative expectations and manage their experiences of the study. It is vital for a case study to assemble sources of data, also known as triangulation. Green, Camilli, & Elmore (2006), echoing Yin (2009), specified

that a thoroughly conducted case study gains from having multiple sources of evidence. This ensures that the results reflect the comprehensive understanding of the participant's results, as I understand them as the researcher.

At the completion of each interview, field jottings were taken to gather initial impressions, and the recordings were transcribed to text and analyzed. Smith, Flowers, & Larkin (2009) described, "analysis is an iterative process of fluid description and engagement with the transcript" (p. 81). I transcribed each interview; Laverly (2003) identified that there should be "multiple stages of interpretation that allow patterns to emerge, the discussion of how interpretations arise from the data, and the interpretive process itself are seen as critical" (p. 23). Transcriptions from each interview were completed immediately as well as member checks (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Member checking is defined as a "quality control process by which a researcher seeks to improve the accuracy, credibility and validity of what has been recorded during a research interview" (Harper & Cole, 2012, p. 1). Once I completed the transcriptions, I gave each participant two weeks to review their transcription of the interview; this gave them ample time to decide if they want to add or change anything said in the interview. Allowing the participant to be a part of the research process through the member checking allows for the trustworthiness of the data. All recordings were destroyed after the member checking process occurred with the participants of the study. Each participant was assigned a pseudonym based on the military phonetic alphabet; I gave them the choice to choose their own pseudonym. During a qualitative study, data collection can take place over several months or even years but "data analysis is expected to begin during the first day or two of data collection" (Ratliff, 2008, p.120). With a qualitative study, my intention is

not to make the data fit into a preconceived outcome but to understand the rich veteran student experience at Public University.

After transcribing, codes and themes were pulled out of each transcription to reflect on the importance of each as it pertains to this study and to future research. Yin (2016) described that the purpose of trying to code is “to be moving methodically to a slightly higher conceptual level” (p. 196) and to categorize for similarities. The initial coding process began with line-by-line coding (Charmaz, 2014; Creswell, 2014). Charmaz (2014) pointed out that, “line-by-line coding prompts you to look at the data anew” (p. 127); through this process, I gained a new perspective and new ideas and I built upon each which helped me to “separate the data into categories” (p. 127). It was performed so that I did not get caught up in the participant’s story and to focus on the details of the data. This was done to ensure that all data was seen and to include any ideas that may have been overlooked previously. After analyzing the transcripts, researcher memos, and jottings, I examined my field notes.

Throughout the analysis process, I kept the research questions as my guide to ensure that I could answer them. After classifying the initial coding categories and themes, all the transcripts were reread to further code the data. The constant comparative method was utilized once I started collecting data and as I was coding to compare against the existing data (Merriam, 1998). Finally, I used axial coding to permit subcategories and categories to be connected to make sense of the emerging concepts from the data (Charmaz, 2014). From the coding process, I took the categories and subcategories to create themes. Through the theming process, I reflected on the meanings that were presented. The theming process was the first tool used to group together the participant

experiences as described in their interviews. Categories and themes are described in the findings section and provided descriptions for this case study (Merriam, 1998). Based on the answers to the questions in the interview process, I defined my themes within each of the categories based on my framework provided by Schlossberg’s 4S System, Situation, Support, Self and Strategies. I used the participant’s own words to decide the themes and then aligned them with the framework. See Table 2 below to view how the coding process was interpreted in the context of the Schlossberg’s 4S system for this study.

4S System	Open Codes	Axial Codes
Support Self Situation	Family Ties Staff ties to Armed Services	Personal Connection to the US Military
Self, Strategies	Educational Benefits & Pursuits	Benefits Earned
Self Situation	Veteran Status & Staff Veteran Status	The Identity & Transition of the Veteran
Strategies Situation	Veteran Transition Staff Transition	
Situation Strategies	Choices, Consequences & Staff Grievances	Alternative Decisions
Strategies Self	Reflections & Advice	

Table 2: Veteran Student Participant Coding - Example from Data Analysis

Consequently, when new themes cease to emerge, saturation should be met, and additional data would no longer be required. With the small response rate, saturation was met with the veteran student population. Once saturation was met with the veteran students, I determined that additional perspectives were needed to give a better picture of the veteran student experience. Peer review is the process of conferencing with two or more of my colleagues regarding the research methods and the congruency between the data collected and the findings. Peer review was a way to verify that the project is progressing soundly (Flick, 2007).

Determining the findings was an iterative process. I continually re-read and re-listened to the transcripts throughout data analysis, determining my findings, and writing up my results. Each time that I encounter the participant's transcripts, it would trigger a feeling from our interview. Sometimes it was a memory of a facial expression that I made a note of when speaking to them, other times it was the inflection in their voice as I listened back to the recording. As an avid fictional reader and audiobook listener, the participants transformed into these compelling characters whose personal journeys depicted the storyline and plot points of my study. Each time I re-listened or re-read their words, their stories became more vivid and their insights more concrete. By constantly revisiting the interviews and revising my own interpretations, I gained a deeper understanding of what these veteran students were experiencing as they were transitioning to Public University.

Role of the Researcher

The researcher plays a vital role in the process of completing a case study. "The researcher is the instrument" (Marshall & Rossman, 2016, p. 118) in qualitative studies. As a researcher my goal was to comprehend each individual experience. The fact is, I am not a veteran, which makes my role in this study more etic. Spiers (2000) stated, "the etic perspective is used to describe phenomena as viewed by someone outside the experience" (p. 716). At the same time, I am the daughter and granddaughter of veterans from different branches of the military. Growing up in a military family, I witnessed the governmental bureaucracy that my father had to deal with when he was deployed and trying to retire to from the military. To hear the stories of the months leading up to his retirement from the military and how he could have been home much sooner, but

paperwork and lengthy delays prevented him, which resulted in another domestic assignment away from our family home. This leads me to my current position, working in proximity to veteran students, I was able to witness veteran students daily as they navigate their way through the demands of higher education. My interactions with them and hearing the plight of veteran students daily as they make the tough decisions to continue or withdraw from higher education due to Post 9/11 GI Bill policies sparked my interest in wanting to understand the veteran student transition. The complex experience of veteran students that I was able to witness in my day-to-day profession was what created my need to know more about their recruitment and transition to higher education, how they understand the intricacies of the rules and regulations of the Post 9/11 GI Bill policies as it pertains to higher education and how they are navigating these transitions.

Ethical Considerations

Trustworthiness is an essential aspect of this study; therefore, thoughtful ethical considerations were considered (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2014; Merriam, 2009; Schwandt, 2007; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2011). Prior to each interview, each participant was given a consent form with the purpose and intended use of the information that was about to be given. Pseudonyms were given to all participants to protect their identities. I used many strategies to ensure trustworthiness; member checking, the role of the researcher for transparency and triangulation (Schwandt, 2007). Triangulation is the process of checking “multiple data sources, multiple investigators, multiple theoretical perspectives and/or multiple methods” (Schwandt, 2007, p. 298). By using multiple sources of data, the survey collects demographic background information, interviews, and

documents allowed for triangulation to confirm findings (Merriam, 1998). Member checking was also used to allow the participants to review and approve the interview transcriptions for accuracy.

Chapter V: Research Findings

The goal of this research was to understand the veteran student transition and how students, staff, professors, and colleges can better assist these veteran students when they arrive on campus. By acquiring this foundational framework, we can begin to better understand the initial transition strategies needed to ensure the success of our veteran student population on campuses across the country. Not only will this aid in improving retention and graduation rates, but it will also assist these schools in becoming places where veteran students and their benefits are accepted with open arms. In this concluding chapter, I examined the findings and implications for future research. While each participant brought their own experiences to each interview, many were experiencing remarkably similar things as they began to use their educational benefits during their transition to higher education. The research questions that drove this study were as follows:

1. What situational factors influence the veterans into the recruiting process to their campus?
 - a. What barriers or challenges do veteran students experience during the transition to higher education?
2. How do veteran students cope with their personal and contextual factors during their first year on their campus?
3. What strategies do they have to overcome their challenges in their transition on their campus?

Employing semi-structured interviews, the participants articulated their experiences as veterans leaving the military and deciding to enter higher education. In

combination with these research questions, a qualitative case study (Merriam, 2007) was chosen as the research method for this study. This case study consisted of one research site, it was chosen based on my own firsthand experiences of listening to the daily plight of veteran students using their educational benefits and wanting influence program and policy updates to assist veteran students in the future. Semi-structured interviews were used as the primary data collection method, but I also used field notes and document analysis to ensure a more accurate picture of the veteran student experience.

To understand a case study, it is imperative that one must understand the setting in which the case study takes place. As one walks around Public University's campus, they would see the rich tradition of perfectly placed mums planted in strategic designs to spell out the school's name and other sayings that relate to Public University. They would also see the large Naval ROTC building in the middle of campus and many students engaging in ROTC training drills from the Air Force, Marine Corps, Army, and Navy throughout each semester. A large monument commemorating the students and alumni who fought and died in World War I resides next to the nationally ranked football stadium. This monument has also been dedicated to the community members who sacrificed their lives in defense of their country and is prominently displayed where thousands of people walk by each week. Before many home-football games, a military flyover has become the standard. With the six military bases in the state, the connection to the military is palpable. Each football season, the football program honors a "Patriot of the Game" where a current or former student or long-standing season ticket holder of Public University is honored in front of the home crowd for their service to their country. It is quite the standing ovation of the 83,000 people when the Patriot of the Game is

announced. There are many visible reminders that Public University has a rich tradition of supporting our military members since the beginning of the GI Bill.

The mission of Public University is “is to provide the best possible educational experience for our students through excellence in teaching, research and creative activity, and service to the state and society” (Mission, 2022). Through the military connected population profile provided to me by Lima, current staff participant, Public University’s statement regarding veteran students reads, “We value our military service-connected students as civic assets and leaders to our university. As a community, we learn from one another, volunteer together, serve each other, work to nurture the growth of our military families on campus, and celebrate their successes” (Lima, personal communication, October 1, 2021). Since the start of my journey to obtaining a PhD degree, Public University has had three Presidents reside over the university. In 2018, the long tenured President retired and a new businessperson with no higher education experience took over. After 10 months, the businessperson decided it was not the right fit and we had an interim president for 18 months who eventually became the new president in 2020. To gain a better understanding of where the veteran student services office lives within the university, it is imperative to understand the organization of the administration. From the President, it moves down to the Senior Vice President & Provost office who oversees nine individuals as well as the college deans. These individuals have varying titles ranging from Interim Vice Provost to Senior Associate Vice President. The office of Veteran Student Services resides under the Senior Associate Vice President for the Division of Enrollment Management and is located within the Registrar’s office.

In the summer of 2020 during my research, Public University unveiled a new tri-campus wide strategic plan. In this strategic plan, according to the premise page, the “brand strength and economies of scale must be realized at the enterprise level, and there must be trust and alignment between roles and accountability” (Strategic Plan, 2020). The plan is focused on increasing brand strength, lowering the cost of tuition, and increasing enrollment with transfer students while growing the online degree programs. While the pillars of the strategic plan do not specifically name the veteran student population, it can be inferred that they are included in the strategic plan. Lima described that while nothing is written in the strategic plan to publicly name veterans, Lima did feel that veterans could fit into “a few efforts named in Pillars #2 (Prepare Students for a Life of Success, Meaning, Service, and Positive Impact), #3 (Make Public University’s Excellence Affordable and Attainable), and maybe #4 (Become a Place of Belonging and Emotional Growth for All Students, Faculty, Staff, and Alumni) of the five pillars named in the strategic plan” (Lima, personal communication, January 18, 2022). Increasing the transfer student population would include increasing the veteran student population as well.

This research study took place at Public University, a tier 1 research university that offers a variety of degrees. Public University is centrally located within the state and has 6 military bases within a few hours’ drive in every direction. The Veterans Benefit Administration’s regional office is 140 miles away, there are 3 Vet Centers located in the state, 2 locations for the VA Health System in the state and 3 outpatient clinics offered in the state from the Veterans Health Administration. Using the VA Comparison tool and searching for Public University, in the past year, there were 1,528 veteran students on campus using their benefits. Of those 1,528 veteran students, they were using “all

chapters of the GI Bill program (e.g., Post 9/11, Montgomery GI Bill, Reserve Education Assistance Program, and Veteran Readiness and Employment” (GI Bill Comparison, 2021). Within this 1,528, 746 were using their Post 9/11 GI Bill (GI Bill Comparison, 2021) with \$5, 260,040.50 total paid in the fiscal year of 2020. This figure does not distinguish between the dependent using their parent/spouse benefits and those using their benefits for themselves, but it does elucidate how much funding has been spent on those utilizing their benefits. With over 5 million dollars in the last year, Public University is looking to increase their veteran student population.

Veteran Participants

With demographic information sent to me from their pre-interview survey (Appendix D), I was able to consider the participant’s backgrounds prior to each interview. All participants identified as males between the ages of 26-48. Five of the six participants identified as a White/Caucasian male while the remaining participant identified as Black/African American male. All participants identified as married or engaged to be married. For instance, Delta was planning his upcoming wedding for the summer of 2021. Alpha marked in the demographic survey that he “preferred not to answer” on his marital status but during our interview, he revealed that he and his wife were in the process of “not being married anymore” (Alpha, 2021). Four of the five branches of the military: Air Force, Army, Navy, and Marine Corps were represented in this small participant group. No participant belonged to the National Guard. Their length of service ranged from 2-25 years with all but one having been deployed during their service. Foxtrot was the only participant to list participating in ROTC but is only now

actually participating in the Reserve Officers Training Corps with his scholarship while in between service.

