

US VS. THEM? HOW STUDENT VETERANS
PERCIEVE THEMSELVES WITHIN THE
UNIVERSITY COMMUNITY

By

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Major Field: EDUCATION LEADERSHIP AND POLICY STUDIES

This multi-case study explored the experiences and perceptions of student veterans in a college setting and who work or regularly spend time in the student veteran center. Through in-depth interviews, student veterans described their experiences on campus and the extended campus community. Further, participants discussed their experiences and perceptions of campus veteran support student such as with the Student Veteran Center and campus support staff. The institution used for this study was a large, public, 4-year institution in the Midwest United States. Six participants participated in face-to-face interviews as well as various support staff that works with student veterans or in departments that service student veterans. Transcripts, observations, and artifacts of collected data were analyzed to identify common themes and contextual information to understand the student veterans' experiences and perceptions at their institution.

The primary research questions for this study were: 1) What are student veterans' reported experiences with support systems in place specifically for them? 2) How do student veterans perceive the role of support services in meeting their goals and needs? 3) Using which tenets of Veterans' Critical Theory (Phillips & Lincoln, 2017) best explain the experiences student veterans have on campus and with a university community as a whole?

This study informs university administrators and faculty about the unique student veteran demographic and their unique attitudes that come out of a military background. The findings of this study will help determine areas that need further assessment and future studies to advance understanding of student veterans and their journey through higher education. Furthermore, results will help inform higher education institutional policies and strategic planning on areas to best support student veterans so they may successfully integrate throughout the university community and meet their educational goals, leading to program completion and eventual graduation.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

There are many groups on college campuses that struggle to complete their college education and drop out before graduation. However, some groups have more difficulties than most navigating the intricacies and challenges of the college experience as well the associated bureaucracy. Those who experience these difficulties may not feel they can be successful in higher education and determine it would be best for them to leave their studies. One group that can be seen as marginalized but not thought of as such by some in Higher Education is student veterans, those students who have served or are presently serving in the United States Armed Forces. The rate at which student veterans graduate is often lower than the graduation rates of most other student populations. Depending on which branch of service one is referencing, the dropout rate for student veterans is as high as 55% (Zoroya, 2014). Yet only one in four colleges report having a detailed understanding of why student veterans drop out before earning a college degree. To gain a better understanding of why student veterans do not complete their degrees, university administrators must gain a better understanding of the needs of veterans (Grohowski, 2013). Many student veterans are transitioning back to their communities and into civilian life, both in the private and public sectors. They bring with them many leadership qualities, as well as unique needs

that must be addressed by varied institutions, such as those providing educational, health, and mental health services (Selber, et al., 2014). Universities need to understand these students better so that they can be retained, supported, and helped to complete a degree, because completion benefits not only the student veteran but the university as well.

Firstly, student veterans need to stay in school until they earn their degrees in order to realize the economic benefits of that degree. A college graduate can earn more throughout their career compared to someone who did not complete a bachelor's degree. According to the Association of Public and Land-Grant Universities, an individual with a bachelor's degree will earn \$964,000 more than just a high school graduate over the course of their lifetime. It is also easier for those with a college degree to weather downturns in the economy. When the United States' unemployment rate reached its peak in 2010, recent college graduates experienced an unemployment rate of 6.9%, compared with a jobless rate of 15.8% for all young workers. Additionally, those with a bachelor's degree are 47% more likely to have health insurance through their jobs than those holding high school degrees (APLU, 2020).

Another important statistic is the rate at which students whose parents went to college complete degrees versus those who were first generation college students. Fry (2021) found adults who have at least one college-educated parent are far more likely to complete college compared with adults with less-educated parents. Some 70% of adults ages 22 to 59 with at least one parent who has a bachelor's degree or more education have completed a bachelor's degree themselves. Only 26% of their peers

who do not have a college-educated parent have a bachelor's degree. Through the NELS Postsecondary Education Transcript Study, Duncan et al. (2007) demonstrated that first-generation students who attended any postsecondary institution (two- or four year) were twice as likely to leave without earning a degree compared to students whose parents had college degrees, 43% and 20% respectively. Even among students who expected to earn bachelor's degrees and attended four-year institutions, first-generation students were much more likely to leave (29% versus 13%) and much less likely to earn a degree (47% and 78%) than students whose parents had a college degree. In other words, the benefits of earning a degree accrue to the children of those veterans who successfully earn a degree given the likelihood of their children going to and completing college rises because of this success (Duncan et al., 2007). With more student veterans graduating and their children having more success in higher education, the amount of generational poverty can be reduced.

Third, there are also benefits to the university when students graduate. For institutions, it is more cost effective to retain current students than to recruit new students. In a study conducted at The Ohio State University, the university claimed by increasing retention efforts by 5% at a cost of \$345,000, the return on investment brought back \$2.25 million in the tuition paid by those retained students (Simpson, 2008, p. 165). While this is only one university, it shows what might be possible at other institutions. Therefore, the return on the university's investment towards retention may provide extensive positive returns.

When it comes to universities, there are many different support systems in place to help students. However, because college students come from such different

backgrounds, there is no one program that will serve all students. One of the unique student populations that exist is the non-traditional student. However, non-traditional students are not all the same, and each has their own characteristics, needs, and challenges. There are several different characteristics that can be used when describing a non-traditional student. The National Academic Advising Association (NACADA, 2010) identifies two of these as a student who has responsibilities outside of the classroom that may take priority over academics, and/or a student who enrolls in college during a transition period in their life such as a divorce or career change. The National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) offers a more expansive definition. A student who possesses at least one of the following characteristics is considered by NCES to be non-traditional: does not enroll in post-secondary education in the same calendar year as high school graduation, is a part-time student for a portion of the academic year, works a full-time job (considered 35 hours a week) while enrolled in classes, has dependents other than a spouse or is a single parent, or is independent when it comes to financial aid purposes (Muniz, 2021).

Student veterans often have several of these characteristics, so they are seen as non-traditional students but also in a separate category because of their veteran status, which means they also have needs specific to this unique status. Therefore, when universities look at the non-traditional population they have on campus, student veterans' needs may not be considered and can fall outside of the realm of non-traditional students as defined by organizations like NACADA and NCES. For example, student veterans often have disabilities resulting from an injury or other trauma sustained during their time in the military. Just over half of student veterans

reported having a Veterans Administration Disability Rating, with 80% of those students saying their disability caused stress in school (Student Veterans of America, 2020).

This dissertation is a single-site multi-case study exploring the experiences of student veterans who are persisting in their university studies at a 4-year university in the Midwestern United States, and their perceptions and experiences of their belonging by their college community. Gopalan and Brady (2020) state, feeling a sense of belonging may lead students to engage more deeply with their studies, leading to persistence and success. They also found students who feel they belong seek out and use campus resources to a greater extent, furthering their success while also buffering students from stress, improving mental health.

Background of Study

Since the terrorist attacks by Al-Qaeda against the United States in September 2001, the United States military has been involved in conflicts all around the world, including wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Over the past 20 years, more than 2.3 million men and women have served in combat zones with the United States Military (Hussein and Haddad, 2021). Upon leaving the service, more veterans are using benefits of the GI Bill to attend college than in the previous peacetime years following the Vietnam War (Caspers & Ackerman, 2013). The most recent version of the G.I. Bill passed by Congress is the Post-9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Act of 2008, known as the Post-9/11 G.I. Bill. It was signed into law on June 30, 2008, and went into effect on August 1, 2009 (Field, 2008). The Post-9/11 G.I. Bill pays tuition and fees in full at state funded public institutions or up to \$26,042.81 per year

at private institutions, provides a monthly housing allowance, and offers an annual \$1,000 stipend for books” (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2022). Since 2010, the average benefit per G.I. Bill participant was \$14,312.45 for a total of \$107.8 billion (Dortch, 2021).

Student veterans using the Post 9/11 G.I. Bill averages more than 700,000 veterans per year utilizing their benefits (Dortch, 2021). With student veterans entering higher education at rates not seen since World War II when 2.2 million total veterans used their benefits, it is important they are given tools and support to be successful and move toward graduation (Bound and Turner, 2002). Student veterans typically experience barriers to student engagement and student success associated with their military experience, over and above any barriers they might otherwise face as a first-generation college student or a member of another identity group that has been historically marginalized on campus (DeSawal, 2013).

Student veterans support services, in addition to the Veterans Administration educational funding provided to universities, tend to expand when governmental benefits expand and contract when benefits contract (Caspers & Ackerman, 2013). Therefore, it is important higher education administrators understand changes when the military makes them. This would allow their student veteran population to stay abreast of these military changes and keep student veteran information up to date so that student veterans will not miss out on anything they have earned. Again, student veterans who feel supported are more likely to stay in school and progress toward graduation (DiRamio, et al., 2008).

Not all students feel they belong when they come to college, and many of them often fall through the cracks of administrative bureaucracy, constantly have to deal with increasing tuition and fees, or just feeling that they are different or not wanted from the rest of the college community. While these challenges are not unique, recent studies have shown that for student veterans, such challenges can add to an ever-growing list of issues that they may have in navigating the university process. These men and women need to feel that college is an accepting and inclusive place; when they do not feel valued, the odds of them staying in college and completing their degrees drops dramatically and is a loss not only for the student, but the university as a whole (Wert, 2016).

Problem Statement

Since 2008, there has been a large increase in the number of student veterans entering higher education across the nation. This is due to the number of men and women who served in Iraq and Afghanistan after the September 11, 2001, attacks. Since taking effect in 2009, more than 817,000 veterans have pursued an educational program under the Post-9/11 G.I. Bill (Sander, 2013). While many student veterans have challenges that differ from those of other college students, there are numerous benefits, systems, and departments on campus designed to support student veterans through graduation (Lokken et al., 2009). As more student veterans enter higher education, the more universities need to understand their needs. In most cases, 4% of the population of a public university is student veterans (DeSawal, 2013; Rumann & Bondi, 2015). However, the rate at which students with prior military experience graduate – which is as low as 45% depending on the branch of the military (Zoroya,

2014) – is lower in comparison to most other student populations, such as student-athletes or those who state they have a disability. Additionally, only one in four colleges report having a detailed understanding of why student veterans leave college before earning a degree, so universities need to understand this group of students better (Grohowski, 2013).

Given the relative novelty of many services offered for student veterans by colleges and universities across the nation, research into how students are using and perceiving targeted services can provide formative information for continued improvement. In particular, understanding student veteran perceptions of these services can ensure that institutions, professionals, and faculty do not succumb to the “more is better” mentality for support services and instead recognize that supporting successful military-to-civilian transitions should be centered around veteran perspectives on the support needed for academic success. Also, extant research has called for more consideration of diversity within the student veteran population and how individual circumstances may impact the efficacy of campus support services (Morris et al., 2019). Mobley et al. (2019) states veteran studies need theoretical perspectives that can advance an understanding of student veteran experiences (p. 1211). To that end, the study explored the perceptions and experiences of student veterans enrolled at a 4-year university in the Midwest United States to gain a fuller understanding of their successes and future needs.

Purpose Statement and Research Questions

The purpose of this study is to explore student veterans’ lived experiences with support systems at a four-year research university, how they perceive the

effectiveness of policies and programs designed to support them, and their interactions with the wider campus community. Specifically, the following research questions guided this study:

1. What are student veterans' reported experiences with support systems in place specifically for them?
2. How do student veterans perceive the role of support services in meeting their goals and needs?
3. Using which tenets of Veterans' Critical Theory (Phillips & Lincoln, 2017) best explain the experiences student veterans have on campus and with a university community as a whole?

Significance of Study

With the ending of the Iraq War and more troops being removed from Afghanistan, thousands of men and women are returning home to the United States. Historical college-going trends from previous wars suggest that many of these veterans will use the benefits of the G.I Bill to attend college at almost no cost to themselves. While this increase in student veterans poses some challenges to universities across the nation, there are benefits to the institutions where they enroll. Existing literature has shown some understanding of why these men and women are going to college, various programs that have been beneficial to them, and how well they have transitioned into the university community. However, there are still issues of how to keep more student veterans enrolled in college programs. This study contributes to the body of research that focuses on student veterans' experiences and perceptions in how they are welcomed and assimilated into the college community as

a whole. The study asked student veterans about their experiences with university programs and policies as well as interaction in class and other aspects of their college career with faculty, staff, and other non-veteran students. Greater understanding of student veterans for continuing their education fostered by this study may support campus leaders to adjust or create programs and policies that would benefit all student veterans.

This study used Veteran Critical Theory in an *a priori* fashion to shape the design of the study and ultimately the interpretation of the data. In this way, I hoped to add to the growing knowledge of student veterans' persistence and graduation from four-year institutions. For example, Mobley et al. (2019) used Veteran Critical Theory to study student veterans studying engineering in hopes of understanding their needs and if support systems put in place were actually helping student veterans move toward graduation. Atkinson (2019) also used Veteran Critical Theory to study female student veterans on college campuses. That study found some unique needs and perceptions of female student veterans that could help guide future studies of the same demographic group. Additionally, Tinoco (2020) conducted a mixed-methods study to discover possible needs, barriers, and challenges that student veterans who were enrolled at a Tier-1 Research University located in the Pacific Rim region. This study looked at how student veterans transitioned into higher education and their relationships with peers and other members of the campus community. Therefore, this dissertation examines a different group of student veterans; those who are studying at a midwestern state 4-year university.

Overview of Methodology

The goal of this research was to gain an understanding of the experiences of student veterans, their interactions with faculty/staff and their peers, how they perceive the policies and support structures in place to help them and their sense of belonging in the university community. This focus includes their perceptions of how people on campus treat them and how well institutional policies and programs support them. The methodology used to research student veterans in this study was a qualitative multi-case study informed by a critical perspective as developed by Phillips and Lincoln (2017) in their Veterans Critical Theory.