Table 3 lists the participant’s demographic information including their age, ethnicity, marital status and chosen military affiliation. No one from the Guard responded to my recruitment emails and therefore they are not represented in the veteran student participant list. Table 3 below lists length of service, deployment information and location, and military occupation is detailed.

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Ethnicity	Marital Status	Military Affiliation
Alpha	26	Male	White	Prefer not to answer	Air Force
Bravo	26	Male	White	Married	Air Force
Delta	39	Male	White	Engaged, will be Married in June 2021	Navy
Echo	48	Male	Black/ African American	Married	Marine Corps
Foxtrot	28	Male	White	Married	Army
Golf	27	Male	White	Married	Army

Table 3: Participant Demographic Information

All were deployed except for Bravo, who is still currently serving and may face future deployment. Delta did not specify his exact location for his deployments but being in the Navy and on an aircraft carrier, his deployments were always in a moving location. During the interviews, as a follow up to their answers within the pre-interview survey, I asked participants where the military deployed them during active duty. Most easily answered the question with each location and length of time deployed. However, I sensed that Delta did not want to answer the question. He physically looked away from the screen and seemed uncomfortable with the question. His demeanor changed and as part

of my research ethics, I did not encourage him to answer. Instead, we moved on from the question. Table 4 below describes the military background of the participant including: length of service, whether the participant was deployed, the places of deployment and military occupation.

Pseudonym	Length of Service	Were you deployed?	Place(s) of Deployment	Military Occupation
Alpha	6 years active duty, 2 years IRR (halfway done)	Yes	United Arab Emirates	Crew Chief
Bravo	2 years, 6 months still active duty	No	N/A	Weather and Environmental Science Officer
Delta	10 years	Yes	Did not specify location - 6 deployments [6 months each] on aircraft carriers	Nuclear Electricians Mate
Echo	25 years	Yes	Iraq 2x & globally (4 years total)	CH-46 Crew Chief & Aircraft Maintenance Chief
Foxtrot	4 years + 1 year ROTC	Yes	Europe - 9 months	13B - Cannon Crew Member
Golf	7 years	Yes	Middle East & South Korea	94F - Computer /Detection Systems Repairer

Table 4: Participant’s Military Background

In Table 5 below, the participants gave their previous higher education information including if they attended college previously as well as their current major, whether they were pursuing an undergraduate (UG) or graduate (GR) degree and their intended graduation date.

Pseudonym	Service to College or College first to service and then college again?	Attended another University?	UG or GR?	Major	Estimated Graduation Date
Alpha	Service to college	Yes, Community College of the Air Force 60 credit hours	UG	Mechanical Engineering	2024
Bravo	College to Service and back to college	Completed a bachelor’s degree in 4 years	GR	Master of Environmental Science: Hydrology & Water Security	Spring 2022

Delta	College to Service and back to college	Yes, one semester at Community College. Completed a bachelor's degree + Law School - 1 semester	GR	Executive MBA in Energy	Fall 2021
Echo	Service to College	Yes - did not list	GR	Executive MBA in Aerospace & Defense	August 2021
Foxtrot	College to Service and back to college	Yes, 2 universities and completed a bachelor's degree	GR	MBA	May 2022
Golf	Service to College	No	UG	Electrical Engineering	May 2024

Table 5: Participant's Military Service & Higher Education

After reviewing the demographic information above prior to each interview, I was able to ask probing questions to each participant based on their answers to the interview protocol questions. Additionally, the information above allowed me to fill the awkward pauses if necessary. Reviewing the transcripts from each interview, I was able to find similarities in each participant's responses.

Veteran Support Staff Participants

As part of my research design, I planned for the possibility of low veteran student participant responses and included the staff interview protocols. A global pandemic was never the reason I would have thought of for low participant turnout, but it is the reality of what was happening in 2020-2021 academic year. Gaining another perspective from those who assist the veteran student population at Public University was an additional voice that was desired. Table 6 includes each staff member's pseudonym, length in position, and their personal connection to the military. To further protect each staff member's anonymity, I excluded each staff member's current employment position title.

Through snowball sampling, I was given five out of the six full time staff members' names at Public University.

Pseudonym	Length in Position	Military Connection
Romeo	2 years	Served 20 years
Zulu	7 years	Served in the Navy
Sierra	1 year	Spouse is currently serving
Tango	3-5 years	Spouse is currently serving & used father's GI Bill benefits for education
Lima	12 years	No one mentioned in immediate family

Table 6: Staff Member Information

Even as large as Public University is, those that work with veteran students are still a small group of people. The staff members who assist the veteran student population are the unseen hard workers who keep the veteran student population enrolled and on track to meet their graduation requirements. These five staff members combined have worked with every veteran student at Public University in some capacity. On Public University's campus, there are 28,000 plus students enrolled (Division, 2020) and of those 28,000, there are 2,500 plus who are "military connected students" (Lima, personal communication, October 1, 2021). The 2,500 include veterans, active-duty members, military spouses/dependents, and anyone who self identifies as military connected. Each staff member works on a different piece of the veteran student or military connected student's journey of using his or her educational benefits.

Personal Connection to the U.S. Military

I grew up in a family with many military connections. My father served in the Air Force and my paternal grandfather served in the U.S. Army after emigrating from the Philippines. My Uncle (mother's brother) served in the Air Force while my aunt (father's sister) and her husband served in the U.S. Army. My family moved along with my father with each new assignment and sometimes he went on unassisted tours without us. While on one of these unassisted tours, my father chose to pursue his master's degree at the Osan Air Base in South Korea. Using his tuition assistance, he was able to complete his master's degree from Public University without ever stepping foot on campus. When I arrived at Public University in my first year, my father stepped on campus for the first time. He looked around and said to me, "so, this is what this campus looks like" since he had never seen campus but had completed his degree while serving in the Air Force. When I was accepted into the same master's program years later, we made a deal that we would walk across the stage together to celebrate having accomplished the same degree program just 18 years apart. It was a special moment that we got to share as father and daughter.

My father's journey through the military was not a stand-alone experience. Many military members have families and move from base to base while their parents serve in their designated role within the military. At some stage, their parents retire or choose to separate from the military and pursue a civilian career. His journey allowed me to have the choice and opportunity to pursue my own passions growing up, which afforded me the possibility to choose Public University as my top college of choice. As I graduated high school, there was no mandatory draft in place and financially, I did not have to join

the military to be able to afford higher education. I was in a fortunate position, and I understood that as I walked around campus for the first time with my parents for the first time. My father chose to utilize his down time on his unassisted tour to pursue a master's degree to better him mentally as well as to add to his resume for when his civilian career began. The tuition assistance program, his Montgomery GI Bill and the education office on the Osan Air Base in South Korea assisted him through his master's degree. In some way, this family military connection and my desk being within earshot of veteran student services for many years led me to this research.

Family Ties

Most participants had a direct military connection that influenced their decision to pursue armed service before and after college. This finding reflects national trends. According to a 2011 PEW research study, “57% of those ages 30-49 say they have an immediate family member who served. And among those ages 18-29, the share is only one-third” (PEW, 2011).

Foxtrot, a 28-year-old married White male pursuing a Master of Business Administration degree grew up in family where many family members were serving in the military. “It has been a family tradition; I am the last of three sons to enlist in the military. My family has a lineage going back to the Civil War, pretty much every male in my family has been enlisted” (Foxtrot, 2021). For Foxtrot, he wanted to get his undergraduate degree in “civil engineering to get into city design and construction because I really enjoyed designing buildings and structures. That was my original plan but the university I originally attended did not have a civil engineering program but a dual degree program with a partner institution nearby but at the completion of the first

major in Applied Physics in four years, I took a break and decided to take this one degree and enlist in the Army” (Foxtrot, 2021). With an extensive line of family members in the military, Foxtrot had no doubt in his mind that he would join the military and had every intention of becoming a “lifer” and has aspirations to “outrank his dad someday” (Foxtrot, 2021). He has had a plan since joining the military to follow in his father’s footsteps. His father had an illustrious military career with many ranked promotions until his retirement was the example that Foxtrot wanted to follow. While Foxtrot’s military career is not going exactly like he originally thought, he is blazing his own trail. To Foxtrot, he felt “like an internal calling that you know want to do something like that [armed services], I really did not want to work a 9-5 job once I got done with school. I knew I just wanted to do something important, and it is kind of in my DNA” (Foxtrot, 2021) to serve in the military.

Similarly, Alpha grew up in a military family where both parents served in the Army, so he was always around the armed services. As a 26-year-old soon to be divorced white male pursuing a mechanical engineering degree, he always had the feeling that the military was in his future. After attending orientation weekend at a local community college after his high school graduation, Alpha did not feel like the college route was the right fit for him at 18 years old. His next plan was to enlist in the armed forces. Alpha knew immediately that he would enlist in a different branch of the military than his parents. His decision to choose a different branch was due to many years of hearing “too many horror stories about the Army growing up” (Alpha, February 11, 2021) to want to join the Army so he chose the Air Force. His mother was also an Aircraft Mechanic for the Army and he described, “I spent most of my childhood around airplanes anyways and

it felt like a natural transition” (Alpha, 2021) to enlist in the Air Force. By enlisting in the Air Force, he forged his own path but also gave a nod to his mom in the process.

Golf, a 27-year-old married white male pursuing an Electrical Engineering degree has had a family member serving in the military since the Civil War. He never doubted his path in joining the Army straight out of high school. Golf, who was driving during our interview took a deep breath and said, “I joined the military, and it was one of those things where it was something I felt like I needed to do” (Golf, 2021). Even in elementary school, he remembers that he authored a paper about the Civil Air Patrol with his intentions of pursuing a career in the Air Force. He had every intention of enlisting in the Air Force when he happened upon an Army recruiter at a local Walmart. He signed his paperwork to begin the process of enlisting and after taking the ASVAB (Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery) test and scoring quite high, he was a natural in the military environment (Golf, 2021). Golf’s face lit up over the zoom screen when talking about his siblings’ journeys so far in their military careers. Golf described his family members, “we all serve in different capacities, my sister is badass; she is one of the first females to be allowed on the Coast Guard Special Forces and my brother is just finishing up his basic training, so he is just getting started” (Golf, 2021). The pressure of having siblings, a parent and extended family in the military was evident during our interview. Now, at 27 years old Golf finds himself being completely separated from the armed services and deemed 100% disabled by the military and beginning his educational journey.

Bravo’s father also served in the military. Bravo, a 26-year-old White male married with no children. Before we officially began our interview, I asked Bravo where he was located since he indicated that it was not in the local area. We discovered he and

his wife were currently stationed at the Air Force base where I was born and he laughed and told me, “My wife was also born here” (Bravo, 2021). Bravo is pursuing a master’s degree in Hydrology and Water Ecology and went to an undergraduate institution with a large ROTC program. His father had a 20-year military career, so he grew up around the military. Bravo did not plan to go into the military when pursuing his undergraduate degree and therefore was not involved in the ROTC program. He moved from base to base and knew the rigors of what life would be like for him should he choose to the military as a career path. After Bravo completed his undergraduate degree, he “thought I’d give the military a try, it seemed exciting to move somewhere to get his career started” (Bravo, 2021) but also had no intention or was not fully committed to doing a full military career (Bravo, 2021). A path he did not initially think he would be on; the military has given him another connection to the military. During our interview, Bravo mentioned that his wife is currently on active duty in the military. Together, they are each working toward their military aspirations

Delta, unlike the other participants in this study, did not mention any family members serving in the military but did settle down in a heavy military community in the Northeast. Delta, a 39-year-old soon to be married White male pursuing an Executive MBA in Energy let this community guide him in his decision for choosing his undergraduate program. This same community guided what branch he chose to enlist in and his time served in the Navy led to his current professional position. The Navy heavy community where he lives has been a constant source of guidance and frustrations for him. His connection to the military is the military itself and all the military connected individuals in his community. Being around so many individuals from essentially the

same branch of the military for most of his life, guided him to join the military. When Delta returned from service, he described, “I owned a house that began falling apart when I was deployed, so when I was thinking of getting out the military, I knew I would come back here” (Delta, 2021). For Delta, it was not necessarily his first choice of where to pick up his life once separated from the military. With a house falling apart and the need to fix it up to one day sell it. Delta began looking for colleges in the area that would accept his military experience for college credits. He found a school that accepted close to 60 hours of credit from his military experience and had an excellent veteran services office. Delta also chose a major in which the military credit could be used as elective credit which was quite generous and helped him graduate in five semesters.

Echo did not explicitly state a family connection (as in not his immediate family) for his reasons for joining the military, however he, like Delta is also living in the same military heavy community. Echo is a 48-year-old married Black male pursuing his Executive MBA in Aerospace & Defense. His wife is currently on active duty in the military and together they are the connection for Echo and his family to the military. In this military heavy community, he pursued his undergraduate degree in the final years of his military career before retiring. Echo has a strong connection to the military and feels that his choice to enlist in the military directly out of high school as a career was the best option for him to grow as an individual. His military career also led him to his wife and their children. The military has had a hand in educating every person in Echo’s immediate family. As a twice-injured combat veteran, his education and his children are “mostly covered by Chapter 35 benefits or VA education benefits for survivors and dependents” (Echo, 2021). Echo “just wants to help the young service members figure

out their life path after the military” and mentioned that he and his wife are moving to the area where Public University is located once, he finishes his degree.

Families are important to veterans. Throughout each interview with these participants, I could hear and feel the influence that family members had on these veterans and their decisions. These decisions that veteran students are making can influence which branch they choose to enlist into or which school to enroll in once they transition out of the military. The veteran’s family is what keeps them grounded when they are deployed and keeps their connection to the civilian side of the world.

Non-military members of a family also experience a transition when a loved one is deployed or returns from service or enrolling into higher education. According to Riggs (2011), families that experience “longer separations will be associated with greater detachment and longer periods of readjustment after reunion” (p. 683). Through these transitions, families can experience periods of “detachment to reattachment, contradictory emotions and behaviors shifting from anger and bitterness to fretfulness and excessive clinginess may be observed” (Riggs, 2011, p. 683). While the participants in this study did not delve into feelings of detachment from their family members, they did describe their fondness for how their family helped them. Their family members help them emotionally, financially, and were role models to whom they could seek comfort in times of need when deployed or when discussing issues about their collegiate courses. Veteran students who have a robust family system to rely on can weather the transition with their support.

It is with their family support that the veteran student can be influenced during the transition and recruitment experiences to higher education. With their family support they

can pursue these educational journeys. Chickering & Schlossberg (2002) clarified that the transition is an event that creates disruption of roles, the routine for the individual and the family, and the relationships for the individual who is experiencing the transition. In the 4S System posed by Anderson, Goodman, & Schlossberg (2012) the family support network is an important aspect to the transition process due to the way in which these groups support these veteran students. With their support network, the veteran student can attempt to anticipate the needs and adjustments needed for their transition into the civilian world and into higher education.

For those veteran students who do not have family support in close physical proximity, they are then relying on the institution where they enroll to offer the support needed to assist them in their transition. Alpha, who is in the process of getting a divorce and moved to the area for his spouse's family, has no local family support, so he is relying on Public University to assist him in his transition to higher education. He mentioned that he feels fully supported by his immediate family but is not able to physically see them often due to financial constraints. Only time will tell how much of an influence Public University will have on his transition since his family support is in another state.

Staff - Family Ties to Armed Services

Four of the five staff members also had personal connections to the military. Romeo and Zulu previously served in the military while Sierra and Tango have a spouse currently serving in the military. Lima did not mention specifically anyone in their immediate family serving but has worked with veterans for the last twelve years. It is not a requirement to have military experience to work with veterans, but it certainly does

give another facet to connect to the veteran to have that experience when working with veteran students.

Romeo served 20 years in the Air Force and then retired with the intention of moving to the state where Public University is located. After retiring and moving, Romeo had a child use their educational benefits as a military dependent at a comparable size institution as Public University. Romeo described leaving the Veteran Services office at this other institution, as “feeling utterly confused with more questions about the benefits process” (Romeo, 2021). Romeo and Romeo’s child still did not know if the paperwork they had turned in was approved or if more was needed. Romeo only had a few days to help Romeo’s child get moved into the dorms but only one appointment with the Veteran Services office. Through this experience of trying to get their child enrolled using GI Bill benefits, Romeo left as a parent frustrated at the process. It was these frustrations that led Romeo eventually to work with veteran students at Public University when a position opened three years ago. Romeo wanted to make sure that other parents and future veteran students knew the steps to using their benefits. Romeo’s description of the experiences as a parent going through the benefits process is “comforting to the parents and students because they know I have experienced both sides of the VA processing machine” (Romeo, 2021).

Zulu served in the Navy but did not specify on the length of time that had elapsed from leaving the military to deciding to try community college with the help of the GI Bill educational benefits. It was in the pauses and breaks in our interview that Zulu thought long and hard about how Zulu’s military career had ended. In this pause Zulu thought college would take a similar path as Zulu’s military career. After starting and

stopping college classes for close to 12 years, Zulu finally finished with an associate degree from a local community college. One of the reasons for the starting and stopping was that Zulu thought choosing a similar path to what Zulu did in the military was the most logical but in the end was not the passionate choice Zulu was seeking. Zulu completely exhausted all educational benefits due to having no direction and no one pushing Zulu to use their benefits in a timely manner. Without the financial backing of the GI Bill educational benefits, Zulu chose Public University to complete an undergrad degree. This choice was largely in part because Public University was the local four-year institution but also accepted all of Zulu's two-year institution coursework. This meant that Zulu would have two years or less of coursework needed to finish an undergraduate degree depending on how many hours Zulu enrolled in each semester.

Zulu experienced all that Public University had to offer their military connected students, even though Zulu's military education benefits had been exhausted. With the experiences that Zulu had finishing up with undergraduate degree, Zulu made the decision to seek employment at Public University after graduation. After graduation, it was not an immediate hire for Zulu but with persistence and knowing that helping fellow veteran students was the path that Zulu wanted to pursue, Zulu was not deterred. Since being hired at Public University, Zulu has worked in three distinct positions within Public University directly associated with veteran students. Zulu understands their needs from day one through to graduation and has no intention of doing anything but assisting veteran students.

While Sierra and Tango have not personally served in the military, they both have spouses who are currently serving. Tango has another aspect in which Tango can relate to

the veteran students. Being a military dependent, Tango has used a parent's Post 9/11 GI Bill benefits to acquire a degree. Tango has been a part of both sides of how the educational benefits are used. Tango has been a dependent using a parent's benefits and now, is a staff member assisting veteran student using their own benefits. Having been through the process as a dependent, Tango has a unique experience in how Tango can relate to each veteran student. Tango described that when talking with veteran students about their benefits and how Tango was able to navigate the perils of meeting all the VA requirements, "it tends put the veteran student at ease because I have been through it, got through it and graduated while using my benefits" (Tango, 2021).

Sierra is married to someone in the armed services. Sierra's spouse is currently considering separating from service. Sierra knows that getting a veteran to understand their benefits is part of the process. Sierra is trying to get their spouse to apply and be accepted into a program is happening at home as well. Previously, Sierra has worked at two other institutions where Sierra was responsible for all aspects of getting the veteran student certified and enrolled in their programs of study. When Sierra began working at Public University, Sierra was glad to focus solely on one aspect of the certification process. It allows Sierra to get to know the students and help them through the process.

Any experience where a staff member can relate to their target audience is helpful but not a requirement when working with veteran students. Sometimes the outside view is necessary but the draw to work with veteran students tends to be because there is a connection between them and a veteran in their life. These five staff members made it quite clear that they are all in to assist the veteran students at Public University. When listening to them speak each staff member would ask for the biggest budget to give the

veteran students anything and everything to assist them and grow their presence on Public University's campus.

The Identity & Transition of the Veteran

There are over 28,000 students enrolled (Division, 2020) at Public University and of those 28,000, there are a little over 2,500 who are "military connected students" (Lima, personal communication, October 1, 2021). Roughly, 8.9% of the student population at Public University includes veterans, active-duty members, military spouses/dependents, and anyone who self identifies as military connected. Throughout each interview, it became apparent that each participant has their own relationship with their veteran status. For those that have been in the armed forces for more than a decade, they descriptions of their veteran status have more of a connection than those who have served less than ten years. While most of the participants do not shy away from revealing their veteran status, most do not bring it up in a casual setting. They are letting the topic come up organically, sometimes in the class introductions or when a topic of being overseas is brought up, they chose to share that they have travelled the world through their service and deployments.

A Sense of Belonging

Foxtrot feels a big disconnect with his fellow classmates as they describe their 9-5 civilian jobs, and he is still working toward his military career. He seemed annoyed at listening to his classmate's "mundane stories that he has no reference or relationship to" (Foxtrot, 2021). By only serving in the military after his undergraduate degree, he does not identify with the civilian plight of everyday nuances. He feels like he and his non-veteran classmates do not have a lot in common. Foxtrot also described that he has "made no effort to get to know his fellow classmates other than the class introductions" (Foxtrot,

2021) because he is in all-online courses, he does not feel the need to make the extra effort to get to know them as he will probably never meet them in person. This sentiment is echoed in Grimes' et al. (2011) study, as "study participants were largely uninterested in establishing a sense of belonging among their younger peers" (p.67). Finding a sense of belonging can be hard enough for a veteran student but in the middle of a global pandemic, Foxtrot felt defeated before he even started.

Golf, like Foxtrot, has a complicated relationship with his veteran status. He feels that many veterans that he meets use their veteran status as their only identity or use it as a crutch. Reminiscing about his time in the military, he does not feel like the veteran identity fits him now that he has left the service. When he was serving, "as a soldier, I didn't have rights" and he does not want to "carry the weight on your back for the rest of your life" (Golf, 2021) for being grouped into the veteran category.

Bravo is a bit more fluid with his veteran status at Public University. So far, he has made connections with other veterans in his cohort and feels comfortable with his status with only these other veterans, as he is able to share his military experience. Bravo did not mention expressing any stories of sharing his military experiences with non-veterans and only because he felt like they would not understand the pressures associated with serving in the military.

Delta was bit more jaded when his veteran status came up in the interview. He looked physically disgusted about the topic when it came up in conversation. On many occasions when people come up to him and tell him, "Thank you for your service" he feels uncomfortable, and he admitted that he gets "dismissive toward these people" (Delta, 2021) because of his un-comfortability in those individuals he feels like they have

no idea what his service entailed. When he was beginning his undergraduate degree at a previous institution, he detailed that it was tough being in class with fresh faced 18-year-olds who had no experience in the real world, it gave him many feelings of “not belonging on a college campus” (Delta, 2021). Grimes et al. (2011) study suggests that veteran status is an invisible identity that veteran students are carrying around with them on campus. Delta did not have a great relationship with this aspect of his identity but also felt that his time at Public University is different than his undergrad experience since he is in an all-online program and only interacts through zoom and online discussions (Delta, 2021). He did not have a good relationship with his veteran identity and truly did not want to discuss it further with me.

As the veteran student transitions to campus, the feeling of belonging is something that they are seeking whether they know it or not. This is due to having the sense of belonging that they had during their time in the military. According to Johnson & Appel (2020) veteran students are “more diverse and more likely to complete their degrees than their non-military connected classmates, military-connected students are somewhat less engaged with their institutions” (p. 33). As the veteran student is making the transition to higher education, they are adjusting to their new roles.

Hammond (2015) described that the veteran student as having taken on “the role of veteran, civilian, student, brother, sister, spouse, and/or parent, etc.” (p. 147). It is in this transition that they are relying the most on their support system to help them as they navigate their new normal. Each day through their transition is a step in their new normal as they get used to this new life on campus and their other responsibilities away from the military. For the participants in this study, it is separating themselves further from their

military life while others still hold that time in high regard. Each participant has their own relationship in how they feel their experience went with the military and for some their experiences will continue to go on. Using their military benefits keeps this connection alive until they graduate and then for most of them, they will be completely separated from their military lives.

Being a veteran will always be a part of their lives, it will take more time for some to adjust to their student life and even more time to adjust to civilian life. With this group of participants, it was split on how they viewed their veteran status. Family support and time have an influence on how they view their status and how they will relate to their fellow classmates at Public University.

Veteran Status Among Staff Members

Staff members that I interviewed described their connection to the military. Of the five staff members, two were former military members. Being a staff member who works with veteran students does not require veteran experience, but the relationship is worth noting. Both Romeo and Zulu use their military careers as a topic to bring up with the veteran students they work with each day. Having a military background assists them when working with veteran students, as they can pull from their time in the military to relate to veteran students.

As Zulu meets with veteran students who are having trouble picking a major or which classes to choose, Zulu can pull from previous experiences to relate with the veteran students. Zulu was once the lost, recently separated military member trying to figure out their next step. Zulu can describe the experience of trying many majors and

how it took running out of benefits before Zulu was able to find a major that was worth pursuing and finishing.

Romeo was a confused parent. Romeo's young adult began college and felt perplexed at the process for dependents and without Romeo being in the office did not feel like everything was explained enough to know the next steps. Romeo's interactions with another school's staff left Romeo puzzled and Romeo had the mindset that those who come through the doors at Public University would have a distinct experience. Veteran students at Public University will know how and where their benefits will be used because Romeo feels the need to not have any confused veterans or parents leave their office. This experience at another university propelled him into a new profession so that he could relate his veteran status and direct veteran students through their benefits.

The staff employed at Public University is a passionate group of individuals who do the detailed work day-in and day-out to do what they can with the resources that they are given. It is with these resources that they can assist them with their benefits. There is always hope for more growth and more resources than with any department on campus. With hopes of recruiting and increasing enrollment of veteran students would certainly be in line with potentially adding more staff to assist the ever-growing population.

Veteran & Staff Transitions

As all the participants were looking at their next steps for when they separated from the military, they are tasked with attending a TAP (Transition Assistance Program) class to help guide their decisions. Each branch of the military has their own program, and each base has their own group of individuals to disseminate the information.