The study is an intrinsic, exploratory multi-case study that I pre-selected as intrinsically worth exploring as a phenomenon of interest (Stake, 1995, p.4). The cases for this study are students who have served or are still serving in the United States Military or National Guard who are attending a Midwestern 4-year university working toward an undergraduate degree and who work or regularly spend time in the Student Veteran Center. Although Stake (2006) uses the term “quintain” to describe a collection of cases (p. 6), I chose to simply call my collection of cases a group. The design of the study follows Hawthorn et al. (2013) in considering student veterans as a marginalized population who do not fit into any mainstream student culture and are often virtually invisible unless they cause problems or disrupt the lifestyles of mainstream persons. They have individual experiences in the military and on campus that shape the way they view not just their university experience but themselves (p.

234-235). Also, this study hoped to understand student veterans' sense of belonging throughout the larger campus community.

For this study, the boundaries of the case are defined as students who have served or are serving in the United States Military or National Guard and who are enrolled in university studies pursuing a bachelor's degree at a Midwestern state university, and who work or spend time in the student veteran center. While other researchers have explored the experiences of student veterans in the Pacific Rim region, very few, if any studies have been conducted in the Midwest. The bounded system in which student veterans are providing their life experiences are descriptions about and interactions with support systems on campus that are in place to help them and move them toward graduation. Therefore, I used multi-case study in order to build knowledge based on the experiences of the student veterans taking part in the study. In using case study, Merriam (2009) says it "can be described by its unique features. The researcher should use a qualitative case study analysis approach if the following three characteristics were taking place: the focus is particularistic; the study research under examination is richly descriptive; and heuristic" (p. 43). A more exact description of these methods appears in Chapter 3.

Summary

Student veterans are enrolling in higher education in numbers not seen since World War II. It is important that higher education officials and the university community as a whole understand more about the specific needs these students have and must deal with on a daily basis. It may be that if more people understood student veterans' experiences and perceptions in and of higher education then supporting

members of this unique campus population becomes an easier task. This dissertation was designed to allow student veterans to express these experiences and perceptions. This chapter introduced the background of the student veteran, as well as the problem statement of the study, along with the purpose statement guiding the study. It also includes the professional significance of the study and an overview of the methodology. The following two chapters present a review of the literature situating the study relative to the branch of knowledge concerning student veterans and the methodology being utilized, while the final two chapters present the findings and implications of the study.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Many student veterans have challenges that are different from other college students. While there are numerous benefits, systems, and departments on campus specifically designed to support student veterans through graduation they still drop out at a higher rate than most other student groups. Therefore, more research needs to be done in order to understand whether or not student veterans do indeed perceive the programs in place to be truly supportive and if this engagement with support systems moves student veterans toward graduation. This chapter reviews the present literature that deals with student veterans and their engagement on college campuses while also giving a short history on the relationship between the military and higher education. This relationship has grown since its inception and has been a benefit to both parties as shown later in this chapter in ways such as tuition assistance, counseling services, and other benefits specifically designed for student veterans.

The chapter begins with the origins of the relationship between the United States military and higher education before covering more recent research about student veterans, their place in the college community, and how student veterans compare to students who do not have military experience in terms of graduation

success. The chapter also includes a review of university programs and policies in place to support degree completion, as well as how student veterans transition into higher education from the military and see themselves in relationship to their peers and others on campus.

Higher Education and Military Cooperatives

The relationship between higher education institutions and the United States military, and thus the origins of the student veteran as a campus demographic began during the Civil War with the Morrill Land-Grant College Act of 1862, also known as the Morrill Act. Sponsored by Vermont Congressman Justin Morrill, the Morrill Act was signed into law by President Abraham Lincoln on July 2, 1862. Officially titled "An Act Donating Public Lands to the Several States and Territories which may provide Colleges for the Benefit of Agriculture and the Mechanic Arts," the Morrill Act provided each state with 30,000 acres of federal land for each member in their congressional delegation. The land was then sold by the states and the proceeds used to fund public colleges that focused on agriculture and the mechanical arts. Sixty-nine colleges were funded by these land grants such as the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cornell University, and the University of Wisconsin (Library of Congress, 2017).

As the nation entered the second year of the Civil War, Union army forces had experienced several defeats in major battles so many in the Union leadership thought their forces needed more men who had been trained in the military instead of those who had just gone through basic training and then were thrown into battle. Morrill suggested the land grant colleges could serve a larger purpose

to society than only providing academics. Requiring the land grant colleges to train citizens as soldiers allowed for America to have a continuous supply of skilled men ready to defend the country, while avoiding the establishment of a large formal military. As a result, Morrill convinced his fellow congressmen to include a clause in the legislation requiring institutions financed through the government's sale of federal lands to also provide military training as part of the curriculum (Beauchamp, 2015). These men would not get the same type of training as others would at military academies such as West Point or the Citadel, but this new instruction would allow them to learn important lessons such as basic tactics as well as the issuing and following of orders.

The Army ROTC program, as we know it today, came into being with the passage of the National Defense Act of 1916. This program represented the first time that the military instruction on America's college campuses was brought under a single, federally controlled program. During school year 1919-1920, the Army ROTC program produced its first group of lieutenants totaling 133 new officers from institutions throughout the nation (UC Berkeley Army ROTC, 2020).

By the end of 1919, 135 institutions had been granted ROTC units. These institutions agreed to offer a two-year basic course, mandatory at many schools, of at least three hours per week followed by a voluntary two-year advanced course of at least five hours a week. Students who completed the advanced course could receive a reserve or National Guard commission. The War Department agreed to pay the salaries of the instructional staff, the cost of books, and the

stipends of advanced cadets. In return, the host schools agreed to provide classrooms and office space and to give senior officers the title of assistant professor of military science and tactics. By January 1922, 57,419 students were enrolled in 131 units located throughout the country (Neiberg, 2000, p. 26). When World War II began, over 50,000 Army Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) officers, trained at land grant colleges, helped the nation mobilize. Army Chief of Staff General George C. Marshall said, “Just what we would have done in the early phases of our training and mobilization without these men I do not know” (Cross, 1999).

Unlike faculty in most civilian college programs, ROTC faculty did not possess Ph.D.s, seek tenure, nominate candidates for degrees, or serve on university committees. Also, ROTC faculty rarely remained at a particular campus for longer than three years. Nevertheless, ROTC programs were set up as full academic departments to make military instruction more respectable in the eyes of students and to encourage civilian faculty to treat the uniformed officers as peers rather than outsiders or interlopers. Furthermore, ROTC officers owed their first allegiance to an outside agency that paid their salary and with whom they had taken an oath of service. All of these characteristics distinguished ROTC from other academic departments, yet the universities rarely challenged the special and unique status of ROTC during the Cold War (Neiberg, 2000, p. 49).

Federal Legislation to Support Student Veterans

As the United States moved closer to the Cold War, the possibility of war with the Soviet Union rose. However, there was a feeling that not all of the

conflicts between the two nations would take place on the battlefield. The United States wanted to find a way to make sure it could compete with the Soviets in other realms such as science, medicine, and technology. In order to accomplish this, the nation needed more of its citizens to be educated and prepared to enter new industries that had never existed before. The answer came in the creation of the G.I. Bill. Over the second half of the 20th Century there would be different forms of the G.I. Bill that would support those men and women who had served in the armed forces and allow millions of them to attend college that would have previously never had the opportunity.

Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944

When one looks at the history of the United States in the 20th century, one of the most important legislative acts and public policy decisions was the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, also known as the G.I. Bill. Before World War II, most citizens who were able to afford college were primarily wealthy families who could afford to have their children not enter the work force right after they completed high school (Hunt, 2006). This act would change everything for millions of American servicemen and women by allowing them opportunities that were previously unavailable. The purpose of the G.I. Bill was "to provide Federal Government aid for the readjustment in civilian life of returning World War II veterans" (General Records of US Government, 2016). While this description may seem quite ambiguous, it allowed thousands of men and women who served their country faithfully during World War II to buy a home, start a business, or provide them with enough funding to go to college. It

was this ability of veterans to afford and attend college in record numbers without accruing massive debt that helped the nation achieve a period of prosperity that had never been seen before in the United States.

While World War II was still raging, the US Department of Labor estimated that approximately 15 million men and women would be unemployed when they left the service when the war ended (General Records of US Government, 2016). To reduce this number and stop the risk of the nation plunging back into another depression, the National Resources Planning Board projected postwar labor needs and recommended a series of programs for education and training. The American Legion designed the main specifications and conditions of what would become the Serviceman's Readjustment Act. Congress chartered the American Legion in 1919 as a patriotic veterans organization. Focusing on service to veterans, service members and communities, the Legion evolved from a group of war-weary veterans of World War I into one of the most influential nonprofit groups in the United States and was often consulted on almost all bills where veterans were concerned (American Legion, 2020). When the bill was sent to Congress, both houses passed it without a single dissenting vote. The G.I. Bill would provide tuition, books and supplies, and counseling services for veterans to continue their education.

One of the most effective influences on the G.I. Bill was the emphasis that Harvard University gave the bill as it began advertisement and recruitment programs directed towards servicemen based overseas before World War II ended. The idea was to make college life attractive to older, mature, and capable

men who, prior to the war, might not have considered college, let alone apply to the oldest and one of the most prestigious universities in the United States (Alexander & Thelin, 2013). Harvard administrators believed having veterans enroll would add a unique perspective to the student body that differed from those students who were coming straight from high school (Harvard University, 1945). When administrators at other universities followed suit, implementing policies similar to that at Harvard, in an effort to avoid appearing unpatriotic and/or lose perspective students when Harvard tapped into a huge new demographic: student veterans.

By August 1946, a year after the surrender by the Japanese, one million veterans of the U.S. war effort had enrolled in post-secondary education paid for by the GI Bill (Kiestler, 1994). By 1947, of the nearly 2.3 million students enrolled in higher education, almost half (49.2 percent) were veterans. Over the next year, enrollment in higher education remained high before tapering off in 1948, at which time 40.5 percent of the 2.4 million students enrolled were veterans (Beauchamp, 2015). Within 7 years, almost 8 million former service members used these services with 2.3 million attending colleges and universities, 3.5 million receiving school training, and 3.4 million receiving on-the-job training. The number of degrees awarded in the United States more than doubled between 1945 and 1950, and when the first G.I. Bill expired in 1956, the education-and-training portion of the bill had disbursed \$14.5 billion to veterans. What is even more impressive about this is that due to the amount of taxes that the veterans paid, the G.I. Bill more than paid for the government-funded awards (General

Records of U.S. Government, 2016). Other numbers that are just as impressive include these: the G.I. Bill created 450,000 engineers, and 91,000 scientists.

These graduates in turn, made new innovations in science and technology, culminating in man's first moon landing in 1969 and the creation of the first home personal computers (Hubbard, 2015).

The Veterans' Readjustment Assistance Act of 1952

With the ending of World War II, some thought there would be no need to continue the G.I. Bill into the 1950s. However, when the United States became involved in Korea, it was felt the benefits needed to be extended to those men and women who were once again called into service for their country. The Veterans' Readjustment Assistance Act of 1952, also called the Korean Conflict Bill, provided veterans of the Korean War benefits similar to those offered in the original G.I. Bill, such as job placement, home loans, and mustering out pay. However, the educational benefits provided to veterans under the Korean Conflict Bill were drastically different from those allowed in the 1944 G.I. Bill (Beauchamp, 2015). Under the Korean Conflict Bill, veterans who served in the military more than 90 days between June 1950 and January 1955 and received anything other than dishonorable discharge were provided up to \$110 a month for school and living expenses for up to 36 months (Ford & Miller, 1995). With the reduction of benefits, the educational assistance received under the 1952 Bill no longer covered all educational costs, which greatly changed the types of schools at which veterans enrolled. However, even with the reduction in benefits, of the estimated 5.5 million Korean Veterans eligible to receive benefits, approximately

2.4 million took advantage of the educational opportunities provided with 1.2 million enrolling in higher education (Ford & Miller, 1995; Stover, 1981).

After 1956, the G.I. Bill of 1952 was dead. Congress assumed that it had done its job for the nation and was no longer needed. While the Cold War was still very much alive, military officials assumed that full-scale war was not likely as nuclear weapons were now capable of inflicting massive amounts of damage on the enemy without the need of large numbers of a large professional, standing military force. However, once the conflict in Vietnam began to escalate, there was a belief that a new type of G.I. Bill was needed for the newest generation of veterans.

The Veterans Readjustment Act of 1966

The Veterans Readjustment Act of 1966, known as the Vietnam G.I. Bill or the Post-Korean G.I. Bill, went into effect in June (Caspers & Ackerman, 2013). This bill originally provided benefits to veterans who served between August 5, 1964 and May 29, 1975. However, this was later changed for those who served as early as February 28, 1961 (Stover, 1981). The benefits used by these veterans were often different from those who served in earlier conflicts. Vietnam veterans tended to favor occupational and vocational education and often sought that type of education at community colleges. This shift towards community colleges has not been fully explained. However, it could have occurred because of the changes in funding levels and payment methods or just because veterans began to have different career goals when they returned from their service (Caspers & Ackerman, 2013, p. 24).

Benefits of the Vietnam G.I. Bill included up to \$100 each month that had to be used for school related expenses. Eventually, Congress increased the amount until it topped out at \$311 a month. One major difference between this G.I. Bill and the ones that came before it is the extension of eligibility to veterans who served during both war and peacetime to receive benefits. For 10 years from the date of their discharge, or until December 31, 1989, veterans were entitled to one month of educational assistance for each month of service (Beauchamp, 2015). This benefit was later increased to 1.5 months of assistance for each month of service. Approximately 76% of the eligible veterans took advantage of the Vietnam G.I. Bill, more than the two previous G.I Bills combined. By 1980, 5.5 million veterans had received an education under the Vietnam G.I. Bill (Department of Veterans Affairs, 2009).