According to the U.S. Department of Labor, “The Transition Assistance Program (TAP) provides information, tools, and training to ensure service members, and their spouses, are prepared for the next step in civilian life” (Transition Assistance, 2019). This “one-day preparation workshop is mandatory for all transitioning service members” (Transition Assistance, 2019) and upon further investigation, it has been transitioning to a more comprehensive model. In reviewing the overview of the program, the process should occur in five parts over a minimum 12-month timeline (Military.com, 2020) and should include: 1. Initial Counseling, 2. A Pre-Separation briefing, 3. Department of Defense Transition Day, VA briefing & Department of Labor help, 4. Specialized transition assistance program career tracks and 5. TAP Capstone. In the final stage, when a military member is almost done, they must verify that they have “gone through the TAP courses and briefing days, a final TAP capstone will certify that you have checked all of your transition boxes and met the Pentagon's list of career readiness standards (CRS)” (Military.com, 2020). In this simple statement, they are acknowledging that they want a departing military member to check the box so that they can separate.

Veteran Transition

Echo was retiring and he felt the TAP class “was lacking” (Echo, 2021) as he sat in the room with soldiers of all ages. He noticed that many of the younger soldiers in the room were not really paying attention and really wanted the class to be over with so they could check the box off. He feels that the entire program should be “revamped and fixed” (Echo, 2021) since as he described, “a bunch of surveys” are not really getting into what or where these soldiers will end up once they are out of the military. Echo felt that the

TAP class should “be based on length of service and cater to each group in a certain way” (Echo, 2021) because for him after 25 years of service and enrolling in higher education with benefits “looks a lot different than a kid who has served only a few years” (Echo, 2021). Everyone is getting these benefits, but Echo does not feel like the military is really telling them how to use their benefits effectively which tends to “trip up a lot of these soldiers because they start but do not finish, or run out of benefits, and end up with nothing” (Echo, 2021) and is that how these benefits were set up? His voice was frustrated, and he was out of breath as he discussed his experience and the experiences of those who have been through the TAP classes. What Echo was looking for in these TAP classes was a sense of how he would take the lessons learned to his campus of choice. How would these lessons assist him in his transition? Echo’s experience was not singular, he knew he was not the only one having concerns about how TAP was disseminated to exiting service members.

Foxtrot is taking a temporary break from his service and has a love/hate relationship with the TAP class. He described that the TAP class that he attended was “civilian led unlike his SFL (Soldier for Life) classes that are taught by current military members” (Foxtrot, 2021) that he had to attend each time he switched military bases. There is a distinct difference between those who have served and those who have not for which many military members felt that those with no military background did not necessarily hear their concerns. Foxtrot’s transition is a bit different as he is able to still connect with his peers in the military and has made a military connection with being a member of the ROTC as requirement of his Green to Gold scholarship. The TAP class for

Foxtrot was a necessity; his plans are very set in his mind of what he needs to do get back into the military.

Alpha explained that the TAP class should be attended one year before leaving the military, but he went to his class only 6 months prior to leaving because “it is just not as stressed as it needs to be” (Alpha, 2021). He did state, “that he could see how many fellow military members would not pay attention” (Alpha, 2021) but that he tried to listen to the GI Bill portion since he would be using his educational benefits soon after his service contract had ended. Alpha felt like TAP “gave him a fair amount of what he needed to know” (Alpha, 2021) and got him started on his transition but that his transition to Public University was completely unrelated to his desired academic pursuits. His significant other’s family led him to this area and he explained, “the cost of living and having family nearby would be best” (Alpha, 2021) but as we discussed him being enrolled at Public University, him and his significant other were close to settling their divorce. His transition was still new to the area and now his connection to this place was severed. Alpha’s transition was not in a good place but he was optimistic about his academic opportunities at Public University and was anxious to get back into the classroom once COVID restrictions could be lifted.

Golf felt like his TAP class was lacking and “when you leave the military, you are nothing” (Golf, 2021) so he did not feel supported as he made his journey out of the military. He feels that “people are dragging their feet when it comes to helping those leaving the military” (Golf, 2021). Knowing that he “needs to face some demons” (Golf, 2021) from his time in the military, he feels like his needs are not being met. Golf did not divulge further about his demons but grew uncomfortable as he discussed his needs. He

quickly moved on to the next subject, visibly shaken that he had revealed he had demons. He knows his needs are not being met as well as the needs of those he once served with and Golf detailed that, “those who have the power to help him simply are not doing so” (Golf, 2021) as he sighed and became quiet. Golf labeled himself as the military does as “100% disabled and no longer eligible to serve” (Golf, 2021) with disgust in his voice as he further explained, “I’m still capable but you know, my quality of life has decreased significantly” (Golf, 2021). Golf did not feel like his TAP class addressed his specific needs as he transitioned out of the military. The class is for all veterans leaving for higher education, but it does not get more specific to include those who are deemed 100% disabled transitioning to higher education and the guidelines needed for navigating both higher education and how to understand their new role as a disabled veteran.

Delta remembers that he skipped the TAP class altogether because he thought it was a “waste of time” (Delta, 2021) and no one ever questioned that he completed the TAP class. It was another box to check on his checklist of things he had to do to leave service. If the boxes were checked, no one above him authority wise would question whether he completed the class. With Delta’s resentment towards his veteran status, his transition could be a bit tougher but because he is in an all-online program and in his own environment. He seems to be fairing quite well but his transition could be harder had he been in-class and

All participants really seemed annoyed at the mention of the TAP class, most went because they were obligated but definite improvements could or should be made. When reflecting on the transition, I surmised that it is a time of confusion, excitement, growth, and grief for these participants. For those who had the choice to separate it is a

distinct experience than those who are told they are no longer required to serve due to medical or staffing reasons. It is a new reality that some are not yet ready for in those first few months leaving, the services offered in TAP are accessible but getting the veterans to use these services is another battle.

These services are set in place to influence and guide the veteran into making smart choices as they leave the military. Each class as they make their transition is designed to assist them with their decisions in their next steps. In these situations, they are making efforts to plan for their futures. For the participants, they each planned to use their benefits upon separating from the military.

Each in their own situations decided what path to take and how they should be using their benefits to make these next steps. The TAP class is a tool to be used to guide them through this process and from the participant's descriptions, I feel like each participant got what they put into each session. So, for those who blew off the class or completely skipped it altogether, they choose to ignore a viable option of assistance. Was their judgment clouded by previous military members who had already gone through the TAP class or lack of knowledge of what the TAP could potentially provide for them? That is a question that I still have for the participants, but I do know that those who took the class seriously and took notes or left with questions are the individuals who are referencing these notes or contacts to this day that still guide them and can assist others who are starting their own journey to higher education.

Staff Transition

The staff participants felt like the transition class is not handled in the best feasible way, as many service members are unsure of how to handle their next steps once

they leave. Sierra, who has worked on multiple campuses, described the TAP process as “these guys are being volun-told to go to the TAP class or the education fairs” (Sierra, 2021) and Sierra seemed frustrated at how this is presented to the departing military member. Sierra wants the veteran student to choose to attend these classes because it is their transition to civilian life and the veteran student must have a handle on this aspect of their new life. Sierra believed a full year of transition outside of the military space should take place for a veteran to fully transition out of the military once separated but was not sure logistically how this would even be done. Sierra is more of a “big brother in a sense rather than an authoritarian but that there is always a checklist involved in everything that they do” (Sierra, 2021). It is a complete mental shift that Sierra sees many have a difficult time adjusting to and hopes that they “take some time to reflect and soul search to figure out where they are spiritually and possibly meditating” (Sierra, 2021) as they make the transition.

Romeo commented that many who walk through their office doors “simply lack an understanding of the educational benefits process and how they will get paid through each semester” (Romeo, 2021). Romeo feels like a cultural shift must happen throughout the entire military for everyone to have an easier transition into civilian life (Romeo, 2021). Working with veteran students the last couple of years, Romeo feels Public University could simplify the cost of their education. This would allow each student, not just veteran students, to plan for the miscellaneous costs of their education. Each semester is entirely different in terms of cost due to tuition and fees and being able to give a simple answer would help the veteran students as they arrive on campus. Romeo believes that some cultural changes will need to be made within the military system to

update the exit process from the military. An entire cultural shift would be needed for those exiting to address internal and external factors for their reasons for choosing their path upon leaving the military.

Tango discussed “catering to a lot of our veteran students who may have PTSD issues when getting out” (Tango, 2021) because it is simply not happening campus wide. Tango went on to discuss that “there is more that can be done because (Tango) doesn’t know if people expect them [veterans] to ask for the help” (Tango, 2021) because of the stigma for those in the military to keep their feelings to themselves. Tango believes that a true Veteran Center on campus would be beneficial for the veteran students at Public University to congregate and form stronger bonds with other fellow veteran students. Tango has witnessed firsthand the effects of PTSD. As Tango’s father came back to the civilian world, Tango described that “it’s not easy for them and people need to recognize that it starts with people understanding” (Tango, 2021).

Lima has been to many meetings and has been through recent changes in leadership at Public University. Through all of this, Lima has attempted to keep veteran students at the forefront of the conversation. Lima would like to see more support in terms of providing a veteran’s center on campus that is centrally located to entice the veteran student population to be on campus more (Lima, 2021). The Student Veteran’s Association at Public University was given a space several years ago in a previous fraternity house that has since been closed due to flooding and health and safety concerns. Lima felt that the space was a box to check for the administration at Public University, it was not in a convenient location nor was it easily accessible for our veteran students and overall felt like an afterthought. As the veteran population has grown in the

time that Lima has worked at Public University, recruitment has been a recent push as many veteran students are choosing Public University due to location or family ties to the region.

Zulu called the TAP class a “mind game” (Zulu, 2021) as Zulu has been through the program and is now serving those who have recently been through the program. Zulu primarily works with veteran students who take their classes online at Public University, but they are still going through many of the same challenges online as those who are in person. Zulu knows the process as a student and as an employee so Zulu has the intimate knowledge of both sides. Zulu has worked to make changes that seemed necessary to enhance the veteran student experience and to assist the veteran student in achieving their goal of graduating with their undergraduate degree from Public University.

The transition for the participants is not just a program that they will attend but also an extended period in which they will come to grips with their new situation. Each staff member encounters the participants in various stages of their transitions. By the time the staff is meeting with the veteran student, they are discussing their benefits, what classes to enroll in and the next steps needed for certification from the university and the VA. Depending on the length of time from separating the military to enrolling at Public University will help each staff member in the way that approach the veteran student and guide them through their enrollment to graduation.

Alternative Decisions

When it came to learning about their benefits, many of the participants described their basic training experience. It was toward the end of their basic training that they were asked about their educational benefits. Is this the most appropriate time to ask someone?

For someone who has gone through several weeks of intense physical and mental training to decide about which benefits to sign up for when they do not know when they will use these benefits.

Bravo shared that he had completed six weeks of basic training and was physically and mentally exhausted. He walked into the benefits sessions and just felt tired and mentally spent, so he “checked the box” (Bravo, 2021) and left the one-hour session. Without fully understanding what he had just signed up for while exhausted from basic training, he is just now, understanding what he signed up for now. Bravo is using his benefits now and back then he did not fully comprehend the extent to what the Post 9/11 GI Bill could offer him in terms of educational benefits. Golf said after hearing about his benefits in basic training, he did not “feel like the information on his benefits was readily available” to him at all.

Delta vaguely remembers that there was a “small lecture at the conclusion of his boot camp” (Delta, 2021). Delta did a lot of research and found his current MBA program on his own, no recruitment for him to attend Public University. With him trying law school while his current company reimbursed him, he was able to try out a lifelong dream of getting his law degree. After one semester, he realized that this law degree was “going to take up more time and potential job opportunities were not looking promising” (Delta, 2021) to him anymore. With law school a forgotten dream, Delta started researching programs that would fit into the remaining months of benefits that he had left. Once he finally began his classes at Public University, he submitted his required paperwork for the VA at the beginning of the semester. It was well over seven weeks until his first payment arrived and if he had not worked full-time, he would not

have had enough funds to pay his bills. As he thought back to his undergraduate days, he said, “I would have had inadequate funds to survive on” (Delta, 2021) and does not personally know many veteran students who are not also working to supplement their incomes while getting their degrees. He finished this sentiment with “the VA is a pain” (Delta, 2021) and knows that it will always be an endless cycle of bureaucracy. Delta seemed resigned to the fact that he will always have to wait on the paperwork, “that is just how the government works” (Delta, 2021) and shrugged off the comment.

Foxtrot is using both the Green to Gold scholarship funds as well as his Post 9/11 benefits plus a job and stated, that “whenever the government gets around to paying you the money is when they get around to it” (Foxtrot, 2021) with a bit of annoyance in his voice. He understands that there will be issues because it is the government, he mentioned one slight hiccup, as he had to take course for his Green to Gold Scholarship and being a member of the ROTC but it was not degree applicable, so this course was not covered by his Post 9/11 benefits. If he did not have three separate streams of income, he would be stuck financially.

Bravo is still serving and thought that he could figure out his benefits on his own. He is not using his full Post 9/11 benefits, as he has not served three full years yet, so he is only partially covered in educational benefits. Through all his researching, he got “pretty confused throughout the process” which ended up with him having to pay for a class that he was not aware would not be covered by his benefits. He felt that with his all-online program, it was a little more challenging for him to navigate the ins and outs of his benefits.