An additional 1966 provision allowed military members to use the G.I. Bill before they left active service. Since active-duty members were receiving salaries, it was less likely they would need to work part-time while attending college. In many of these cases, the entire benefit could be used toward the cost of tuition. Vietnam veterans intending to use the benefit as the sole means of funding their education and living expenses were less likely to choose to attend the more expensive institutions, an option more feasible for their active-duty peers who were still receiving military pay (Caspers & Ackerman, 2013).

The Montgomery G.I. Bill

With the ending of the Vietnam War came the end of the G.I. Bill again. While the United States was involved in smaller conflicts, there was nothing that

came close to a full-scale war. However, as the Cold War began to intensify in the 1980s, there was a feeling the military needed more service members so some former veterans who were members of Congress wanted to revive the G.I. Bill. There was a sense that better incentives to join the military were needed in order to convince young people to sign-up in the absence of a major conflict. In 1984, Mississippi Congressman Gillespie V. Montgomery revived the G.I. Bill so this new version would be known as the “Montgomery G.I. Bill.” Nuclear war was deemed impossible to win so ground troops would be needed to fight a war where victory was possible. With the changes to the legislation in the 1984 update, a monthly stipend was paid directly to the student. The lump sum payments indirectly encouraged veterans to pursue lower-cost education options so they could also use some of the money to pay for their various living expenses. Under the Montgomery G.I. Bill, veterans were only eligible if they completed their initial active-duty commitment and agreed to have their pay reduced \$100 each month for 12 months. In return, the Veterans Administration provided \$400 a month for 36 months of college or other educational training. Veterans who chose not to participate at the time of their enlistment permanently forfeited their eligibility (Beauchamp, 2015).

As of the 2007-2008 academic year, just before a Post-9/11 G.I. Bill went into effect, the Montgomery G.I. Bill covered “approximately 73 percent of the cost of tuition, fees, room and board at a public four-year college, and covered much less of the cost at a private nonprofit four-year college: 31 percent when using the 2007-2008 College Board estimate average cost” (McBain, 2008, p.4).

For many veterans, the costs of higher education are often part of family budgets, which need to cover other expenses so there is a strong incentive to keep education costs low and to retain portions of the stipends for living expenses and family support. Therefore, the trend toward enrolling in vocational and two-year training and education programs continued under the Montgomery G.I. Bill, despite a growing national trend toward an information-driven, high-tech economy demanding a four-year degree (Caspers & Ackerman, 2013).

The Post-9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Act of 2008

After September 11, 2001, the Montgomery G.I. Bill had to be updated again as the United States found itself in a new type of war and with thousands of men and women entering the service in numbers that had not been seen since Vietnam. The most recent G.I. Bill enacted is the Post-9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Act of 2008, more commonly known as the Post-9/11 G.I. Bill. Introduced by Virginia Senator Jim Webb in 2007, the Post-9/11 G.I. Bill was signed into law on June 30, 2008, and went into effect on August 1, 2009 (Field, 2008). This version of the bill is the most generous in history. This is largely due to the rise of a college education and the fact that not as many men and women are wanting to join the armed forces. The new bill pays tuition and fees in full at the in-state tuition rate at a public institution or up to \$25,162.14 per year at a private institution; provides a monthly housing allowance during the term of enrollment, the amount of which is based on the zip code of the institution attended; and offers an annual \$1,000 stipend for books (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2022).

One interesting fact about the Post-9/11 G.I. Bill is that many veterans chose not to use it, and instead took advantage of the older Montgomery G.I. Bill. This choice is possible due to when the service member entered the military and how long they stayed enlisted. Some users are not eligible for the Post-9/11 G.I. Bill while some are eligible for both. Veterans may only receive benefits from one of these programs at a time and a change is irrevocable, so veterans need to research which is the better choice for them since different circumstances can mean one program is better than the other. For example, out-of-state students generally pay higher tuition and fees to attend public colleges and universities. But because of the new, stricter no out-of-state fees rule, student veterans enrolling at out-of-state institutions are responsible for the entire tuition and fee differential. Those costs can be considerable depending on state policies and institutional tuition structures (Caspers & Ackerman, 2013).

When it comes to how colleges and university administrators support the various G.I. Bills, they like them because they allow the growth of the student body with individuals who will have the ability to pay. Student veterans support services in addition to the Veterans Administration educational funding are provided for by institutions of higher learning and tend to expand when G.I. Bill benefits expand and retract when benefits retract. Therefore, it is important these administrators understand the changes in the various G.I. Bills, so that they can help their student veteran population stay abreast of these changes and keep their information up to date so that student veterans will not miss out on anything they have earned.

Criticisms of the G.I. Bills

While many people believe the G.I. Bills have been a boon, not just to the veterans who have served but also the nation as a whole, there were some who did not agree with the G.I. Bill and felt veterans should not have benefits that are not available for the rest of the population (Herbold, 1994). However, the G.I. Bill was not the first time veterans were able to receive additional compensation for their service. After the Revolutionary War, veterans were given land for their service, and after the War of 1812, the Mexican American War, and the Spanish-American War, veterans were provided pensions (Alexander & Thelin, 2013). Those who served in the Union Army during the Civil War were given pensions by the federal government and those who served in the Confederate Army received pensions from the former Confederate states as well (Department of Veterans Affairs, 2008; Green, 2006). For veterans of World War I, the federal government approved a bonus in the form of certificates that could not be redeemed until 1945. In January 1936, Congress overrode a presidential veto and passed legislation that replaced the bonus certificates with bonds that still bore a 1945 maturity date, but World War I veterans could redeem these bonds earlier due to the events of the Bonus Army March on Washington DC during the Great Depression where homeless veterans were driven out of the city by force (Alexander & Thelin, 2013). Therefore, giving veterans benefits that were not available to the rest of society was not new and unexpected. However, citizens may have been surprised by the scope of the benefits from the G.I. Bill.

Another historical criticism of the G.I. Bill is that it was only a help to white men and largely left out minorities (Turner & Bound, 2003). African Americans, especially, in the South, faced intimidation and were less likely to take advantage of the benefits owed them. The same was true of women, many of whom were redefined as “civilian contractors,” during World War II making them ineligible for veterans’ programs (Kinder, 2015, p. 268). Gay men and lesbians faced hostility as large numbers of them were forced out of the service during World War II. In 1945, the Veterans Affairs Director, Frank T. Hines barred military personnel discharged for ‘homosexual acts or tendencies’ from receiving veterans’ benefits (Canaday, 2009, p. 150). While a few veterans did protest and fight for their fellow soldiers who were being persecuted, most used their military service as a “steppingstone to a better life” and moved on (Keane, 2001, p. 205).

A recent criticism of the G.I. Bill is that at one time student veterans could use the benefits at any school they wanted to, including for-profit institutions such as the University of Phoenix. Critics believe for-profit schools take advantage of student veterans and use predatory practices to entice the student veterans to enroll and use up all their military benefits whether it was necessary or not. 31% of student veterans who enrolled at for-profit institutions had to take out loans in the academic year ending in 2012 (Zarembo, 2015). Critics say the schools prey on veterans with misleading advertisements while selling expensive and woefully inadequate educations. Since the Post-9/11 GI Bill took effect in 2009, eight of the ten colleges collecting the most money from the program have been for-profit schools. Veterans' groups say for-profit schools snare unsuspecting veterans with

aggressive marketing, high-pressure sales calls and ads that falsely imply that these particular schools are exclusively approved for G.I. Bill benefits (Zucchino & Rivera, 2012).

An additional criticism some have is the way in which benefits differ from one state to another. The amount of monetary benefits a veteran receives is based on the zip code of the institution they are attending. This means that some states provide larger monetary benefits than others. One of the most dramatic examples is in Washington, D.C., which lacks a comprehensive state college system. The largest public institution, the University of the District of Columbia, is a low-cost institution, even though the district is also home to some of the nation's most expensive private institutions. As a result, the V.A. bases the benefits for service members in the District of Columbia on a cost of \$197 per credit hour. In neighboring Maryland, the benefit is based on a much higher cost: \$458 per hour. The gap is evident in other regions as well. In Texas, the benefit is based on a rate of \$1,471 per credit hour, while for neighboring Oklahoma the per-hour rate is just \$151 (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2022).

Many also criticize the Veterans Administration and some schools for the amount of time it takes to process paperwork for veterans' benefits. "The VA is taking, on average, 35 days to process a G.I. Bill claim," said Patrick Campbell, chief legislative counsel for the Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America (IAVA). When this happens, it means that some veterans incur penalty fees that would not be included once their payments go through. It is imperative that these

types of errors are corrected so student veterans do not have to use their payments and other funds for late penalties.

The G.I. Bill not only changed the lives of those who used the educational benefits to attend colleges and universities, it also changed the landscape of higher education. Universities were able to hire more employees to handle the increased numbers of students who enrolled. Institutions also had to make adjustments and gain an understanding that student veterans were a new demographic with their own set of characteristics, problems, and needs. Those new employees needed to be able to bridge the gap between the Veterans Administration and the university so these student veterans would not get lost in the system.

The relationship between the U.S. military and higher education institutions has been influential for each organization. For the U.S. military, this relationship has helped to train officers through university-located ROTC programs, help enlistment during times of war and crisis by already having a military presence on campus, and maintaining this presence on campuses to humanize military members and normalize their membership in the college community. For institutions, the relationship has helped student veterans pay tuition and other costs, helped prepare students for the rigors of higher education, and added a new diverse population to the university community. However, there are still challenges for student veterans being successful in higher education. The next section looks at some of these issues and how researchers have attempted to

study student veterans, their engagement on college campuses, and find solutions to support them and move them toward graduation.

The 21st Century Student Veteran College Experience

Just as student veterans have had to adjust to higher education, higher education has begun to change and focus on serving the modern student who are attending their institutions. Each university needs to look at their student body and decide what is best for them, as well as the university itself. How a university supports students is integral to their success and moving toward graduation.

Defining Student Success

As higher education practitioners look at ways to help their student succeed, there are different ways to look at this issue. Scholars have theorized integration (Tinto, 1993), involvement (Astin, 1993), engagement (Kuh, et al., 2007), and belonging (Masika & Jones, 2016; Gopalan & Brady, 2020) as key to retention in particular and student success in general (Wolf-Wendel, et al., 2009). I am focused this study on engagement and belonging. I assert student veterans persist in higher education when they believe they are valued and accepted by the university community. This includes not just how student veterans are treated in the classroom but also how policy and programs support them and help them move toward graduation.

Kuh et al. (2007) defines engagement in two ways. The first is the amount of time and effort students put into their academics and extracurricular activities that lead to the experiences and outcomes that constitute student success. The second is how universities allocate their human and other resources to organize

learning opportunities and services to encourage students to participate and benefit from such activities. While these components have been used to study other student demographic populations, these researchers have begun to use these methods to focus on student veterans' engagement in order to help understand student veteran perceptions and experiences in college so universities can see what resources are truly helping them and not just from the point of view of the institution.

Gopalan and Brady's (2020) research found that feeling a sense of belonging was positively and robustly associated with outcomes colleges care deeply about, including persistence and mental health. This sense of belonging also led students to engage more deeply with their studies. They also found students who feel they belong seek out and use campus resources to a greater extent, furthering their success while also buffering students from stress, improving mental health. However, these benefits may not be equally shared. A growing literature indicates that students from underrepresented racial-ethnic minority (Black, Hispanic, and Native) and first-generation college (FG) backgrounds report lower belonging as well as greater uncertainty about their belonging. This dissertation attempted to determine if these outcomes are the same for student veterans or if belonging is not something they feel is important to their future success.

Supporting Academic Success for Student Veterans

Several conceptual models have been developed to attempt to describe the experiences of student veterans and how these experiences would help or hinder

them in higher education. Although they were developed through empirical research, compared to other well-used theories these frameworks are still new and being critiqued for their effectiveness. DiRamio, et al. (2008) present themes for student veterans as they move into the college environment. Wert (2016) developed a model that incorporated structured resources, such as financial assistance and meeting childcare needs, to scaffold a successful transition by adapting Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Next, Phillips and Lincoln (2017) adapted a veteran critical theory from Critical Social Theory (Guess, 1981) to understand issues from a student veteran lens based on 11 principled beliefs. These conceptual models have laid the foundation to form an understanding of the student veteran experience in higher education in order to create practical approaches to promote satisfactory academic progress for student veterans (Vacchi et al., 2017). Finally, the use of Validation Theory (Rendon, 1994), which was developed from factors contributing to student learning and retention in higher education, shows ways in which student veterans can benefit from genuine engagement and support to navigate the systems universities have in place to move forward toward graduation and that many students struggle with when having to deal with the university system alone. Rendon's (1994) study was developed from the results of a larger study of the factors contributing to student learning and retention in higher education. During the study, non-traditional students reported validation allayed doubts about their ability to learn and was important to their academic success. Validation Theory counters the notion that college students must navigate the college system, which relies primarily on self-

responsibility in programs that are not likely to foster the types of interactions that build the genuine relationships necessary for promoting engagement, as Kuh et al. (2007) would define it. “Validation serves as an important foundation for involvement, academic success, and development in college” (Rumann & Bondi, 2015). By using Validation Theory in studying student veterans, it might be possible to discover more ways to help them move toward graduation.