Golf revealed that he was deemed, “100% disabled” (Golf, 2021) upon his release from the military so he is purely going to school while using his Post 9/11 benefits plus his disability benefits which is covering his cost of living and schooling needs. He calls this a “blessing so that he can focus solely on his studies” (Golf, 2021) but did mention that most of his classes moved online due to the pandemic, which is not his best learning environment and feels robbed of the true college experience. He is hoping that campus opens back up and he can get a true college experience learning in the classroom.

Alpha had a plan prior to starting his educational benefits. He saved up as much as he could and knew that he would have to use this money if not everything were covered once he began his coursework. Like Foxtrot, he had a course that needed to be evaluated by the VA before they would grant payment. After 15 weeks into a 16-week semester, his course payment was finally granted but he was quite stressed as he awaited the funds. Alpha also did not choose to drop any courses out of fear that he would mess up his benefits for the semester. He went on to state that, “if it doesn’t check off a box, you cannot take that class and have the government pay for it” (Alpha, 2021). Visibly, his frustration appeared across his face as he rolled his eyes and laughed off his comment about checking a box. I could feel his years of service bubbling up to the surface because he had obviously spent many hours of his life ensuring that all his boxes were checked.

Each participant was physically and mentally exhausted after weeks of intense boot camp. At the completion of basic training, they are given choices. A choice of how long to sign on for service and for those in this study which educational benefits to sign up for at the conclusion of their service. This choice is sometimes not thought of again

for years and sometimes decades. The situation in which they are put in when making this decision is clear that they are to deal with this once they have completed their time in the military.

It is not until the veteran is made aware of their benefits that they begin to cope with their choices made many years prior. Their choice of how to use their benefits and where they choose to use their benefits begins to resonate for the veteran. The strategies that are used depend on where and when these benefits begin for the veteran. These strategies depend on the willingness of the veteran and the training of the staff at the intended university.

Reflections and Advice

As each interview ended, the participants became reflective of their time in the armed forces. For all the participants, they have left the military with many lessons learned. Their time in the military has given them each a different outlook as they begin collegiate experience. It is through these life experiences that they can bring an outside and a much-needed perspective to the classroom. For these participants, they have all come to Public University for distinct reasons and hope to leave with a degree and a new direction.

Foxtrot described his first experience through his undergraduate degree; he admits how he “coasted and didn’t take it seriously” (Foxtrot, 2021) and that he barely passed enough hours to get his degree. Now, with service under his belt while pursuing his master’s degree, he conveyed that he “feels more responsible this time around and is able to handle a lot more” (Foxtrot, 2021) while he goes to school this time around. He reminisced about his basic training experience and being a fresh college graduate. It made

him feel like the adult of the group at 22 years old looking at these 18-year-old kids with no life experience and was glad that he got his undergraduate degree prior to enlisting. He had a bit of time to find himself before going into service. Even now, it felt absurd to him thinking back that he was the experienced young man among the other kids attending basic training.

Golf would not change the experience that he has had in the military. The greatest lesson that he has learned from the military was that the structure of his days is what gives him energy. He was incredibly open about his time in the military, and it was very evident in his voice that he still has issues with how he left. The anger came through his voice, and I could hear him taking deep breaths as he calmed himself down. He does not regret his time in the military, but he does know that his time has ended, and he is using this time to pursue his new educational pursuits while supporting his wife as she goes to school as well. Golf did not offer any advice, but he is still processing his time in the military to be able to give advice currently.

Alpha said that he learned to “accept responsibility” (Alpha, 2021) while in the military and has carried this over to his job and current degree program. It was astounding to him the number of students who choose not to show up to class, “that was obviously something that I could not have done in in the military” (Alpha, 2021) in terms of not showing up. He went on to describe that one of the biggest benefits is that he will “always show up and be on time” (Alpha, 2021) because he assumes that it has been “ingrained into him from his time in the military” (Alpha, 2021). He even described his experience of pledging a fraternity at Public University. Through this occurrence, the more senior members of the fraternity would ask the pledges how many classes they had

missed each week and after a couple of weeks, Alpha was the only pledge who had not missed a single class. He quickly realized that the Fraternity experience was not what he thought it would be and decided to end his rushing experience. In the end, it seemed as though he was seeking another brotherhood to take part in but realized he was older than all the pledges plus all members of the house and felt like it was not the right fit for him. He feels a bit isolated now, not being able to meet for in-person classes but is finding some connections with some of his classmates.

Bravo learned that he could handle the stress of going to school due to his experiences in the military. When he has an approaching deadline for class, it is nothing compared to the pressures of his training, so it does not “faze him” (Bravo, 2021) at all. He later discussed how each base is different in how they give their information so he would tell other veterans, to “use the education office and have them give you advice on your educational benefits” (Bravo, 2021).

As Alpha reflected, he knows his time in the military was not a long journey, but it did make an impact. Alpha said, “you need to show up and not be afraid to ask questions” (Alpha, 2021) and to take “personal ownership of your education” (Alpha, 2021). Alpha was one of the younger participants and felt like his journey had been a bit hindered due to the pandemic but was looking forward to the upcoming semester and being more on campus and experiencing the on-campus hustle and bustle of student life. For Alpha, his journey from the military to higher education taught him that he needs to rely on himself and that is what he is doing with his education. With his recent change in marital status that brought him to the area, he is financially not able to move again and

chose Public University to complete his undergraduate degree with hopes of moving elsewhere in four to five years.

With his journey being a bit different, Foxtrot's scholarship allows him to step away from the structure of military life in some ways, but he is anxious to get back to the military way of life. Foxtrot's only advice for those coming to start their education is "don't doubt yourself" (Foxtrot, 2021) after he really started doubting whether he could pursue his master's degree. Foxtrot's goals are very military focused, as he wants to use the Army to Green Scholarship to promote within the military with hopes of surpassing his father's rank someday.

When Echo reflected on his time in the military, he really felt like many begin the process but do not finish. His advice was to "find a program that works with you and not against you" and to "have goals and finish" (Echo, 2021). This seems like sound advice that many would follow but Echo in his 20 plus year career has seen many former military members try and fail at using their educational benefits with no degree. He feels like more can be done to assist younger veterans along the way as he has noticed the younger members tend to start college classes but do not finish with a degree thus wasting their benefits.

Delta on the other hand is very much a realist when it comes to giving advice. He mentioned that he "always knew that the wheels of the mechanism that is an organization, they always move slowly" (Delta, 2021). Delta highlighted that a veteran coming into higher education now, should "know the administrative side of your benefits, do your due diligence because the VA needs everything before they will make a

payment” (Delta, 2021). As I listened to each participant, what I took away was that more communication is necessary from start to finish through the entire process.

The staff also had ideas or advice that would help them better serve the veteran student while at Public University. Tango hopes that “the VA saw what happened with the Army Ignited system and learn from their mistakes as their new system is soon to roll out” (Tango, 2021). Tango wants to be a person that the veteran students can go to for help because Tango grew up as an “Army Brat” and has been around those in the military their whole life. Tango does not want to hold the veteran student’s hands but will until all veteran students are comfortable with their transition and class schedules. Lima is still pushing for more support from the top down regarding the administration and Romeo feels that more support staff directed toward veteran students is necessary to give the veteran student an overall better student experience.

The military taught these participants many life lessons. It is with these life lessons they have taken with them and into this next phase of life. Each participant is using these lessons to guide them on their educational journey. Part of the reflective discussions led to each participant describing how they would tell other veterans how to use their Post 9/11 benefits. They all had differing experiences in terms of what they would tell other veteran students who are deciding to use their Post 9/11 benefits.

Benefits Earned

When designing the study, I assumed that the veteran students using their Post 9/11 benefits would have concluded their military duties. Veteran implies that an individual is no longer serving in the military. When I collected the demographic surveys, I noticed that two of the participants listed are still currently active-duty military

members. Benefits can be used while military members are still active in the reserves, or still active but minimum service requirements must be met in order use Post 9/11 GI Bill benefits. Using benefits while still active duty will cover the educational costs, but the housing allowance will not be dispersed since the active-duty military member is already receiving a housing allowance. The rest of the participants have left the military all together. They left by choosing not to renew their contracts, by medical discharge, or through retirement. All have chosen to use their Post 9/11 educational benefits to further their education.

Educational Benefits

Once Echo knew that his retirement was imminent, he reached out to the education office on his base. While still active duty, he began his journey to obtaining his undergraduate degree through his Tuition Assistance provided through the Marines. Each branch of the military has their own version of Tuition Assistance (TA) that is available for active-duty members and some branches offer TA to their reserve members but not all. Echo finished his undergraduate degree as he was retiring from the military, so he had not used any of his Post 9/11 GI Bill benefits. After a few years in the private sector, Echo decided to use his Post 9/11 benefits before they were set to expire. He has since moved on to his graduate degree, which he is currently on track to finish in the Fall 2021 semester. Echo mentioned that he “will use all his benefits” (Echo, 2021) and therefore will not be able to pass them along to his children but that his “wife will be able to pass her Post 9/11 benefits along to their children” (Echo, 2021) should his children want to pursue higher degrees than they are already working on.

Alpha has made the decision to not re-sign his next contract after 6 years of service. When one initially enlists in the armed services, they are contracted for a certain length of time. Alpha did not specify that he signed a specific number of years contract but the admission of still serving in the reserves led me to deduce that he still has time on his contract that he must fulfill. Since he did not sign a new contract, it became his next plan to pursue a Mechanical Engineering degree at Public University using his educational benefits.

Foxtrot is in between service. He applied and received the Army's "Green to Gold" scholarship while on active duty. The scholarship is a "two-year program that provides eligible, Active Duty enlisted Soldiers an opportunity to complete a baccalaureate degree or a two-year graduate degree and earn a commission as an Army Officer" (Army Green, 2017). During the application process, he was told of the parameters of participation in this scholarship. Part of his program is to voluntarily take an honorable discharge while he attends school. While he is in between service, he can use his Post 9/11 benefits since he is technically not serving and when he re-enlists, he can stop using his Post 9/11 benefits and save them for his spouse or children. His situation is a bit different, as he will rejoin the military once he graduates with his master's degree. This move to pursue this scholarship is purely to advance his military career so that he can be promoted later down the line. He made an off-hand comment, "the military basically owns my ass for the next 10 years" (Foxtrot, 2021) and chuckled.

Foxtrot knows that this is his opportunity. He initially applied for a program that his father completed during his illustrious military career. Foxtrot's application to this other scholarship program within the military was considered a "permanent no" (Foxtrot,

2021) due to a medical issue that was discovered during his medical exam required for this scholarship. This medical exam was more extensive than the standard physical exam given to incoming boot camp recruits. While he did not elaborate as to what eliminated him from contention for this scholarship, he did seem annoyed and rolled his eyes that he could not apply ever again. The medical issue is not keeping him from serving in his current capacity and will not keep him from this alternative path that he has chosen. It was always Foxtrot's goal to follow in his father's footsteps but with the permanent medical "no" for the program his father completed, Foxtrot was led to the Green to Gold scholarship which he seems happy with so far.

Delta served 10 years in the military and has already completed an undergraduate degree. He took a one-semester pursuing a law degree paid for by his current employer. Delta always wanted to go law school. But shortly starting the program, he had second thoughts. Completing the law degree through the employee program at his current position would have tied him to his company for many years to come. During his first semester of the program, he realized that if he stayed in law school, he would also have to stay in his current job. Delta's distaste for the area in which he was living also shaped his fears of being tied to this job. So, after one semester he left law school.

Despite this initial educational setback, Delta persisted in advancing his education. Delta is a student at Public University pursuing his master's degree. Through his own research and with the brand name of Public University, Delta decided to apply for an all-online master's degree program at Public University. He applied, was accepted, and enrolled at Public University. With his Executive MBA program, all courses are predetermined each semester which makes using his Post 9/11 GI Bill benefits a breeze.

Delta described his enrollment experience as “the easiest process, I can get an email telling me I am enrolled and then a few days later my books show up” (Delta, 2021). It has been a “seamless experience once I got everything set up with my benefits and connecting with the right people within my EMBA program” but Delta knows that his experience is not always the standard case. He understands how many veterans can “end up without their housing allowance if they have any setbacks with their VA certification paperwork” (Delta, 2021) because he mentioned one month where his housing payment had been delayed but thankfully, he was working full time and had the funds to cover the monthly expenses. Living in a high concentration of active and inactive military members has made an impression on Delta. Once he completes his degree at Public University, his goal is to move far away from his current residence. Delta sighed and said, “I’ve served my time and would like to live a normal existence away from the military mindset of everyone I work and live with, in this community” (Delta, 2021). The military mindset that Delta described was “those who have retired or left the military but still act like they are serving in their military unit and treat those around them as if they are in the unit” (Delta, 2021) and that is not how he wants to live anymore. The degree from Public University will make him more marketable to find employment out of the military heavy community that he returned to when his service contract ended. He is ready to move on from this phase of his life and ready to begin this new phase with his soon to be wife and new degree in hand.

All the participants have come to Public University in a variety of diverse ways. The Post 9/11 GI Bill has helped each one of them find their next step in their lives. For Alpha and Golf, this is the beginning of an entirely new career path. Only time will tell if

they complete their undergraduate degrees in the time allotted from their benefits. Both Alpha and Golf have very prescribed degree plans and if they are not able to enroll in a certain course due to a failed grade requirement or prerequisite, it will delay them a semester or two. The Edith Nourse Rogers STEM scholarship was created to extend the Post 9/11 GI Bill benefits for up to nine more months for veteran students pursuing a STEM related major due to veterans running out of benefits in the time it takes to acquire a STEM degree. This STEM scholarship is already in the plan for Alpha because in his first semester, he “had to take a math class as a prerequisite for a required math class in my degree plan and with as much math that is required for this degree, I am already behind” (Alpha, 2021). He will have to apply for this STEM scholarship and be granted the extra time and money to complete his degree. From his demeanor, he seems confident that he will be granted this extra time, but he is still only in his first year of his program. Bravo, Delta, Echo and Foxtrot are all adding a master’s degree to their current careers to take them to the next level and make the necessary steps to move locations or careers.

These educational benefits have been earned to assist them with their lives after they leave the military. It is with these benefits that they can find a new career path or improve their current employment. With the support of their families, each participant can pursue their degree and work toward adding to their overall life plans. They each have goals well beyond the degrees that they will acquire at Public University. For some, it is starting fresh in a new location like Echo, who mentioned he was in the process of building a house near Public University and moving once his degree was completed. To Alpha who is thinking long term of how this degree will get him out of this location and closer to his family since his marriage was ending.

If used well, these educational benefits can change a veteran student and their families' lives forever. Echo is an example of using his benefits well, he began using his benefits while still on active duty. Then as Echo retired and sought a master's program, he timed his benefits to finish as he graduated. If used poorly, the benefits can be wasted with no degree completed and debt gained. Zulu, current staff member detailed how with no direction or proper guidance, a veteran student can aimlessly take classes and run out of educational benefit money. Benefits can even be passed on to the veteran's dependents should the veteran not need or want to use the educational benefits earned. Benefits can be used while a service member is still active in the military but as they separate themselves from the military, service members can use their benefits at a variety of different schools. Benefits can be used at the community college level, at vocational/technical/trade non-degree schools, as well as traditional four-year institutions to seek undergraduate degrees, master's degrees, and doctoral degrees. These benefits were set up with the intention of assisting our military members with what they will do once they complete their time in the military. With guided assistance, military members can plan to use their benefits that best suit their needs for their future and the future of their family.

Staff Grievances

As the front-line workers who assist the veteran students daily, they are hearing the daily struggles of veteran students. One common thread that all staff members mentioned was that the length of time that a veteran student must wait to receive housing payments. This is the bulk of the complaints that veteran students ask each month. The

process to certify a veteran student is dependent on many moving parts for the veteran student and the certifying specialist.

The certification process begins with the veteran student and getting enrolled for the upcoming semester. They must get their planned courses for their upcoming term approved by their campus advisor as being degree applicable, the campus advisor must sign off and the approved form is sent to the veteran student services office. Then the veteran student services certifying specialist must approve the form and send it on to the VA for final approval. Once the form leaves campus, the VA has 30-45 days to approve the course list. If anything on this form is considered incorrect or is deemed not degree applicable, the form is sent back, and the entire process begins again. The 30–45-day window creates a financial strain on the veteran student, and some are not paid their housing allowance for an entire semester, as the process must be repeated until officially approved. This causes many calls and emails from angry veteran students and parents of dependents who have not received housing payments due to these delays.

In May of 2021, the new secretary of Veteran Affairs addressed that the VA needs to begin to “fill the department’s 50,000 empty positions and addressing the department’s aging infrastructure” (Korb & Toofan, 2021). A few staff members discussed the Army Ignited online certification system, which is a trial run for the VA system that will be implemented in the 21-22 academic year. It will overhaul the outdated archaic IT (Information Technology) system that is currently serving veteran students. One month into Army Ignited being live, Zulu lamented, “it has ruined our whole lives” because it is still currently unavailable so instead of reverting to the prior system, they are forced back to a paper process. When the Army Ignited system was switched on, they completely shut

off the old system instead of running both systems to ensure everything was running in the new system. On the home screen of <https://www.armyignited.com/app/> website, a banner at the top of screen describes that this system “is experiencing a high volume of latency and intermittent service availability due to ongoing network maintenance and network modernization” and from Zulu and Tango’s discussion, it has been well over 6 months of sporadic notes and the site working on and off. The irritation from both staff members was extremely evident throughout our discussions because it was creating double the work since they had to submit within the site and then keep a paper backup in case the system crashed. Zulu and Tango both learned the hard way that they need to have backups because the site would swallow up their submission. As with any new system, there are always implementation growing pains but if this is the precursor to the new VA system. The staff members at Public University will be extremely cautious in their optimism as many described the VA as “historically picking the cheapest option which leads to so many complications down the road” (Zulu, 2021).

Zulu would like to know what the Army side looks like because Zulu, “can see some students but I can’t see other students and just nothing works” and Zulu’s frustration was palpable. Tango’s thoughts on Army Ignited, “now, we have to track everybody manually and send it back to the Army” (Tango, 2021) as our interview was a few weeks into the Fall 2021 semester, Tango went on to say that “we are just now getting paid for the Spring 2021 semester” (Tango, 2021) which is causing many veteran students to not enroll until their funds are paid, thus delaying their educational journey.

Each staff member wants to help in the best way that they can but feel restricted in the confines of what the VA processes. The delays, turnaround times and system

outages cause headaches for staff and students. The frustrations are worked around as they best can to serve the veteran student, but it does cause some to stop their educational journeys as they cannot afford the delays of payments. It is getting the veteran student to reenroll that becomes the next hurdle getting them to graduate.

Educational Pathways

All participants have varying time left remaining on their Post 9/11 educational benefits. Due to the time constraints of the benefits, up to 36 months of educational benefits if fully qualified. Also, depending on when the veteran student's service ended, they may have a time limit of when their benefits are to be used. For those who had their service end before January of 2013, they have 15 years from the last date of service to use their Post 9/11 GI Bill benefits or they will lose any unused benefits (Post 9/11 GI Bill, 2022). If their service ends after January of 2013, the time limit has now been removed and benefits can be used or passed on to dependents or used by the service member when or if they choose to use their benefits (Post 9/11 GI Bill, 2022). These new guidelines of removing the 15-year time limit greatly improve the families of these service members because if the veteran does not need to use the benefits, it can be passed on to the dependent when the dependent is college aged. The downside of the benefits expiring was that many service members did not have a child who was college aged by the time their benefits ran out and the service member nor their spouse needed to use this benefit.

Participants' educational trajectories varied across the study. Two of the participants are working toward their undergraduate degrees while the remaining four have opted for the all-online master's degree programs at Public University. Golf and Alpha are seeking undergraduate degrees in Engineering; both have chosen an

extremely specific degree program with no elective room. Golf had no previous credits to add toward his degree so he will begin a 4-year long journey to obtain his degree leaving little room to have any missteps along the way.

Alpha had 60 credit hours from his Air Force Community College, yet none of those credits will count toward his intended Mechanical Engineering degree. The credits gave him 3rd year status to enroll earlier than other first year students, but he is also starting a 4-year long program. His Post 9/11 benefits may run out before he completes his degree, but he has already planned to apply for the Rogers STEM Scholarship extension, which would give a recipient a possible 9-month extension on benefits (STEM, 2021). Due to the strict degree plan, any deviation from the plan will only delay him further as Public University offers certain classes in specific semesters as they go in sequence. As Alpha is just beginning his program and is not currently enrolled in the prescribed first semester set of courses, he will certainly be off track already. Alpha met with his academic advisor by phone and discussed the possibility of dropping a course but “was too scared to drop a course because I would have to resubmit the course confirmation form to be recertified” (Alpha, 2021) and then he decided against for fear of losing money or owing money back to the VA.

Delta, Echo and Foxtrot are all in the middle of their Master of Business Administration (MBA) programs. Each working in different specialized topics within Public University’s MBA program. Each chose their respective masters programs based on the length of time it would take to complete their degrees and the mode of delivery. All chose their programs because they were offered exclusively online with one or two instances of in person meetings as part of their program. All three discussed how

Public University made using their benefits as “an easy process once all the paperwork was in place with the VA and the degree program I chose” (Delta, 2021). Delta even mentioned certain individuals who have assisted him so far. This person Delta mentioned does not work directly for the veteran student services office but has a small cohort of veteran students in their EMBA programs each semester and has solid knowledge of what is required on the course confirmation forms to get the veteran students certified each semester. Delta, Echo and Foxtrot are each physically located in different states away from Public University. Bravo is in a Master of Science all-online program that is a few months longer than the 18-month MBA programs that Delta, Echo, Foxtrot are pursuing but Bravo will finish his benefits as he completes his degree like the others in this study.

Lima has spent more than a decade working with veteran students and has seen many changes implemented. Lima used to be a staff of one when the veteran student population was much smaller. Since Lima has been a part of veteran student services, Lima has had to work with three different presidents of Public University as well as other top administrators who have come and gone. Lima has been able to add one other full-time staff member as well as veteran student workers to keep the office up and running. With a limited number of staff, it is a constant battle to make sure that they are adhering to all the rules set forth by the VA (Veteran Affairs) as well as the DoD (Department of Defense). “The governing DoD agreements specify significantly more stringent quality and performance requirements than do VA regulations” (Brink, 2021). Veterans are a unique group integrated into the campus community at Public University with hopes of growing their population in the coming years.

Veteran students with a limited income after they separate from the military are choosing their educational pursuits with their benefits time frame in mind. For those with their undergraduate degrees already, the participants can be a bit more selective with their program based on the length of time left on their benefits. Participants seeking an undergraduate degree must plan early in their educational career to lay out their degree path to ensure that they are on track to finish their degrees and use their benefits to their advantage. It is with the support of their families, university staff members and persistence that they will be able to graduate with their degrees at the end of the programs.

Each semester, every class they choose must be approved and be degree applicable according to the VA. According to Public University's Veteran Student FAQ, it states that "no action will occur for any semester until you have submitted a Course Confirmation form for approval, and it is received" (Veteran student FAQs, 2022) by the Veteran Student Services office at Public University. This is to ensure that veteran students are on track to graduate in a timely manner. Every interaction with the staff members at Public University is an opportunity for the veteran student to check on their progress but also the potential to learn they have any issues with the VA and their benefits. Every day the participants make the choice to go to class, to do their homework and to turn in their assignments.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I presented the findings of this study. The findings show that family support situational has an impact on the veteran in transition. It is not a defining factor but with family support through each transition, the veteran student fares much

better than those with no familial support to assist with the day-to-day activities. As veteran students begin to cope with their transition away from the military as well as their transition to campus life, they begin to understand their new roles on campus and within their own families.

Utilizing their educational benefits has led participants to Public University. All participants in this study did not feel that they were heavily recruited to Public University but were drawn to the prestige and brand of the university as well as personal factors that led them to enroll at Public University. It is with these educational benefits they have each come to know who they are in the civilian world as veterans of the armed forces. This veteran status affords them the opportunity to pursue the degrees they are currently seeking due to their educational benefits.

As the situation of separating from service was discussed, each exiting service member must attend the Transition Assistance Programs. Each military base and branch of the military has their own version of the Transition Assistance Program. This creates a differing experience for each veteran student and makes it difficult for the staff to plan a universal transition experience to college campuses. Through the TAP classes, each participant learned of their educational benefits and the next steps of their impending transition as they are leaving the military. With not all the participants leaving service and one who did not even attend the TAP class, this class was not necessarily helpful to everyone in this study. TAP is also not an indicator of how the veteran student will fare once on their college campus of choice. The support of the military through these TAP classes can be minimal as described by the participants as they exit their service contracts.

All the staff members were more concerned about the overall wellbeing of the veteran student and how to assist them through their transition. The staff members are thinking of strategies to create better programs, to update their policies, and revamp their processes so that they can better assist the incoming and continuing veteran students. There was not much they could do to prepare the veteran student prior, but they could assist the veteran once they are at Public University. This is if the veteran is willing to accept their assistance.

Each participant, as well as the staff members, has experienced their own set of frustrations with the benefits process. With well-timed and informative assistance, the benefits process from the university side can be mitigated to lessen the delays in payments from the VA. Having a strategy in place to make the veteran student as well the veteran staff members aware of changes in plans can potentially quicken the turnaround time and delays from the VA. As the veteran students discussed their time in the military and their new experiences in higher education, this led to the veterans becoming reflective of their time in the military. Through these reflections and anecdotal stories, the veteran students offered advice to future veterans. Advice and strategies the veteran students would have liked to receive if they were beginning this process again to make it easier on their fellow veterans.