Many universities have programs for student veterans; however, student veterans participating on other research have not given such programs high marks for fostering genuine support and engagement. In their study of student veterans new to campus, Hawthorne et al. (2013) found that these students often look for others who have had similar experiences, in an effort to replace the cohesion of their military unit with a familiar peer group. A 2009 study for the American Council on Education found that only 32% of college campuses hosted student veterans’ organizations. This percentage is lower than what some researchers believed was actually on campuses because so many institutions portray themselves as “student veteran friendly” (Arminio & Grabosky, 2013). This dissertation interviewed student veterans to find if they believe their institution is truly a place that is friendly to student veterans or just says it is for purposes of recruitment and university satisfaction.

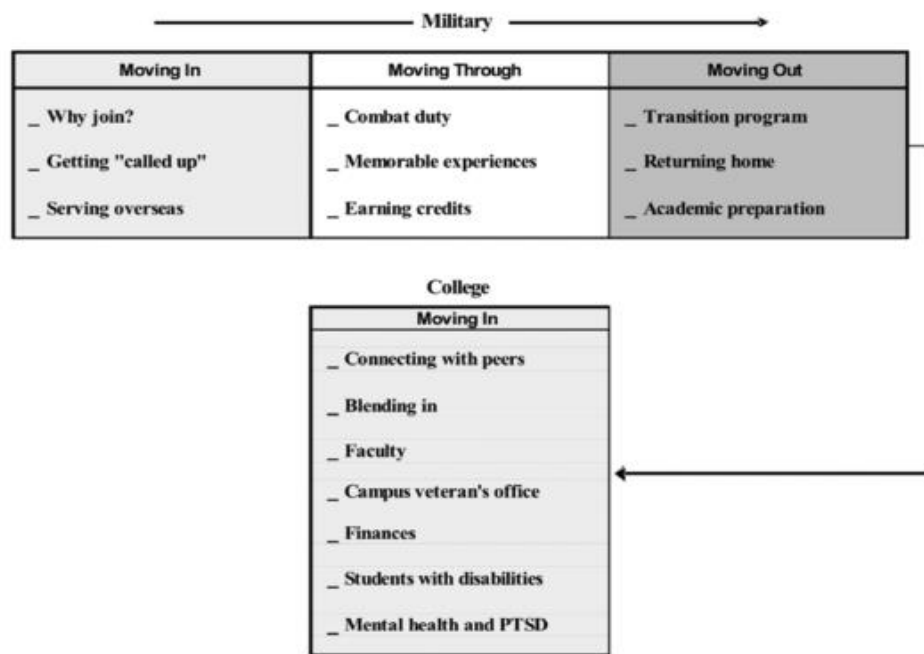
Using Moving In, Moving Through, Moving Out for Student Veterans

DiRamio, et al., (2008) used Schlossberg, et al.’s (1989) Moving In, Moving Through, Moving Out model for adult transition as a conceptual lens to describe service members’ transitions from the military to higher education.

DiRamio and colleagues determined that a holistic process centered on identification, orientation, and mentoring of enrolled student veterans was needed to assist individuals in navigating the college system toward graduation. At the top of their model for student veterans entering college are the things they believe are the most important for them to be successful in higher education: connecting with peers, blending in, and engaging with faculty.

Figure 2.1

Themes of Transition for Student-Veterans



Note. From *Combat to Campus: Voices of Student-Veterans* by D. DiRamio, R. Ackerman, and R. Mitchell, 2008, *NASPA Journal*, 45(1), 73-102.

DiRamio and colleagues (2008) explained that for the average college student, things like finding out where the various institutional offices are located

may be common sense, but for the student veteran who has spent the past several years in an environment that does not lend itself to free thought and making many of their own decisions, things like connecting with peers and faculty can be extremely difficult. The authors also highlighted the importance of understanding how military service shapes the thought process of student veterans. When an individual is transitioning through the moving in process, arriving on a college campus, they will need to “learn the ropes” and become familiar with rules, regulations, norms, and expectations of the new system.

Wert’s Veteran Transition Success Model

Wert (2016) adapted the concepts of Maslow’s (1943) hierarchy of needs to represent the experience of student veterans. At the bottom of Maslow’s hierarchy are basics needs such as of food, shelter, and safety. Wert situated financial stability as the most basic need for student veterans; from this perspective, administrators should be especially mindful of federal and state regulations impacting veterans’ educational benefits and financial assistance. Wert progressed the model from financial stability through career development and employment. Needs addressed prior to employment are mental health, social support, and academic success. Finally, Wert noted in order for student veterans to successfully transition, each level needed to be met for progression to the occur.

For student veterans, Wert determined these needs have been met and reinforced in the military through the camaraderie and peer support of their unit. After student veterans leave the military, many of them struggle with the loss of

belonging to a group. This may mean there is a “lack of real connectedness in the college environment for student veterans [which] may be tantamount to having safety and physiological needs such as financial stability and good health unmet, leading to feeling isolated and disconnected and needing to just blend in” (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011). Wert also noted that one of the most important needs for student veterans is to be able to relate and connect with people on campus so that they will be able to function and eventually succeed. If the basic need of feeling a part of a team or community is not met, many student veterans will look for that satisfaction somewhere else, and if that is away from college, then they will most likely leave.

Challenges of Transitions

Transitioning into a new community or lifestyle can be a struggle for many people. Student veterans experience several different transitions being experienced at the same time. Not only are student veterans often transitioning into university study, but they are also moving from military service to civilian status. These transitions have been studied in different ways such as this move from the military into civilian life as well as having to adjust to find their place and sense of belonging on campus.

Nahphan and Elliott (2015) call this transition a role exit. Role exit is a unique transition because it involves learning a new role or position while at the same time withdrawing from the values, norms, and expectations of a previous role. The importance of disengagement is magnified in cases where the expectations of their previous role would be unnecessary, inappropriate, or

possibly criminal in the new role. For student veterans, many of the conditioned and normative behaviors of the military such as hyper-vigilance, and aggression are dysfunctional in civilian life. The challenge of role exit for veterans is compounded by the fact that expectations of their previous role are often deeply embedded into their self-concepts and especially difficult to relinquish. This study conducted a qualitative analysis of in-depth interviews conducted in 2010 with eleven student veterans who had served in the U.S. Armed Forces since the 9/11 terrorist attacks, who had been deployed overseas, and who had a wide range of military experiences. The student veterans had recently graduated from, were currently enrolled in, or were soon transferring to a mid-sized, Western, public university from a local community college.

Some studies have found the role change of full-time military service member to full-time student has caused challenges for transitioning student veterans. Rumann and Hamrick (2010) discussed identity re-negotiation where the veteran is learning the new normal from their military identity to a civilian identity or even a student identity. Previous findings suggested the salient identity to recognize for this population is student veteran. Their findings concluded gender, racial and disabilities identities came after the veteran identity (Cook-Francis, & Kraus, 2012). Among student veterans in engineering, similar results were identified suggesting student veterans were more likely to identify their veteran status or branch engagement as their primary identity (Atkinson, 2015, p. 29).

Another issue student veterans experienced was caused through an expanded world view gained through their military service. Returning to the classroom with peers who have a more limited worldview posed a challenge for student veterans in transition (DiRamio et al., 2008). Further, student veterans come from a highly structured organizational system with many formalities and directed orders to implement. The civilian environment of a college campus with its less formal and unstructured culture can leave the student veteran feeling lost (Naphan & Elliot, 2015). In the beginning of the academic year, colleges and universities traditionally hold orientation for new students. Orientation was designed to help all students. Unfortunately, student veterans were often busy with families or their jobs and could not attend these information sessions (Falkey, 2016). Additionally, if the student veteran can attend the orientation, the event is not typically devoted to specific issues facing student veterans so a general new student orientation event is not as helpful as it might be if the event focused on smaller groups within the larger student population (Warner, 2018).

Student Veteran Identity

Transitioning student veterans report experiencing challenges in their transition from full-time military service member to full-time student (Naphan & Elliot, 2015). Rumann and Hamrick (2010) discussed identity re-negotiation where the veteran is learning the new normal from their military identity to a civilian identity or even a student identity. Previous findings suggested the salient identity to recognize for this population is student veteran, which is attempting to reconcile two separate identities: students and veterans. Their findings concluded

gender, racial and disabilities identities came after the veteran identity (Cook-Francis, & Kraus, 2012). Among student veterans in engineering, similar results were identified suggesting student veterans were more likely to identify their veteran status or branch engagement as their primary identity (Atkinson, 2015, p. 29).

Throughout society, men and women are given titles or identities and these can often become a large part of how society sees them and how they see themselves. However, one title or identity does not encompass who they are because they have different roles depending on who they are with and what they are doing. One of the biggest issues that many student veterans have is that they are often viewed through a lens of just being a veteran and not the other roles/group memberships they may identify with. For instance, a student veteran can also be an ethnic minority, a member of the LBGT community, a parent, or a part of any number of other groups that is a large part of their identity. Faculty and staff should provide opportunities for student veterans to explore how their identities intersect, because students who are able to explore their multiple intersecting identities are more likely to feel a sense of wholeness contributing to a sense of self-confidence (Rumann et al., 2015).

In the past few years, new research has begun to go beyond what the foundational researchers did in regard to student veterans and their relationship within the college community. In the early literature, most researchers concentrated their studies on white men who had served. Student veterans are still often incorrectly stereotyped as young, white males and “traditional” students but

the veteran population is becoming more diverse in terms of race or ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation (Parker et al., 2017; Vacchi, 2012; Martin 2022). The most recent demographics used for updating these numbers comes from a 2016 Research Brief by the group, Student Veterans of America. Their data came from a sample size of 1,352 individuals who were surveyed in a Department of Veterans Affairs G.I. Bill population data set. Recent policy changes brought an end to the “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” era, allowing lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender troops to openly serve. Additionally, women are serving in a wider range of combat positions. These changes in policy will allow for new demographics of student veterans to take advantage of military benefits so they will be able to go to college in higher numbers than previously. This means there is a need for additional research that considers how student veterans’ diverse backgrounds relate to their college experiences and outcomes. Fernandez et al. (2019) believe colleges and universities need to identify ways to support veterans across diverse backgrounds in order to ensure that they not only have access to the college experience but also that they have every opportunity to successfully complete their own college degrees. This dissertation explores student veterans’ perceptions of the support they receive from the university, and the relationship of that support to academic success which can be defined as moving toward graduation.

Classroom Environments

Entering a college classroom can be stressful for any student. Student veterans feel more anxiety than many traditional students because of being out of

school for years and may worry they will not be able to with their fellow students. Fernandez et al. (2019) found student veterans were strongly affected by faculty members and peers in their classroom environments who were welcoming or not. Prior research often focused on administrative structures, out-of-classroom programs, and co-curricular sources of social support as ways to improve student veterans' outcomes (Mikelson & Saunders, 2013). In addition to those programs and services, Mikelson and Saunders (2013) encourage faculty members and administrators to examine how faculty members and students contribute to and develop classroom climate for student veterans.

For example, in fall 2018 the University of Houston Office of Veterans Services developed and distributed a "Military and Veteran Cultural Competency Survey" to faculty and staff. In doing so, university leaders not only collected data they could use to support student veterans, they also communicated to the faculty and staff that the university values student veterans and their experiences in classrooms (Osborne, 2014). Livingston and Bauman (2013) write that student veterans should not be asked to defend or justify the nation's foreign policy any more than other students would be asked to do so as part of a relevant academic exercise. Further, student veterans should never be asked if they killed combatants or be assumed to have mental, psychological, or physical disabilities. "I have so much knowledge to spread but when most civilians find out I served overseas, the only thing they want to know about me is whether I ever killed anyone. Do you know what it feels like to get asked a question like that?" (Norfleet, 2016, p. 36-37).

Another way to focus on student veterans is looking at how they are treated and interact in specific parts of the campus community rather than the campus as a whole. Originally, many researchers focused on climate at the level of a college or university campus, but more recent literature suggests that classroom climates might be as important as perceptions of general campus climate. Osborne's (2014) study consisted of 18 student veterans with combat experience who participated in individual interviews and focus groups. Two of the guiding questions for the study were "What challenges did you encounter while transitioning to the university?" and "What questions and comments about your service do you find offensive?" Some student veterans stated that negative interactions or relationships with peers and faculty in the classroom might create impressions that faculty and peers view them as not ready for college or mentally unstable—sometimes leading to anxiety about attending classes. Osborne (2014) concluded that "military status" is "often met by professors and peers with uncertainty or suspicion with regard to their [student veterans'] mental health and wellbeing" (p. 253). Having positive perceptions of classroom climate can ultimately influence student veterans' perceptions of campus climate, which predicts positive academic outcomes such as student persistence or commitment to the institution (Fernandez et al., 2019).

Problematic experiences in the classroom for student veterans may arise when instructors and other students make assumptions about student veterans. Participants in Osborne's research believed that civilian faculty and students think veterans are "individuals who enlisted because they were not 'college material'"

(2014, p. 253). Several student veterans admitted that they were initially wary of enrolling in higher education because they perceived the university as “anti-military” (Osborne, 2014, p. 249). After taking courses, many participants in Osborn’s study reported that peers and professors “made derogatory or overly simplistic comments about the military” (2014, p. 254). Student veterans also perceived that “disclosing one’s self as a veteran was risky and left them vulnerable to inaccurate assumptions about their mental health and overall wellbeing” (p. 254). Osborne’s and DiRamio et al.’s (2008) findings, taken together, suggested that student veterans’ perceptions of classroom environments deserve further study, going beyond how student veterans perceive and experience their classroom environments to examine how these perceptions or experiences relate to whether student veterans move toward graduation or leave the university (Fernandez et al., 2019).