As discussed, the transition from service member of the armed forces to student on a college campus, there needs to be “some level of support should be provided by the higher education institution to increase the probability of his or her academic and personal success” (Home alone, 2011, p. 9). In Sargent & Schlossberg & Schlossberg, Lynch & Chickering’ s (1989) 4S system, the transition process is denoted by four

categories: situation, self, supports and strategies. In this context, the participants are moving through this situation now as they transition onto Public University's campus. The veteran students must be in a place to understand themselves. Knowing oneself and understanding the identity of who they are within the confines of being a student at Public University plus who they are in all other identities in their lives assists the veteran student in their transition. This situation must involve support. Support for veteran students as they understand this situation and are accepting and being open to the support given to them by their family members, the staff at Public University and the VA as they make this transition to higher education. The strategies for supporting the veteran student must be in place to assist during the transition. These strategies can come from the staff members in how their programs are set up to assist the veteran student in transition as well through the transition programs as the veteran exits the military. Without proper strategies, the transition can have setbacks, but strategies can always be added to support the veteran student. With strategies in place, the veteran student can move through the 4S system during all the transitions through life. The next chapter will offer a thorough discussion of these findings.

Chapter VI: Discussion

This chapter will provide a discussion of the research findings, how these findings were able to answer the research questions, how they relate to the research in the field, and demonstrate any gaps that were found in the literature.

The significance of this study is that it focuses on a research gap to provide a greater understanding regarding the influential factors that affect the veteran student recruitment, being retained, and persistence toward graduation in higher education all while using their government earned educational benefits to fund their educational endeavors. This study explored the veteran student plight as they navigated their way from the military bases to the college campus classrooms while examining the bureaucracy of the paperwork involved in utilizing the Post 9/11 GI Bill educational benefits. As well as how the relationship between the transition to campus and dealing with the bureaucracy of the government required paperwork often causes delays or stalls veteran students in their quest obtain a college degree upon leaving the military.

The purpose of this case study was to uncover the difficulties that veteran students faced when utilizing their government earned educational benefits during their recruitment and transition to higher education. It was hoped that through this study, dozens of participants would have participated, and findings would have emerged to inform veteran student services staff as well recruitment and advising offices on college campuses to better assist the transition of veterans to higher education. Due to the constraints of the global pandemic and higher education moving primarily online during the focal point of my research, my participant pool was smaller than anticipated and after having to pivot and bring in a secondary point view. The veteran staff point of view was

added into the study which contributed a new dynamic that I did not expect but was pleasantly surprised by the added detail in corroboration with the veteran student perspective. This chapter will establish that the findings did contribute to the study of veteran student transition while using educational benefits.

Research for this study used a qualitative, constructive case study methodology as an approach to collecting rich data to support the specified purpose. In-depth interviews were conducted with veteran students and veteran support staff, as well as exploring institutional and other publicly available documents throughout the study. There were six veteran student participants plus five veteran support staff participants as well as the researcher's personal observations. The data was evaluated based on the relevance to answering each of the research questions. It was then coded, analyzed, and organized for further assessments. Based on these assessments, categories and subcategories were created through the process of analysis and organization. When further categories could no longer be condensed, the process of analysis was complete.

The purpose of this chapter was to provide a relevant discussion of the findings to add further insight as it relates to pertinent literature. Findings from this study were supported by research questions to allow the reader to make their own judgments of the data. Throughout this chapter, the findings will be discussed at length as it relates to the relevant literature to provide the reader with informational insights.

Throughout Chapter V, the major findings of this study indicated that the veteran student tends to move organically through their decisions of their life course trajectories. It begins with family support as the young adult makes the decision to join the military beginning with which branch to choose. Then it is also the family that supports the

veteran's decision when choosing to leave the military to pursue their educational journey after their military career. It is a series of moments; moments of transitions and how each veteran is supported during these transitions can have an immense impact on each transition.

Those who participated in this study have taken the nontraditional path to higher education. They have either just begun their journey to a college degree or are embarking on a graduate degree after many years of military service and an undergraduate degree already achieved. It is up to these institutions to work towards creating programs for serving and understanding our veteran students. Veteran students delayed their lives to return to campus to serve our country in times of need or crisis throughout the years.

Family Ties

Throughout this study, the participants expressed that their family had a profound impact on them from their decision to join the military to where they would enroll in higher education. These family ties have guided their decisions throughout basic training, through their military careers and into their civilian lives and new careers. As the situation of transitioning to higher education became a reality for these participants, Schlossberg's 4S System (Anderson, et al., 2012) was at the forefront of the transition. Evans, Forney, and Guido-DiBrito describe Schlossberg's Transition Theory as being able to "provide insights into factors related to the transition, the individual, and the environment that are likely to determine the degree of impact a given transition will have at a particular point in time" (p. 107, 1998). Through Schlossberg's 4S System, the Situation that these veteran students are in right now is that they are pursuing their degrees while using their educational benefits. The Support system for veteran students

manifests in the form relationships with their family members, friends, coworkers, or any individual who encourages the veteran and adds positive reinforcement (Anderson et al., 2012).

With their family support, the veteran student can be influenced during the transition and recruitment experiences to higher education. It is with their family support that veteran students can pursue their educational journeys. Chickering and Schlossberg (2002) clarify that the transition is an event that creates disruption of roles, the routine for the individual and the family, and the relationships for the individual who is experiencing the transition. In the 4S System posed by Anderson, Goodman, & Schlossberg (2012) the family support network is an important aspect to the transition process these groups support these veteran students. Having a support network, the veteran student can attempt to anticipate the needs and adjustments needed during their transition into the civilian world and into higher education. It is crucial that the administration and advising staff incorporate ways to involve the veteran student support systems as their support helps to assist the veteran student each semester toward graduation.

Veteran Transition

Veteran students are transitioning away from the structure of military life and into a life of being a full or part-time student. Goodman, Schlossberg, and Anderson (1997) discussed that “moving through a transition requires letting go of aspects of self, letting go of former roles, and learning new roles” (p. 23). As veteran students are making the transition to higher education, they need to maintain their important relationships on campus and at home. Sargent and Schlossberg (1988) and Schlossberg, Lynch, and Chickering (1989) denoted four broad categories of the transition process: (a)

situation, (b) self, (c) supports, and (d) strategies. Veteran students are in their situation, which is the transition from the military to (or back into) higher education. For veteran students, the self can be different for each veteran student contingent upon their length of service, deployments, and commendations. Support comes from the family support system but also from the institution where the veteran student is enrolled, and any connections made at this institution. Support is essential to the transition of the veteran student and can influence the intent of the veteran student to persist in higher education. Strategies that are set in place in the higher educational setting to assist veteran students as they navigate a college campus are vital to persistence and graduation rates of veteran students. “No matter where one is in the transition process, no matter what the transition is, one deals with it differently depending upon the 4 S’s” (Schlossberg, 1984, p. 28). Veteran students have a distinctive outlook on this world and their input in the classroom should be nurtured.

Many veteran students arrive on campus with little direction of the steps that are needed to persist to graduation. As Carlson (2012) denoted “the key for any veteran to earn a degree is often the transition period immediately following his or her active service” (para 2). The veteran student transition is contingent one basic need, the need for support. Early in an “individual’s transition from member of the armed forces to student on a college campus, some level of support should be provided by the higher education institution to increase the probability of his or her academic and personal success” (Home alone, 2011, p. 9), my research only confirmed that the need for support as soon as possible for the veteran student to ensure success.

Veteran Identity

As the transition is in progress for the veteran student, the identity of the veteran and who they are now becoming is another transition they must face. Veteran students must take on “the role of veteran, civilian, student, brother, sister, spouse, and/or parent, etc.” (Hammond, 2015, p. 147) all while trying to navigate campus, homework deadlines, and submitting the proper paperwork to ensure that their educational benefits and payments are made on time. Anderson, Goodman, and Schlossberg (2012) defined a transition as any “event or non-event that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles” (p. 39). For those working on a college campus, “understanding how a student’s roles, relationships, routines, and assumptions have changed as the result of his or her military experiences is vital” (DiRamio and Jarvis, 2011, p. 9) for veteran students who are understanding their place on campus and navigating their transition as a civilian. Veteran students are “altering their roles, routines, and relationships at home, in the community at large, and in the educational setting” (Schlossberg, Lynch and Chickering, 1989, p. 14).

A strong sense of self must be nurtured once separated from the military. With the veteran student understanding who they are in this new role, a student only solidifies the role in which they now inhabit. Coming to a college campus may be a brand-new experience for some veteran students and knowing who they are away from the military is a foundational step in a successful transition with the support of those in their family and on campus. Understanding the roles that are needed to be successful in all aspects of life for the veteran and being able to cope with the new roles thrust upon in their transition is needed for a successful transition.

Educational Benefits

The Post 9/11 GI Bill is giving these participants and many before them the opportunity to pursue a degree in higher education. With such a benefit bestowed upon them, the benefits process must work well to keep these veterans in higher education. Most “veterans blend into their campus populations and succeed with no additional assistance, but some have specific needs related to post-service transition that may impede utilization of education benefits or require additional support during pursuit of higher education” (Carter & Kidder, 2015, p. 10). The unique needs of the veteran and in relation to their benefits require a staff with knowledge of the veteran benefits and how these benefits can be used at their institution.

As the population of veterans grows in higher education, more training, more education and an overall knowledge of veteran specific rules and policies is needed by support staff to assist veterans into higher education and through to graduation. The educational benefits package can give a veteran another opportunity to better themselves away from the military as the general veteran does not serve until retirement age. These benefits are giving the veteran the chance to start a second career in the civilian world after their military careers have ended, however long or short their careers spanned. Based on this research, there are several suggestions for research, practice, and policy.

Research

When looking at the research involving veteran students in higher education, there is little research on the recruitment of veterans, which must start at the time of their decision to separate from the military. At this point, there should be more than just a class that checks the box as they exit their service. Those in the Education Office as well as

each military base must be well versed in how to get the educational benefits information across to their soon to be veterans so that there is not any confusion. The timelines and turnaround time seem to stall, confuse, or frustrate many veterans who are trying to get their education according to those interviewed in this study.

This research only began to scratch the surface on how the information on how benefits can be better delivered and understood. It is a convoluted system that many in this study had issues with when trying to get information on how to use their benefits. Each veteran student has their own unique journey to obtaining their degree and being able to guide, retain and graduate these veteran students begins before they step on campus. The discussion of educational benefits should not be a box to check while physically and mentally exhausted at the end of basic training but a detailed and involved discussion with those who will eventually use these benefits. The TAP class should re-inform those who intend to leave service with the plan to go to higher education and assist those who do not have a plan in place with guided steps. To follow up with them once separated from the military to get these veterans to higher education and into a degree program which will not only help them grow as an individual but also highlight the veteran student experience to enrich those around them on campus.

Practice

Taking the information gathered here along with the ever-changing veteran specific policies, there are many steps that could or should be implemented to better serve our veteran students in higher education. A common theme that I encountered was that the turnaround time for paperwork was far from ideal and even discouraged some to keep a class they were not sure of because of fear; that the paperwork would delay their

payments or that they would be charged later down the line. The new updated system along with an updated infrastructure plus hiring close to 50,000 employees to help run the VA in all areas is a need that must be fixed soon. Supporting the veteran student in their transition to campus is vital and creating programs to assist the veteran and their families through this transition must be in place. The obstacles that can delay the process are some of the fundamental issues that deter the veteran student from finishing their degree.

Policy

While the government continues to make policies regarding veteran students and each institution of higher education is run differently hence the list of veteran friendly universities. In March of 2021, the SVA (Student Veterans of America) brought many topics to the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives on the needs and priorities needed for those in the SVA to succeed (SVA, 2021). This report highlights the need for improvements from the VA regarding veteran students, it also highlights the continuing issues still faced by our veteran students currently that sometimes hinder or discourage these veteran students from obtaining the degree that they have been working towards through the last few years.

Future Research

With any research, it is recommended that this same circumstance be investigated across other institutions and with the VA who are working together to assist veteran students with little to no issues through the benefits process. A multi-case study would only bolster the theoretical possibilities related to the recruitment and transition of veteran students to higher education. This study was limited to those who responded but also due to the global pandemic that occurred in the middle of the study. Due to the small

number of participants and with the limitations of the pandemic restricting the classroom experience, the experience of the veteran students was significantly different than of those who a year prior would have had an entirely unique experience.

The focus of this scholarly work was to understand the veteran student population as they are recruited and transition to higher education. While I did not specifically rule out any level of student, many studies are focused on undergraduate vs. graduate whereas I accepted all who responded to the recruitment email. It would be ideal to replicate this study but to get extremely granular for example, focusing on veteran students between the ages of 26-30 who have no previous college experience entering higher education for highly specific degree programs while utilizing their Post 9/11 educational benefits. By getting this granular and understanding the immediate needs of veteran students in their first two semesters it may change policy and practice on college campuses to assist, retain and graduate these first-time nontraditional veteran students.

Chapter VII: Conclusion

This study stemmed from the frustrations that I heard passing from my desk from the veteran students who could not pay their bills. This was because the VA was not making housing payments due to a backlog of paperwork. The bureaucracy of paperwork that a veteran student and university staff must complete for the veteran student to be paid in a timely manner is almost impossible if not done on an extremely tight timeline. Then, if any detail of this paperwork is incorrect, the paperwork begins again. I wanted to understand their stories, how could the process

As the 20th anniversary of the September 11, 2001, has come and gone, many of today's veterans will be using Post 9/11 GI Bill benefits for years to come. Each participant's story is important because it helps the higher education staff understand the veteran student as they transition from the military to higher education. After interviewing veteran students and staff at Public University, more can be done on all fronts to prepare the veteran for the transition to higher education and beyond the military in general. This begins well before the veteran decides they will separate from the military but that is for another study.

Each participant's journey is his or her own and each has a part in shaping Public University's future in how they will handle future interactions with their veteran student population. With each participant having their own reasons for why they chose to pursue a degree at Public University and attributing little recruitment to Public University, each had differing experiences while using their benefits. The military connection and family support had a greater impact on each participant than the actual recruitment effort that Public University is allowed to make. The location proximity to military bases, the

location of family members, benefits acceptance plus incentives and the brand name of Public University were more enticing than any actual recruitment according to the participants and staff members.

During the first year on campus, the participants relied heavily on their familial support to assist them with their day-to-day tasks as well the support staff on campus to assist with the educational benefits aspect of their Post 9/11 GI Bill. Together the veteran students and support staff can have tremendous impacts on one another but getting the veteran student to accept help is proving more difficult the longer the veteran has served in the military. Therefore, both the participants and staff described an overall military cultural shift away from the “keep everything to yourself” or “do not ask for help” mentality.

Public University, like most college campuses across the nation are doing what they can with the resources that each administration is giving them to assist and recruit veteran students to their campuses. For Public University and those in this study, the process is working but not without delays and not without frustrations. Frustrations from the staff on how the VA programs are working or not working and the updates being made to those programs that are approved by the government without the proper IT support. Frustration from the veteran students who are not able to pay their bills because the delays imposed by the VA have gone on for months. These frustrations sometimes lead to veteran students not enrolling in the next semester.

Public University is using the resources that they have available to ensure that the veteran student side of the process runs as smooth as possible. The VA side is a mess according to those in this study. With the potential to add more veteran students than ever

to the higher educational landscape, the support for the entire veteran related programs must be in place. This support does not appear to be in place, this is evident with the implementation of the Go Army website program. The government rolled out the new program while deactivating the old program before all the kinks had been worked out and now the support staff is left to keep track of paper and doubling their workload for when the website is working.

The outlook is that more support is needed from the government down to the veteran students. A holistic effort to give support for the programs is needed to expedite the digital paperwork necessary to certify each veteran student using their educational benefits. As the population of veteran students continues to grow in higher education, more extensive studies will be needed to understand how to uniform the process across all campuses since each individual campus has their own processes. The findings of this study also contribute to the literature of how important the support system must be a solid foundation for veteran students as they make their transition to higher education no matter the age of the veteran student. There are still gaps that exist within the literature and many questions that still need further research to answer those questions. Future studies should continue to explore the timeframe of the decision to leave the military to enroll on the college campus. It is during this timeframe that many decisions are made that impact their educational journey and learning how the military can support the veteran as they make their move to the next step will impact the veteran student.

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Appendix A | Veteran Student Recruitment Email

TO: VETERAN STUDENTS

Dear Veteran Student,

My name is Kasie Crall, and I am a doctoral candidate in the Adult and Higher Education program in the College of Education at the University of Oklahoma. I am conducting a research study exploring the recruitment experience to higher education as well as the transition experience of veteran students who are utilizing their Post 9-11/Forever GI Bill educational benefits from the military who are in the first two semesters of being on campus.

To participate in this study please reply to this email. Upon agreeing to meet for an interview, whether in person, by phone or via zoom, you will be directed to a personal background survey (10-15 minutes) to be completed prior to the interview. The entire interview process will take place on only one occasion and will take 30-60 minutes to complete. There will be a follow up through email communication at a later date.

There is no penalty for choosing not to participate in the study or for withdrawing from the study at any time.

Eligibility: You must be a currently enrolled student at the University of Oklahoma, identify as a veteran, be utilizing Post 9/11 GI Bill or Forever GI benefits and currently in your first or second semester at the University of Oklahoma.

Compensation: You will not be compensated for participating in this study.

Confidentiality: You will be asked to provide some personally identifiable information, but please know that this information will not be used for any publication purposes and all information regarding your identity will be changed for my final paper.

Please email (kasie@ou.edu) or call 405-325-6017 to make an appointment that fits with your schedule. We will meet by phone/zoom appointment.

I would like to thank you ahead of time for contributing to a better understanding of the veteran student recruitment and transition experiences.

If you have questions or concerns about the research, the researcher conducting this study can be contacted by email at kasie@ou.edu (Kasie Crall). The University of Oklahoma is an equal opportunity institution.

Thank you,
Kasie Crall
Ph.D. Candidate
Adult and Higher Education

405-325-XXXX kasie@ou.edu

IRB NUMBER: 12851

IRB APPROVAL DATE: 02/01/2021

Appendix B: Veteran Student Interview Protocol

Zoom Interview Questions

Thank you for your participation today. Before we begin, with your permission, I will audio record and take notes during the interview. The recording is to truthfully record the information you provide and will be used for transcription purposes only. If you choose not to be audio recorded, I will take notes instead. If you agree to be audio recorded but feel uncomfortable at any time during the interview, I can turn off the recorder at your request. Or if you don't wish to continue, you can stop the interview at any time. Your responses will be used to develop a better understanding of the recruitment and transition of veteran students to a public institution while utilizing their earned educational benefits.

(Give consent form to be signed or will be emailed to veteran student if doing phone interview)

*Once consent form is signed and completed, we will proceed with the in-person interview.

Welcome – Purpose of the interview

Thank you for agreeing to do this interview and I appreciate you taking the time out of your schedule to meet with me today. Hi, my name is Kasie Crall and I will be conducting this interview today. I am seeking to understand the recruitment experiences of veteran students utilizing their Post 9/11 or Forever GI Bill benefits who are transitioning into higher education. The interview should last no more than one hour.

Rules

Everything will be confidential. To protect your privacy, I will not connect your name to any of your answers. If you have any questions or if you do not wish to answer any specific questions, please feel free to let me know at any time during our conversation. You may also stop the interview at any time for any reason. There are no right or wrong answers.

At this time with your permission, we will begin the interview. (Turn on recording device).

Opening questions: How were you recruited to join the military? Was the GI Bill mentioned during your recruitment? If so, how was the Bill presented to you? Do you recall if the educational benefits of the GI Bill were mentioned? How did you understand the process of utilizing your GI Bill to cover educational benefits?

1. Describe the **Situation** that led to your decision to go back to school?
 - a. Based on the survey *Prompt: If he or she attended or did not attend the Transition assistance program provided by the military, why or why not?*
 - i. How did the military prepare you for higher education?

- ii. (if indicated on the survey that they attended TAP classes) How many times did you attend TAP (Transition Assistance Programs)? Describe the experience, how did it prepare you for this transition to this university?
 - iii. Did you participate in any other programs that your branch of the military offered to help with the transition? To learn about the military benefits offered.
 - Prompts: Did you attend school or classes while in the military or prior to joining the military?*
 - iv. Why did you choose this university to pursue your education?

- 2. Describe the recruitment experience to this university as well as any other universities that you may have considered?
 - a. *Were you initially emailed?*
 - b. *Did you check the veteran friendly colleges' list?*

- 3. Have you been educationally impacted by COVID-19?
 - a. *Was there a delay in you entering higher education?*
 - b. *Did you end choosing a different college than you originally planned?*

- 4. Describe your experience(s) utilizing your educational benefits:
 - a. *Have you encountered any delayed services?*

- 5. How do you view your current situation as veteran student pursuing your chosen major with the benefits that you are using?

- 6. Describe your **Support** system at home?
 - a. *When did you share your plans with your support system about your decision to attend higher education?*
 - b. *How they have adjusted to you attending higher education?*

- 7. Tell me about your transition thus far from deployment to student life. Have you had any challenges? What adjustments have you had to make so far?
 - a. *Based on answers probing questions may be asked*

- 8. Describe your educational journey so far? [**Self**]
 - a. *Prompts: difficulties, challenges, help, assistance, etc.? What challenges have you met with enrolling in classes or through the semester related to your classes?*

- b. Do you feel that these challenges have hindered or helped in your educational journey?
 - c. Do you identify yourself as a veteran with your classmates/faculty/staff? Why or why not?
9. Describe how being a veteran student is unique in your experience compared to the traditional college student:
10. Do you feel that the university is meeting the needs of veteran students? Who has been helpful in your educational journey thus far?
11. If you could tell veteran students (or yourself) what to do when enrolling in higher education, what advice would you give them?
a. Prompt: what would you do differently?
12. Have there been any significant events, places, or people (good or bad) that have been significant throughout your transition? **[Strategies]**
13. Was there anything you were not aware of prior to your transition?
14. Do you have any questions for me?
15. Would you like to add any additional information? Anything you think we should have covered that we didn't or to expand on any questions asked previously?

Closing statement

Thank you for participating, sharing your experiences and your time for this interview. The information that you provided today will be very helpful for my research and other veteran students.

Turn off recording device.

Appendix C: Staff/Administrator Interview Protocol

Zoom Interview Questions

Before we begin, with your permission; I will audio record and take notes during the interview. The recording is to truthfully record the information you provide and will be used for transcription purposes only. If you choose not to be audiotaped, I will take notes instead. If you agree to being audiotaped but feel uncomfortable at any time during the interview, I can turn off the recorder at your request. Or if you don't wish to continue, you can stop the interview at any time. (Give consent form to be signed or will be emailed to veteran student if doing phone interview)

*Once consent form is signed and completed (or verbal consent), we will proceed with the in-person interview.

Welcome – Purpose of the interview

Thank you for agreeing to do this interview and I appreciate you taking the time out of your schedule to meet with me today. Hi, my name is Kasie Crall and I will be conducting this interview today. I am seeking to understand the recruitment experiences of veteran students utilizing their Post 9/11 or Forever GI Bill benefits who are transitioning into higher education. The interview should last no more than one hour.

I will now begin recording the interview.

Opening question: How is your semester going?

1. **[Situation]** What lead you to work with veteran students?
 - a. Once you began working with veteran students, can you describe your experiences with working/assisting them through recruitment and their transition to higher education?
2. **[Support]** Do you feel supported on campus?
 - a. From the administration?
 - b. From the student body?
 - c. From the veteran student population?
 - d. From the VA?
3. **[Self]** Describe your experiences working with veteran students:
 - i. *Prompts: Depending on answers, probe or ask more detailed questions.*
 - b. Describe your experiences working with the VA
 - i. *Prompts: Depending on answers, probe or ask more detailed questions.*
4. **[Strategies]** What are your strategies to assist veteran students as they are recruited?

- a. What are your strategies to assist veteran students as they transition on to your campus?
5. Do you have any questions for me?
6. Would you like to add any additional information? Anything you think we should have covered that we didn't or to expand on any questions asked previously?

Closing statement

Thank you for participating and your time for this interview. The information that you provided today will be very helpful for my research and other veteran students.
Turn off recording device.

Appendix D: Demographic Survey Protocol

In order to gain a better understanding of the recruitment and transition experiences of veteran students to higher education, this questionnaire has been developed to gather feedback with respect to your experiences during your recruitment and transition. I appreciate your honest and comprehensive responses. This survey should take you approximately 15-25 minutes to complete. Participation in this survey is completely voluntary.

If you are not comfortable responding to a particular question, please mark it with a N/A.

1. What is your age?
2. What is your gender? Man: ____ Woman: ____ Gender non-binary: ____
Gender non-conforming: ____ Prefer not to answer: ____ Prefer to self-describe: ____
3. Please indicate your Ethnicity: (select all that apply)
 - a. __Asian
 - b. __Black/African
 - c. __Hispanic/Latinx
 - d. __Native American
 - e. __White
 - f. __Pacific Islander
 - g. __Prefer not to answer
4. Marital status: a. __ Single b. __ Married c. __ Divorced
 d. __ Widowed e. __ Prefer not to answer
5. What is/was your affiliation in the military?
 Army
 Navy
 Air Force
 Marine Corps
 National Guard

 How long was your service? [If you are currently still serving or in the reserves,
 please indicate as much]
6. At any time during your service, were you deployed? Yes____ No____
 - a. If so, where:
 - b. How long was your deployment?
7. What was your military occupation?
8. Did you go from deployment/service to college or from college to deployment/service back to college?

- a. Did you attend a TAP (Transition Assistance Program) class prior to separation?
 - b. How many times?
 - c. How many weeks/months prior to separating from military did you attend the TAP class?
9. Have you attended another university (2-year, 4-year or vocational) prior to the University of Oklahoma?
- a. If so, when and for how long?
 - b. How many credits transferred to the University of Oklahoma?
 - c. Did you receive any college credit for your military experience? If so, was it helpful toward your degree that you have chosen to pursue? If not, how did that make you feel?
10. Current major? _____
11. Estimated graduation date? _____
12. Have you experienced any financial challenges since you became a veteran student?
- a. Yes
 - b. No
13. Are you currently employed?
- d. Yes (If so, how many hours per week are you working?)
 - e. No
14. Have you visited the Veteran Services office on campus?
- a. Yes
 - b. No
15. Have you visited with your academic counselor/advisor?
- a. Yes
 - b. No
16. Have you had any physical affects (injuries, etc.) made it more difficult to transition to student life?
- a. Yes
 - b. No
17. Have you had any mental affects (emotional, psychological, etc.) made it more difficult to transition to student life?
- a. Yes
 - b. No