Osborne’s (2014) study suggests the need for more study on the relationships between student veterans and faculty/staff on campus due to student veterans having a unique cultural background and experience challenges in higher education. Yet, few studies have examined whether faculty or staff have an accurate understanding of student veterans’ transition into higher education. To promote a deeper mutual understanding and high-quality interpersonal contact between faculty and student veterans, Lim, et al. (2018) explored how faculty’s perceptions of student veterans diverged from student veterans’ perspectives. In particular, the authors aimed to illuminate how each group understood student veterans’ dispositional characteristics as well as the nature of challenges faced by

members of this group faced during transition. By clarifying faculty's points of misunderstanding and misjudgment as well as the consequences of these misconceptions as experienced by student veterans, the authors attempt to provide a more accurate perspective on student veterans' transition and develop more effective support strategies for helping them succeed. This study hopes to add to this knowledge in hopes of addressing the different perspectives of student veterans and university personnel.

Support in the classroom is integral in supporting student veterans. If they feel isolated because of the way faculty and staff treat them, as well as their peers, it makes it more difficult for them to build relationships and stay engaged. As stated previously, many student veterans are hoping to find the same kind of cohesion on campus that they had in the military. Without this support the odds of student veterans completing their degree drops significantly.

However, there is a possibility that student veterans may have a difficult time being able to relate with non-student veterans both inside and out of the classroom. One theory that could help researchers understand why student veterans and non-student veterans may have a difficult time relating to one another is Perry's (1970) model of cognitive development during the college years. Perry's model defined cognitive strategies and assumptions that students adopt as they develop intellectually. The model has also proved helpful in giving undergraduate students an understanding of their own experiences and development and could help determine differences between college students who have served in the military and those who did not.

The four stages of Perry's (1970) model show how undergraduate students' thinking develops and grows. Stage One: Dualism; the belief that all problems have correct answers and that authorities can furnish these answers. At this level things are seen as black or white, good or evil. Dualistic students become frustrated with ambiguity and with group work that removes the classroom authority (the teacher) from the center of the experience. State Two: Multiplicity; the brain recognizes the fallibility of authority. This can cause discomfort and is not appreciated by students who equate knowledge with certainty. Brains in this stage tend to withdraw from authority and seek the company and/or affirmation of peers. In the absence of an unassailable authority to serve as arbiter of truth, arguments appear to be only opinions and they all appear equally valid or at least potentially so. Students in Stage Two realize there are at least two sides to every assertion, and they take pride in their ability to deconstruct the positions of their dualistic peers. They question authority and may conclude that no absolute truths exist, but only perspectives and perceptions. Stage Three: Contextual Relativism; students in the third stage recognize that important challenges have more-defensible and less-defensible solutions rather than a single correct answer or no answers at all. These students are not yet adept at resolving which argument is most reasonable among competing arguments when all sound plausible. Therefore, these students may recognize the need for evaluating evidentiary claims according to some standard or methodology but are not yet practiced at doing so. This stage therefore brings feelings of insecurity, self-doubt, and occasional anger. Such students desire to understand, yet at the

same time wish to escape from the intellectual work involved. Stage Four: Commitment Within Contextual Relativism; At stage four, students appreciate ambiguity as a quality of the most interesting challenges. They can enjoy methodically discovering, evaluating, and using evidence. Students at this stage recognize that reasonable answers often depend upon the contexts and value systems in which the problems occur but are amenable to investigation. Education is perceived as the opportunity to develop understanding and to practice intellectual skills in those very situations where evidence is incomplete and certainty unachievable. Associated feelings are focus and commitment. Even for those who achieve stage four, however, moving from one stage of Perry's model to the next is neither automatic nor painless (Perry, 1970; Barker, 2022). Therefore, due to their age and experiences, student veterans may be at a later stage in Perry's model than their non-student veteran peers.

Student Veteran Success Rates vs. Other Demographics

The graduation rate for student veterans, depending on the branch of service, is as high as 50% or as low as 45% (Zoroya, 2014; Alschuler & Yarab, 2016). While these numbers may not be the lowest of all student demographic groups, student veterans still lag far behind the most successful groups in terms of the ratio of those who graduate within six years of matriculation. For example, women's graduation rates are the highest at 63.6% while the men's rate is 58.1%. Non-first-generation students complete college at a rate of 64.2%. Asian students graduate at the highest rate among their military counterparts at 73.2%, followed by white students (64.3%), multiracial students (56.1%), and Latino/a students

(51.4%). Student veterans graduate at higher rates when compared to African Americans (41.3%) and American Indians (38.1%) (DeAngelo et al., 2011). In order to find these percentages, DeAngelo et al. (2011) collected responses from 210,056 students from 356 four-year non-profit institutions. While these numbers do not take student veterans into account, each group has members who are student veterans. Whites make up 70.8% of the United State military, followed by Hispanics (8.5%), African Americans (8%), and Asians (2.5%). All other groups make up 1% or less of the total military population (Cate & Davis, 2016).

The demographic statistics and graduation rates only reflect only one aspect of student veteran engagement on college campuses. A student veteran's experience in higher education cannot be reduced to a few pithy and inconsequential statement or facts. There are many characteristics that each student veteran brings into their university experience. As stated previously, problematic experiences in the classroom can make student veterans feel they are outsiders and may alienate them from the wider university community. How student veterans are treated throughout the university community is an important aspect of their success, as well as whether they can navigate the various programs and procedures that are in place to help support them. The following section looks at Critical Theory and, more specifically, Veteran Critical Theory, which helped explore the experiences of student veterans on campus.

Veteran Critical Theory

Throughout society hierarchies exist, some of these are based on economics, others on race or gender, others based on systems that place others

over their peers. Within all power relations there exists a tension between compliance and resistance. Societal groups struggle to influence social structures and the same can be said about organizations or educational institutions within a given society. (Tierney & Rhoads, 1993). For critical theorists, understanding the power of these hierarchies is fundamental to understanding human experiences. Buchanan (2010) writes that “critical theory is interested in why human society (in its eyes) failed to live up to the promise of the enlightenment and become what it is today, unequal, unjust, and largely uncaring” (p.101). Critical theorists in general focus attention of understanding and then acting to overcome social structures through which people are dominated and oppressed. Creswell (2014) offers that “critical theory perspectives are concerned with empowering human beings to transcend the constraints placed on them by race, class, and gender” (p.65). Phillips and Lincoln (2017) extend the tenets of critical theory to student veteran status. The goal of critical theory is the transformation of society as a whole so that a just society with peace, wealth, freedom, and self-fulfillment for all can be achieved (Fuchs, 2015).

Critical perspectives have been widely applied to social theories in order to explore the way in which power is amassed and used to influence the patterns of relations in the social sphere of higher education institutions (Tierney & Rhoads, 1993); consider, for example, critical feminism (Rhode, 1990); critical race theory (Delgado & Stefancic; 1993), queer theory (De Lauretis, 1991), and disability theory (Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2009) as applied to student experiences. Phillips and Lincoln (2017) have added to the critical perspectives

available for exploring experiences of particular student identities with their Veteran Critical Theory, which challenges the status quo of an institutional system and the structures, which were intended to support student veterans. Applying critical social theory to the experiences of student veterans acknowledges that institutional systems may actually disadvantage, exclude, or otherwise harm student veterans even though these systems are attempting to provide support. Veteran Critical Theory revises tenets previously articulated in other traditions, positing 11 guiding research principles, or evaluating measures, for examining institutional systems and/or evaluating their policies, procedures, and practices.

Tierney and Rhoads (1993, p. 319) offer five key aspects of critical theory: (a) marginalization and emancipation, (b) role of culture, (c) the role of power, (d) a critique of positivism, and (e) the union of research of practice. This dissertation uses each of these aspects. The first three are seen in Phillips and Lincoln's (2017) tenets of Veteran Critical Theory. The fourth is found by the very nature of qualitative research in that there is not just one truth. Each student veteran has their own experiences and perceptions that inform their own truth. The final aspect is found due to the different methods of data being collected and how the data was analyzed through methodological and theoretical lenses.

When determining what theory this research study should utilize, Veteran Critical Theory was chosen due to it having 11 tenets that can be used as a theoretical lens, which encompasses almost every facet of a student veterans' academic experience based on the three key aspects of critical theory which

Tierney and Rhoads (1993, p. 319) identified. These tenets provide tools that help to understand the challenges of student veterans on college campuses such as dealing with policies that preference non-veterans, microaggressions toward student veterans, and/or programs that look to support student veterans when in reality they are there to help the university appear veteran friendly. In their Veteran Critical Theory, Phillips and Lincoln (2017) revise tenets previously articulated in other traditions, positing guiding principles or evaluating measures, for examining institutional systems and/or evaluating their policies, procedures, and practices. The 11 tenets of Veteran Critical Theory are listed below and are grouped by three aspects of Critical Theory by Tierney and Rhoads (1993, p. 319).

The tenets that are based on marginalization and emancipation:

Veterans occupy a third space (country) on the boarder of multiple conflicting and interacting power structures, languages, and systems. In this space, student veterans can choose to operate by the rules of and live within the accepted practices of military or civilian spaces, at various times accessing the power, privilege, or prestige associated with one or another culture.

Veterans experience various forms of oppression and marginalization including microaggressions. Microaggressions are the everyday verbal and nonverbal slights or insults that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative messages to target persons based solely upon their marginalized group membership. These hidden messages communicate these people are lesser human beings and suggest they do not belong with the majority group, threaten and

intimidate, or relegate them to inferior status and treatment (Sue, 2010, p. 3).

These microaggressions lie outside of the oppression that uses overt and concrete acts of intimidation, ridicule, and other forms of injustice and unfairness.

Veteran Critical Theory values narratives and counternarratives of veterans. Veteran Critical Theory suggests narratives as an opportunity to clarify the experience student veterans have had. Further, the sharing of their stories can also produce a counternarrative from assumed experiences of student veterans. Phillips and Lincoln (2017) suggested institutions should create opportunities for student veterans to voice, write, or express their story and experience. Tinoco (2020) conducted a mixed-methods study to discover possible needs, barriers, and challenges that student veterans who were enrolled at a Tier-1 Research University located in an urban environment located in the Pacific Rim region. In this study 281 individuals of which 231 were student veterans, took a 29-question survey asking about university and home life, as well as study skills and academic progress. Then, 33 student veterans who took the initial survey took part in a follow-up interview to discuss more specific detail of their university experience. This study focused on how student veterans transitioned into higher education and their relationships with peers and other members of the campus community.

Veterans experience multiple identities at once. A common reality of a marginalized group is intersecting identities. Hispanic women have intersecting racial and gender identities, both which can be oppressed in different ways in different settings. Further within the veteran identity itself there are confounding identities, such as enlisted versus officer, differing ranks, deployment times,

and/or combat versus non-combat. Phillips and Lincoln (2017) recognize how these multiple identities interact with one another and is drawn to the foreground or background depending upon context. Being labeled as only a student veteran fails to identify the other roles a person may carry.

Veterans are more appropriately positioned to inform policy and practice regarding veterans. The unique experiences student veterans have can be explained to civilian allies but are empathetically understood by other student veterans. Phillips and Lincoln (2017) suggested like in disability theory, a member of the population must participate and engage in the drafting and direction of institutional policy and structures. An able-bodied planning committee would not fully grasp the scope of getting across campus in a wheelchair and dealing with non-ADA compliant buildings.

The tenets focused on the role of culture include:

Structures, policies, and processes privilege civilians over veterans. Higher education is a civilian structure. Veteran Critical Theory asks that we recognize and question the innate privilege of being a civilian. While there are some institutions that are directly connected to the military and others, such as land-grant universities have a military history, most higher education institutions are led by civilians, taught by civilians, and are inclined to serve traditional age college civilians first. Mobley et al, (2019, p. 1215) interviewed 60 Student Veterans in Engineering to find the challenges experienced in engineering education and to gain an “insider perspective” into their evolving emic sense of

self. The researchers hoped their study would result in more strategic development of support programs to help student veterans.

Veterans are victims of deficit thinking in higher education. Deficits or more often perceived deficits are blamed on the student veteran when they are more likely a fault of the civilian-oriented and civilian-privileging structures of higher education institutions. Programs that focus on student veteran retention and academic success may be using civilian measures that do not accurately gauge student veteran success. For example, degree completion is often tracked by degree completion at one institution (Phillips & Lincoln, 2017). Veterans who attend multiple institutions are then considered academically unsuccessful, which is also a problem for any transfer student (Vacchi & Berger, 2014).

Some services advertised to serve veterans are ultimately serving civilian interests. Phillips and Lincoln (2017) suggest institutional practices are created more for the benefit of the institution and less than actually benefiting the student veteran. An institution may want to earn Veteran-Friendly Status from various military organizations but may not actually be considered veteran-friendly by the enrolled student veterans. The product of the institution was geared more toward the general public, so it appeared student veteran friendly while a secondary outcome was to help student veterans.

Veteran culture is built on a culture of respect, honor, and trust. Veteran Critical Theory suggests veteran culture is grounded in respect, honor and trust. As student veterans enroll at institutions of higher education, their own notions of respect, honor, and trust may be violated in different ways by the university

system. Policies and procedures that colleges and universities put in place that seem to undermine these characteristics shake the foundation of student veterans' relationships with their institutions.

The tenets that are based on the role of power:

Veterans are constructed (written) by civilians, often as deviant characters. Veteran Critical Theory does not presume civilians cannot research or write about veterans. Rather, VCT acknowledges that people who are not student veterans are writing about student veterans. The media often tells veterans who they are and how society sees them before veterans have the opportunity to understand themselves in a higher education environment. In the same way, media (and some scholarship) tells students, faculty, staff, and administration of colleges and universities who (or more often what) veterans are. Student veterans then become either characters in a civilian story or caricatures of civilian assumptions (Phillips & Lincoln, 2017).

Veterans cannot be essentialized. Feminist scholarship claims that women are 'unknowable.' This unknowable nature of women is linked to their constructed nature, male assumption, and their inclination to undermine these assumptions. In the same way, Veteran Critical Theory recognizes that veterans can be unknowable as well. This tenet recognizes the broad spectrum of veterans (student veterans in particular) and challenges the act of essentializing or developing blanket policies, procedures, and programs, specifically those constructed by civilian assumption, fear, or reaction. Atkinson (2019) used Veteran Critical Theory to study female student veterans on college campuses. In

this study eight undergraduate women were interviewed, and the data collected was seen through the lens of VCT. Atkinson's study found some unique needs and perceptions of female student veterans that could help guide future studies of the same demographic group such as how women could help their peers in terms of leadership, professionalism, and independence.

Summary

While the United States military has been involved and influenced higher education since the passing of the Morrill Land-Grant College Act of 1862, it was the G.I. Bill that truly changed the relationship between the two entities. With so many veterans being able to take advantage of educational benefits, it has changed the face of colleges and universities as well as the entire nation. Countless veterans, including 3 former Supreme Court justices, 3 presidents, 14 Nobel Prize winners, 450,000 engineers, 91,000 scientists, and 67,000 doctors (to name a few) benefited from the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944 (Humes, 2006). With these changes and so many student veterans entering higher education, faculty, staff, and university administrators have begun to adjust to support the needs of student veterans.

This chapter then presented literature about higher education's attitudes toward student veterans, perceptions that student veterans have toward their peers and how the two groups interact in the classroom. It proceeded to include an overview of research previously conducted such as the challenges of student veterans transitioning into college life, how student veterans are treated in the classroom by faculty and peers, and to determine issues and concerns facing

student veterans throughout the university community. It concluded with a description of Veteran Critical Theory, its tenets, and previous studies that used VCT as their lens for data interpretation. This study hopes to add to the growing literature focusing on student veterans, their perceptions of how they are supported on campus, and if engagement from both the student and the institution are comparable.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Chapter II presented student veterans as a group that is increasing in numbers on college campuses across the United States (DeSawal, 2013; Rumann & Bondi, 2015). To understand the needs of student veterans, more research is needed. This chapter begins with a general perspective of the research project, followed by an overview of the multi-case study approach, and Veteran Critical Theory, used in an *a priori* as a theoretical perspective shaping the design of the study and ultimately the interpretation of the data. The remainder of the chapter consists of the epistemological/theoretical perspective, problem statement, theoretical framework, purpose statement and research questions, the research setting, multi-case study methods, data collection and analysis, research ethics, positionality statement, and significance of the study. Together, these sections show how this study explores the experiences and perceptions of student veterans and whether those move them closer or further away from degree completion.

Epistemological/Theoretical Perspective

The study used the epistemological lens and theoretical perspective of social constructionism, which states that individuals seek understanding of the world in which they live and work as well as develop subjective meanings of their experiences (Creswell, 2014, p. 8). Social constructionism is also guided by the

principle that the unique experience of the individual, and each individual's reality, is constructed and based on their own perspective and observations about the environment around them (Crotty, 1998). In the same manner, another individual's reality and meaning of their surroundings is based on their own unique experience. Social constructionists investigate individuals' numerous realities and how these realities impact their lives and the lives of others that they encounter (Patton, 2015). Therefore, I attempted to capture student veterans' perspectives of their various experiences but did not attempt to place value on such perspectives. The research study used a social constructionist theoretical perspective to view and study student veterans' experiences through their interaction with their environment, in this case, a specific institutions' support structures, and inquire whether those structures' goals were in unison with student veterans' goals.

In the past few years, new research has begun to go beyond what the foundational researchers did regarding student veterans and their relationship within the college community. In the early literature, most researchers concentrated their studies on white men who had served (Atkinson, 2019). Student veterans are still often incorrectly stereotyped as young, white males, and traditional students (who enter college as soon as they complete high school) but the veteran population is becoming more diverse in terms of race or ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation (Parker, Cilluffo, & Stepler, 2017; Vacchi, 2012). The most recent demographics used for studying student veterans comes from a 2016 Research Brief by the group Student Veterans of America. Their data came

from a sample size of 1,352 individuals who were surveyed in a Department of Veterans Affairs G.I. Bill population data set.

Recent policy changes brought an end to the “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” era, allowing lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender troops to serve openly. These changes in policy allowed for new demographics of student veterans to take advantage of military benefits so they were able to go to college in higher numbers than previously. This means there is a need for additional research that considers how student veterans’ diverse backgrounds relate to their college experiences and outcomes. Fernandez et al. (2019) recommend colleges and universities need to identify ways to support veterans across diverse backgrounds to ensure that they not only have access to the college experience but also that they have every opportunity to successfully complete their own college degrees. The study is a single-site multi-case study exploring the experiences of student veterans who are persisting in their university studies at a 4-year university in the midwestern United States. and their experiences and perceptions in their college community and the surrounding area.

Problem Statement

Since 2008, there has been a large increase in the number of student veterans entering higher education across the nation. This is due to the number of men and women who served in Iraq and Afghanistan after the September 11, 2001, attacks. Since taking effect in 2009, more than 817,000 veterans have pursued an educational program under the Post-9/11 G.I. Bill (Sander, 2013). While many student veterans have challenges that differ from those of other

college students, there are numerous benefits, systems, and departments on campus designed to support student veterans through graduation (Lokken et al., 2009). As more student veterans enter higher education, the more universities need to understand their needs. In most cases, 4% of the population of a public university is student veterans (DeSawal, 2013; Rumann & Bondi, 2015).

However, the rate at which students with prior military experience graduate – which is as low as 45% depending on the branch of the military (Zoroya, 2014) – is lower in comparison to most other student populations, such as student-athletes or those who state they have a disability. Additionally, only one in four colleges report having a detailed understanding of why student veterans leave college before earning a degree, so universities need to understand this group of students better (Grohowski, 2013).

Given the relative novelty of many services offered for student veterans by colleges and universities across the nation, research into how students are using and perceiving targeted services can provide formative information for continued improvement. In particular, understanding student veteran perceptions of these services can ensure that institutions, professionals, and faculty do not succumb to the “more is better” mentality for support services, and instead recognize that supporting successful military-to-civilian transitions should be centered around veteran perspectives on the support needed for academic success. Also, extant research has called for more consideration of diversity within the student veteran population and how individual circumstances may impact the efficacy of campus support services (Morris et al., 2019). Mobley et al. (2019) states veteran studies

need theoretical perspectives that can advance an understanding of student veteran experiences (p. 1211). To that end, the study explored the perceptions and experiences of student veterans enrolled at a 4-year university in the Midwest United States and who worked or regularly spent time in the Student Veteran Center to gain a fuller understanding of their successes and future needs.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study was Veteran Critical Theory, used in an *a priori* fashion to shape the design of the study and ultimately the interpretation of the data. Following the work of other critical social theorists and that followed such as feminist, disability, and postcolonial scholars, Phillips and Lincoln (2017) developed Veteran Critical Theory as a tool for challenging the status quo of an institutional system and the structures which were intended to support student veterans. The critical theory perspective acknowledges institutional systems may disadvantage, exclude, or otherwise harm veterans despite an intent to support academic success and promote graduation. There are 11 tenets of VCT that allow researchers to look at the various experiences and perceptions of student veterans. These 11 tenets are:

- Veterans occupy a third space (country) on the border of multiple conflicting and interacting power structures, languages and systems.
- Veterans experience various forms of oppression and marginalization, including microaggressions.
- Veteran Critical Theory values narratives and counternarratives of veterans.

- Veterans experience multiple identities at once.
- Veterans are more appropriately positioned to inform policy and practice regarding veterans.
- Veteran Critical Theory values narratives and counternarratives of veterans. Structures, policies, and processes privilege civilians over veterans.
- Veterans are victims of deficit thinking in higher education.
- Some services advertised to serve veterans are ultimately serving civilian interests.
- Veteran culture is built on a culture of respect, honor, and trust.
- Veterans are constructed (written) by civilians, often as deviant characters.
- Veterans cannot be essentialized.

Full definitions of these 11 tenets can be found in Chapter II of this study.

Methodology

The goal of this research was to gain an understanding of the experiences of student veterans, their interactions with faculty/staff and their peers, how they perceive the policies and support structures in place to help them and their sense of belonging in the university community. This focus includes their perceptions of how people on campus treat them and how well institutional policies and programs support them. The methodology used to research student veterans in this study was a qualitative multi-case study informed by a critical perspective as developed by Phillips and Lincoln (2017) in their Veterans Critical Theory.

The study is an intrinsic, exploratory multi-case study that I pre-selected as intrinsically worth exploring as a phenomenon of interest (Stake, 1995, p.4). The cases for this study are students who have served or are still serving in the United States Military or National Guard, who are attending a midwestern 4-year university working toward an undergraduate degree, and who work or regularly spend time in the student veteran center. Although Stake (2006) uses the term “quintain” to describe a collection of cases (p. 6), I chose to simply call my collection of cases a group. The design of the study follows Hawthorn et al. (2013) in considering student veterans as a marginalized population who do not fit into any mainstream student culture and are often virtually invisible unless they cause problems or disrupt the lifestyles of mainstream persons. They have individual experiences in the military and on campus that shape the way they view not just their university experience but themselves (p. 234-235). Also, this study seeks to understand student veterans’ sense of belonging throughout the larger campus community.

Creswell (2014) explained that a qualitative case study analysis approach explores a bounded system through detailed data collection and analysis over a period of time, involving various data collection sources, which results in the materialization of case-based theses, reports, and report of findings (p. 14). Similarly, Stake (1995) stated, “Case study is the study of the particularity and complexity of a single case, coming to understand its activity within important circumstances” (p. xi). What distinguishes case study methodology from other qualitative approaches is the intensive focus on a bounded system which can be

an individual, a specific program, a process, an institution, or a relationship (Plano-Clark, & Creswell, 2010). Implicit in the selection of multi-case study methodology is the assumption that there is something significant that can be learned from these cases. Such boundedness could be defined by time, place, or some physical boundaries. Key characteristics of a case study design are the researcher collects multiple forms of data, the researcher analyzes the data for description and themes (or patterns) that emerge, and that the researcher reports description, themes, and lessons learned (Plano-Clark & Creswell, 2010, p. 242).

I hope to help fill gaps in the literature to understand how student veterans see themselves in the larger university community and what meaning they make of their experiences and perceptions. A multi-case study is appropriate because through various data sources I discovered the context and specific situations in which the student veterans attend college and explored whether and if these experiences were common among the student veterans taking part in the study while still understanding each participant and their story is unique.

For this study, the boundaries of the case are defined as students who have served or are serving in the United States Military or National Guard, who are enrolled in university studies pursuing a bachelor's degree at Midwestern state university, and who work or regularly spend time in the student veteran center. While other researchers have explored the experiences of student veterans in the Pacific Rim region and the west coast of the United States, very few, if any studies have been conducted in the midwestern United States. Midwesterners are generally considered proudly ordinary people who speak dialect-free American

English and go about their business without fanfare or drama. Sisson et al. (2007) describe the American Midwest as source of comfort and conformity for its citizens, a place transformed from a 19th-century symbol of progress into a 20th-century symbol of stability, from the home of pioneers pointing the United States toward the future into the residence of guardians of the nation's traditions.

Therefore, studying student veterans in this part of the United States produced findings differing from those from research conducted in other parts of the United States. The bounded system in which student veterans are providing their life experiences are descriptions about and interactions with support systems on campus that are in place to help them and move them toward graduation.

Therefore, I used multi-case study to build knowledge based on the experiences of the student veterans taking part in the study. In using case study, Merriam (2009) says it "can be described by its unique features. The researcher should use a qualitative case study analysis approach if the following three characteristics were taking place: the focus is particularistic; the study research under examination is richly descriptive; and heuristic" (p. 43).

All three of these characteristics are taking place in this study. The multi-case study is particularistic due to student veterans' unique experiences, challenges, and obstacles as these men and women pursue a bachelor's degree from an institution of higher education (Stake, 2006). Conducting a qualitative multi-case study analysis showed these student veterans negotiate the unique culture and social attitudes as well as the targeted support programs, services, and policies that are in place for them at a public state-university. This study differs

from those before it because those studies focused on a specific gender or academic major while this study does not take those characteristics into consideration. Vacchi and Berger (2014) state some of the gaps in knowledge about student veterans that need to be filled are the impact of faculty and peer groups on student veterans, as well as the impact of campus services on student veterans. This study seeks to address these gaps by studying a part of the country's student veteran population that has not previously been studied, students who work or regularly spend time in the student veteran center, and how their university supports them. Also, while qualitative studies are not generalizable, they can still show how a university can have programs and policies that benefit student veterans that may be replicated on other college campuses.

A case study analysis approach is descriptive in nature (Patton, 2015). The design of the study focused on creating a full and substantial account of student veterans' experience and perceptions of how they are treated and if they feel they belong in the larger university community. I initially interviewed each participant in order to obtain data and give the interviewees a chance to express themselves. Participants were then interviewed a second time so I could clarify data as well as ask additional questions that data from the original interviews created. Put together, these experiences allowed me to focus on different aspects of the student veterans' experiences to create an understanding of how the university is supporting or not supporting them in their move toward graduation. Merriam (2009) also stated, the final product of a qualitative research study is richly

descriptive, including words...rather than numbers...and the data collection method was in the form of interviews, text-based documents, and field-notes...or a combination of these are always included in support of the findings of the study” (p. 16). Thus, as a result of utilizing face-to-face interviews, rich and thick descriptions emerged from the student veterans’ stories of their experiences, examinations, descriptions, and perspectives. Additionally, the qualitative multi-case study analysis method is heuristic, meaning the multi-case study illuminates new meaning and understanding regarding how the student veteran participants perceive the effectiveness of university support programs, services, and policies in retaining student veterans at the research university. Therefore, I present the research outcomes from the perspective of the student veterans.

Purpose Statement and Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to explore student veterans’ lived experiences with support systems at a four-year research university, how they perceive the effectiveness of policies and programs designed to support them, and their interactions with the wider campus community. Specifically, the following research questions guided this study:

1. What are student veterans’ reported experiences with support systems in place specifically for them?
2. How do student veterans perceive the role of support services in meeting their goals?

3. Using which tenets of Veterans' Critical Theory (Phillips & Lincoln, 2017), best explain the experiences student veterans have on campus and with a university community as a whole?

Research Setting

This study was conducted at university where students have the choice of working toward 102 bachelor's programs with 170 options, 61 master's programs with 98 options, and/or 7 doctoral programs. The institution has a student population of 26,000 students and is one of several large universities in the state. The institution is in a mid-sized city with a population of 169,000 in a Midwestern state and is 91 miles from a large military base and several National Guard and Reserve Units. The institution also has a Veteran Student Center and ROTC unit located on campus. It is also located two miles from a Veteran's of Foreign Wars post which encourages interaction between older and younger veterans for each to lend support to the other. The institution was chosen based on previous knowledge of student veterans at the institution, personal relationships I have in the area and the institution, family members being alumni of the university, and a visit to the campus during the summer of 2020. Also, the institution was chosen because it is in a location that is easy for me to visit throughout the year due to family living in the area. The pseudonym for the research institution used for this study is Alpha University.

The demographics of Alpha University undergraduate students are 59% women versus 41% men. 80.1% of undergraduate students are white, 5.2% are international students, 3.6% are Hispanic, 3.5% are African American, 1.7 are

Asian, less than 1% are Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, and the rest of the student body consists of students who are unknown, or multi-ethnic (College Factual, 2021). In the last published Diversity Report from Alpha University 4.9% of the undergraduate student body was student veterans. Of this population 82% were white, 5.4% were Hispanic, 3.1% were African American, and less than 1% were American Indian or Asian. Alpha University began tracking veteran status during the mid-academic period, Spring 2012. The faculty demographics of Alpha University are 90.8% white, 3.3% African American, 3% Asian, 2.8% multi-ethnic, and less than 1% Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander. There are no international or Hispanic faculty members. These demographics help place the multi-case study in context because student veterans may or may not feel they are represented by members of their ethnic group in the faculty of the university.

The Alpha University's website states their values in supporting student veterans: Engaging, we engage with our military-affiliated students as early as possible to help them apply for educational benefits, provide certification of said military benefits, and connect with campus and community resources; Supportive, we support our military-affiliated students by providing a welcoming and professionally staffed student center, including a quiet study area and computer lab, access to academic and post military resources, and a veteran and military exclusive lounge for camaraderie; Advocative, we advocate for our military-affiliated students by working with local, state and national organizations to promote the needs and rights of veterans and their dependents; Ethical, we conduct our work with integrity, honesty, and high professional standards, and

believe that all individuals should be treated with affirmation, dignity, and respect.

While this is an ideal statement and one that shows the institution's goals in supporting student veterans, questions remained about the extent to which student veterans enrolled at the institution considered Alpha University successful in supporting student veterans. One of the goals of this study was to allow the student veterans to answer that question.

Another reason student veterans chose to attend Alpha University is because it is located in a state that has specific benefits for them. The Returning Heroes Education Act benefits student veterans who served in the military in armed combat in a full-time capacity under a call to active service authorized by the President of the United States or the Secretary of Defense for a period of more than 30 consecutive days. Additionally, if the student veteran did not serve for 30 days but earned one of the following combat medals they would be eligible: Bronze Star, Combat Action Badge, Combat Action Medal, Combat Infantry Badge (Army), Combat Ribbon (Marine), Congressional Medal of Honor, Global War on Terror ("GWOT") Service Medal, Global War on Terror ("GWOT") Badge, Purple Heart, or any other Action Badge, Combat Medal, or Expeditionary Medal or Ribbon offered within a geographic area that enables the veteran to receive a combat pay tax exclusion exemption, hazardous duty pay, imminent danger pay, or hostile fire pay. The educational benefits for the Returning Heroes Education Act are that all public institutions of higher education must limit the amount of tuition such institutions charge to combat veterans to \$50 per credit

hour, as long as the veteran achieves and maintains a cumulative grade point average of at least 2.5 on a 4.0-point scale or its equivalent.

Other requirements for this benefit are that student veterans must be enrolled at a public institution of higher education, have been honorably discharged from military service, be a registered voter or eligible to vote as determined by the State Secretary of State, or be a current resident of the state. The monetary benefit of this act greatly helps student veterans since it lowers the tuition cost per credit hour to \$50, which is much lower than the \$257 per credit hour for in-state residents (Department of Higher Education & Workforce Development, 2021).

The city that Alpha University is located in is Alphaville. The population of Alphaville, as of 2019, is 167,051 with an average age of 33. The median household income is \$36,856 with a poverty rate of 22.9% which has been decreasing over the past several years. The largest demographic group is white, 85.3%, then Hispanics, 4.32%, African Americans, 4.25%, Asians, 2.06%, and then Native Americans, 0.64%. According to the latest figures, 0% of the households of this community speak a non-English language at home as their primary language. Finally, 4.3% of the city's population served in the armed forces with the most during the Vietnam War era (Data USA, 2022). These demographics help place the multi-case study in context because student veterans may or may not feel they are represented by members of their ethnic group in the population of the community that surrounds Alpha University.

In the city of Alphaville, there are Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) posts that support and promote the wellbeing of veterans in the community. This organization is active and known to interact with non-military citizens as well as bring together military members from different eras. The VFW mission is “to foster camaraderie among United States veterans of overseas conflicts; [t]o serve our veterans, the military and our communities; [t]o advocate on behalf of all veterans.” Their vision is to ensure that veterans are respected for their service, always receive their earned entitlements, and are recognized for the sacrifices they and their loved ones have made on behalf of this great country (VFW, 2022).

Case Study Methods

Patton (2015) states several guidelines for constructing case studies. The ones I paid the closest attention to are 1) focus on capturing the uniqueness of each case, 2) make the case coherent for the reader, and 3) balance detail with relevance. Each participant had a story to tell, and I had a duty to represent the participants’ experiences accurately and in a trustworthy manner. Therefore, each individual case must be handled with care and not manipulated to fit into a broader picture or theme. In making the case coherent for the reader, I take the reader into the participant’s experiences. While the reader will not be meeting the participant, they should be able to understand where the participant is coming from and the value of their experience and perceptions. Finally, it is important to tell the participants’ story without becoming bogged down with too many details and random anecdotes. While many of these do add to the participants’ experiences, too many can become unwieldy and actually draw the focus away

from important details from the participant. The case study should take the reader into the case situation and experience. Each case study in a report stands alone, allowing the reader to understand the case as a unique, holistic entity...and should be sufficiently detailed and comprehensive to illuminate the focus of inquiry. Then, at a later point in analysis, it is possible to compare and contrast cases to have a wider understanding of each case (Patton, 2015, p. 538).

Multi-case study methodology requires specific and clear boundaries to enable focus on depth and detail (Stake, 2006, p.3). The parameters of the study were determined by time, place, and the nature and size of the sample. First, in terms of time and place, the research study took place during the 2021-2022 academic year at Alpha University. Fixed-interval sampling was used for this study (Patton, 2015). Fixed-interval sampling is where the researcher treats units of time as the unit of observation, such as 30-minute units or 60-minute units. The advantages of fixed-interval sampling over continuous monitoring are that field workers experience less fatigue and can collect more information at each sampling interval than they could on a continuous monitoring routine (Patton, 2015, p. 263.) Second, the study is bound by the nature and size of the sample. Participants were former or current members of the United States Military or National Guard, enrolled at Alpha University, a four-year state university situated in the Midwestern United States, and who worked or regularly spent time in the student veteran center. The student veterans were not a member of any specific college, school, or major.

Participants

Criterion-based selection was used as the main method of recruiting student veterans and institution administrators to participate in this study (Patton, 2015, p. 267, 281). To be included, student veteran participants were required to be a student at Alpha University, a current or former member of the armed forces, and work or regularly spend time in the student veteran center. Institution administrators were employees of Alpha University, and work with student veterans or have influence with programs and/or policies that affect student veterans. In determining how many participants were needed, different articles were consulted. Hennink et al. (2017, p. 593) stated saturation occurred somewhere between seven and twelve interviews, while Hagaman and Wutich (2017) said the number could be as few as six (p.36). Using these studies as guidelines, six participants were recruited for this study, and each participated in two separate interviews, either in person or through Zoom.

After IRB approved the study at Oklahoma State University, I contacted the director of the Student Veteran Center at Alpha University to recruit participants. This administrator agreed to help me find participants among her student veterans, which is approximately 1,000 student veterans. The recruitment letter explained the process participants would go through during the formal interview. This can be found in Appendix A. I believed that with so many student veterans attending Alpha University, the desired number of participants would be easily recruited, and that was the case. While I hoped to find a cross section of student veterans who served in different branches of the military, it was not

imperative as all student veterans had both common and unique experiences (Rumann & Bondi, 2015). Additionally, the demographics of Alpha University student veterans is primarily members of the Army and Marines so it would be more difficult to find members of the other branches. In the end, I only interviewed student veterans who came from the Army and Marine Corps. I hoped to have student veteran participants who came from different majors and/or programs at the research institution, because it was doubtful that each college and/or programs have identical experiences with student veterans. Fortunately, each participant came from a different major at Alpha University so I was able to see how different departments were viewed by the participants.

It should also be stated that there were some student veterans who declined to be interviewed. One student veteran said he did not like to talk to people that he did not know. Another said he did not have time because he was going to help another student veteran train for an upcoming event. Finally, one student veteran who was not white stated he was too busy and left the student veteran center quickly after talking to me.

COVID-19 Research Protocols

Oklahoma State University IRB has made the following statement to help keep both researchers and subjects safe due to the COVID-19 Pandemic. It was prepared using CDC guidance currently available, to assist researchers in describing (in both the research protocol and informed consent) measures to reduce the risk of spread of COVID-19. Researchers should modify procedures during the study as needed to reduce risks to participants and to ensure that

current CDC guidelines are followed. The following steps are being taken to address the risk of coronavirus infection:

Screening: Researchers and participants who show potential symptoms of COVID-19 (fever, cough, shortness of breath, etc.) will NOT participate in this study at this time.

Physical distancing: Whenever possible, we will maintain at least 6 feet of distance between persons while conducting the study.

Mask/Covering: Researchers will wear and participants will be advised to shield their mouth and nose with a cloth face cover or mask during the study, even when maintaining at least 6 feet of distance. Tissues will be available to cover coughs and sneezes.

Handwashing: Researchers and participants will wash hands before/during (activity) or use a hand sanitizer containing at least 60% alcohol.

Disinfecting materials: When feasible, researchers will clean and disinfect surfaces between participants, using an EPA-registered disinfectant or a bleach solution (5 tablespoons of regular bleach per gallon of water) for hard materials and by laundering soft materials. Disinfected materials will be handled using gloves, paper towel, plastic wrap or storage bags to reduce the chance of re-contamination of materials.

Electronics: Alcohol-based wipes or sprays containing at least 70% alcohol will be used to disinfect shared touch screens, mice, keyboards, etc. Surfaces will be dried to avoid pooling of liquids. This research study will follow these guidelines when meetings occur for formal interviews, informal interviews, observations,

and any other time the two will be in proximity with one another (Oklahoma State University, 2021).

Participant Interviews

Patton (2015) states, “skilled interviewing is about asking questions well so that the participants want to share their stories” (p. 427). This research study began with open-ended questions that invited thoughtful, in-depth responses that elicited specific points or topics of discussion that were salient to the participants. Questions focused on three types of questions, 1) background of the student veterans, 2) experiences and perceptions of personal interactions of student veterans both on campus and off, and 3) experiences and perceptions of Alpha University policies and procedures. These questions allowed the participants to answer from their experiences rather than just questions that might elicit a one- or two-word response. From these types of questions, I asked probing questions as appropriate such as 1) tell me about an interaction with a faculty member that has stuck with you and 2) what have been the most challenging adjustments to college? The easiest? These questions allowed the participants to know how deep they needed to go in their responses (Patton, 2015, p. 428). The interview was semi-structured to allow for participants to discuss topics I had not anticipated, and for participants to feel like a partner in the research, rather than just a research participant. Case study interviews integrated and synthesized interview responses from throughout the interview into a coherent story (p. 443).

Six participant interviews were conducted between March and July, 2022. Participants were recruited through the Student Veteran Center on campus at

Alpha University with the help of the center director. The first interviews took place face-to-face during Spring Break in March, 2022. This was because I was also on Spring Break and could travel to the research university. Also, since students were not in class, they had time to meet with me and did not feel rushed, since they had fewer commitments during this time. The second round of interviews took place in person, by Zoom, or by phone call April through July, because depending upon scheduling, both the participants and I were back in school and may or may not have been able to meet in person. Each participant was either a student liaison worker in the student veteran center or someone who regularly spent significant time in the student veteran center.

Participants selected pseudonyms or had me choose one for them if they could not decide. All participants remained anonymous throughout data analysis. It should be stated, however, the student veterans knew each other and knew who was being interviewed because of their relationships, and because all regularly spend time in the student veteran center. Therefore, the participants could be able to identify one another in the final dissertation. The use of pseudonyms was a recommended guideline to ensure anonymity of participants (Wiles et. al, 2008). See Table 3.1 for demographic and military characteristics of the student veteran participants.

Table 3.1

Demographics of Participants

Name	Ethnicity	Gender	Military Status	Branch	Years Served	Military Occupation
Edward	White	Male	Discharged	Army	-4	Combat Engineer
Annie	White	Female	Reservist	Army	4+	Military Police
Shannon	White	Female	Discharged	Army	20+	Communications/ Signals
Blane	White	Male	Discharged	Marines	4+	Administrative Assistant
Ryan	White	Male	Discharged	Marines	8+	Parachute Rigger
Matt	White	Male	Discharged/ ROTC member	Army	8+	Military Police

Patton (2015) states social constructionist interviews are dialogical performances, social meaning-making acts, and co-facilitated knowledge exchanges. This approach involves interpretive practice that requires flexibility and dexterity that cannot be captured in mechanical formulas (Patton, 2015, p. 433-434). Using standard open-ended questions during the interview discussions made data analysis faster and easier due to the fact it was easier for me to locate all the participants' discussion responses to any specific question then organize responses that were the same or similar. This also allowed flexibility to pursue various topics with greater or less depth, depending on the relevance to each person (Patton, 2015, p. 443). Areas of interest for this qualitative multi-case study analysis included student support programs, services, and policies that

successfully aid student veterans transitioning to a postsecondary educational institution. Accordingly, the main purpose of the individual participant interviews was to hear directly from the student veterans about their biggest challenges, barriers, interactions with fellow students, both student veterans and non-student veterans, and positive/negative experiences in trying to obtain a postsecondary educational degree (Cook & Kim, 2009).

Initial Interview Questions

Background

1. Where did you grow up and where did you go to high school?
2. Why did you decide to join the military?
3. What was your favorite part about being in the military
4. Why did you select this university?
5. What expectations did you have coming into college or university?

Experiences and Perceptions of Personal Interactions

6. Describe your overall experience transitioning from the military to college.
7. Using your experiences, describe the faculty's attitude toward veterans.
8. Tell me about an interaction with a faculty member that has stuck with you.
9. What have been the most challenging adjustments to college? The easiest?
10. Tell me about an interaction with a classmate or fellow student outside of class that has stuck with you.

Experiences and Perceptions of University Policies and Procedures

11. What services does your school provide that are specifically designed for veterans?

12. Which of these have you used and what were your experiences using these services.

13. What services does your college or university not provide that you wish they did?

14. Would you recommend this school to other veterans? Why or why not?

Questions for University Administrators who work with Student Veterans

15. What made you want to work with student veterans?

16. What makes student veterans different than non-student veterans?

17. What programs and/or policies does your university have in place to support student veterans?

18. What do you think could be improved to help student veterans move toward graduation?

20. What is your sense of student veterans being integrated in the larger campus community?

21. Is there anything else you would like to add about your work with student veterans?

Reciprocity and Incentive

Qualitative studies can intrude into settings as people adjust to the researcher's presence (Patton, 2015). While the observer must learn how to behave in the research setting, the people who are taking part in the research are deciding how to behave toward the observer. Patton's reciprocity model of gaining entry to a research site assumes that some reason can be found for participants to cooperate in the research and that some kind of mutual exchange

can occur (p. 395-396). Providing a financial incentive, along with the opportunity for student veterans to tell their experiences to someone who appreciates their service, are of potential value to the participants. Offering a financial incentive to those who took part in the research study hopefully showed that I valued their participation, their experiences, and their time (Neurohr, 2017). For each formal interview, the participant received a \$25 Amazon gift card. I believe this amount was high enough to be an incentive, but not so high as to be coercive and/or impact the veracity of participants' answers. The total time for each formal interview was 30 to 60 minutes.

Participant Observation

Observations of student veterans also took place at the Alpha University student veterans' center and other places where veterans gather, with particular attention to interactions and formal and/or informal conversations taking place among student veterans, university employees, and non-student veterans.

Observations also took place around campus at locations related to student veterans. I was attempting to recreate what Stake (2006) suggests for observations; the researchers will observe as much as they can, ask others for their observations and study the records of events of those happenings (p. 27).

Observations took place on several dates throughout the Spring and Summer semesters of 2022.

Artifact Collection Protocol

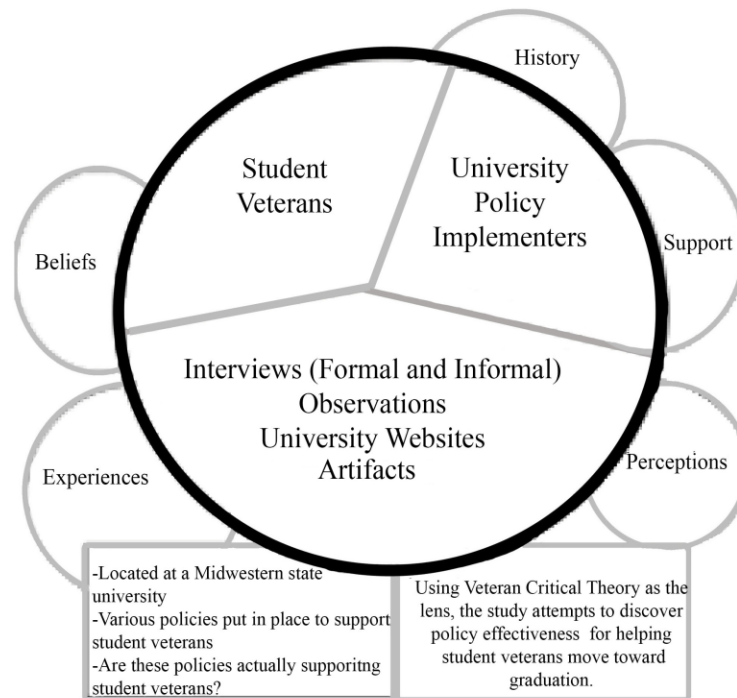
While taking a tour of the potential campus site during the summer of 2020, I observed numerous places where brochures and other written documents

were positioned so prospective students and others could learn about the various departments and related information. Gathering information about student veterans was done in the same way as the previous summer, as well as researching the institution's website to gain additional information about student veterans and the institution's resources to support them. The university's website has a link to the Student Veteran Center. This webpage allows student veterans to access to information such as Military Transfer Credit, Military Activation Policy, and other forms that can help them in different aspects of their military benefits.

The following image helps to represent different aspects of student veterans in the university community at Alpha University, the policies and procedures that are in place to support student veterans there, and how this research study has learned about student veterans' experiences and perceptions of their time in higher education. As stated previously, it is possible student veterans do not feel these policies and programs are helpful and may see the university as trying to show they are supporting student veterans, when, in reality, they fall short. In some cases, these policies and procedures may be based on tradition and continue to do what has always been done rather than investigate new methods to support student veterans. The image also shows the ways data was collected from student veterans to understand their experiences and perceptions, so I can tell their story accurately and fairly.

Figure 3.1

Alpha University – Data Collection



The study was conducted through semi-structured interviews as well as observations at the research university’s Student Veteran Center, such as attending a come-and-go lunch on St. Patrick’s Day, on Alpha University’s Dead Day, which took place on Friday May 13, 2022, and during normal business hours in the summer of 2022. Human subjects research approval was given for the study by the Institutional Review Board of Oklahoma State University.

Data Analysis

This research study examined the challenges, barriers, and both positive and negative experiences student veterans may experience while attending college, even though there are support systems in place to help them. When analyzing the data, I combined individual interviews, field notes, observations,

institutional artifacts, and any other data collected to draw conclusions and report findings. The most effective way of transforming the text data from individual interview sessions was to audio record them and then transcribe the interviews. From the individual interviews, I was able to create rich descriptions and findings, guided by Veteran Critical Theory in an a priori fashion.

Coding Themes

Due to the nature of this study being Qualitative, I looked for ways in which I could find patterns, and/or categories that would help me “translate” the data I had collected. Since coding is not an exact science and is an interpretive act by the researchers, I used *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers* by Saldana (2016). Saldana profiles 26 different coding methods so I needed to determine which I felt would be best for this study. The three I chose were In Vivo Coding, Structural Coding, and Values Coding. Each of these is appropriate for qualitative studies, and I found them to be helpful in focusing on what the student veterans were saying, but also in what they were meaning when they used language that a military outsider might not understand. Also, these codes helped me compare the participants’ responses to one another, so I could see the similarities and differences in their experiences and perceptions, both while on campus and outside in the surrounding community.

In Vivo coding uses words or short phrases from the participants’ own language. The root meaning of in vivo is “in that which is alive,” and as a code refers to a word or short phrase from the actual language found in the qualitative data record (Saldana, 2016, p. 105). These include terms of a particular culture,

which in this case is military language used frequently by student veterans since it was their “native” language while serving. Several times, the participants used language that I did not know or understand but was common to them. When I did not understand something, I asked for clarification and I would get responses like, “Sorry, that’s a common phrase we use.”

Structural coding is particularly useful for researchers using multiple participants and semi-structured data gathering. It also both codes and initially categorizes the data corpus to examine the commonalities, differences, and relationships among comparable segments of data. For instance, Structural Coding applies a content based or conceptual phrase representing a topic of inquiry to a segment of data that relates to a specific research question used to frame the interview (Saldana, 2016, p. 98). Since the participants in this study were all student veterans, this coding can show the common and different experiences that these men and women had both in the military and on campus.

Values coding is the application of codes to qualitative data that reflect a participant’s values, attitudes, and beliefs, which interconnect to form the basis for a participant’s perspective or worldview. Saldana defined value as the importance we attribute to ourselves, another person, thing, or idea; values are the principles, moral codes, and situational norms people live by. An attitude is the way we think and feel about ourselves, another person, thing, or idea. Attitudes are part of an enduring system of evaluative, affective reactions based upon and reflecting the beliefs which have been learned. A belief is part of a system including our values and attitudes, plus our personal knowledge, experiences,

opinion, prejudices, morals, and other perceptions of the social world. Beliefs are ingrained in the values attached to them and, Saldana (2016) explained, can be considered rules for action (p. 121-132). This particular combination of coding approaches was appropriate for this study due to the student veterans' perceptions of themselves on a college campus, as well as the belief system they developed during their time in the military, and how those beliefs act as a lens to view the non-student veterans on campus and those in the community surrounding Alpha University.

Using these three coding methods together and throughout all the data collected, I believe the student veterans' experiences and perceptions were accurately represented and brought forth. Using the student veterans' own words and comparing them to find themes made it possible to understand them as individuals, and as a group of people who use the Student Veteran Center for their personal needs, as well as being a part of a larger group like they were when they were in the Army. It also allowed me to find similarities between their experiences and perceptions of their time, both inside and out of the classroom, as well as in the community surrounding Alpha University.

Quality Criteria: Internal Validity, Reliability, and External Validity

In qualitative research, internal validity refers to the degree to which research outcomes are consistent with reality. Internal validity in qualitative research can be attained through understanding the perspectives of participants and presenting their interpretation of specific phenomenon. Hence, internal validity in a study can be assured through triangulation, member checks, focus

group interviews, individual face-to-face interviews, clarification of researcher's biases, and peer examination (Creswell, 2014).

Reliability describes the level of consistency in research findings and the degree to which research results are replicable. This is influenced by presumption concerning objective reality such that repeated studies yield similar findings. In qualitative studies, reliability lacks absolutism due to changes in subjective realities. Therefore, reliability indicates my approach is consistent across varied researchers and different projects. In a study, researchers may engage in various activities including triangulation, audit trail, and describing the theoretical framework of the research to strengthen the dependability of a study (Creswell, 2014).

External validity describes the degree to which research findings can be transferred to other research situations. The philosophical assumptions of subjective reality in qualitative research create difficulties in confirming external validity. To guard against this, a researcher may restrict claims about groups to which the results cannot be generalized and/or may conduct additional experiments with groups with different characteristics to see if the results are consistent. Researchers may use modal categories and multisite designs to assure external validity in qualitative research (Creswell, 2014).

Researcher Ethics

It is important to know the ethical issues that can occur at various points in the research process (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007). There are three basic principles that guide this: "the beneficence of treatment of participants, respect for

participants, and justice. Ethics should be a primary consideration rather than an afterthought, and it should be at the forefront of the researcher's agenda" (Creswell, 2012). To aid with this, institutional review boards were established on college campuses to "provide protection against human right violations. The IRB committee requires the researcher to assess the potential risk to participants in a study such as physical, psychological, social, economic, or legal harm (Creswell, 2014).

For this study, I considered various ethical aspects in interacting with student veterans. For instance, some student veterans suffer from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder due to being in battle, being stationed overseas away from family, or having responsibilities outside of being in the military, such as first-time parents or stepparents. Carless and Douglas (2016) state individuals who have experienced trauma need to communicate aspects of their experience to others who are willing and able to witness, acknowledge, and respond. In addition, versions of these personal stories need to be made available as a cultural resource to challenge the dominant narrative about soldiers and their supposed ability to "cope," following war, with physical and/or psychological difficulties and transition into civilian life. Therefore, it was important for me to consider the questions that I asked during interviews, because some veterans may have experienced trauma during their service. I understand I am not a medical practitioner, counselor, or psychologist. During the interviews, it was also important to use nonjudgmental and non-denigrating language, so participants felt at ease and understood that I valued them and their experiences (Leavy, 2017).

I was forthcoming with the participants so they knew what to expect and knew they could leave the interview at any time. To accomplish this, I used an IRB-approved recruitment letter that explained the whole process in which the student veterans would participate. Then, the IRB-approved consent form was utilized and signed for each interview. This can be found in Appendix B. Also, when writing about the data that was collected, I used pseudonyms to identify the participants in any written report from the study. Finally, all data obtained was kept in places that could be unlocked only by me. It should be noted, however, that the data collected was available to members of the dissertation committee in a de-identified fashion. Also, the computer that was used during this research project had passwords to protect any files where confidential materials were kept in digital form. While I wanted to collect data from the participants in this study, this goal was secondary to their well-being. I hope these interviews allowed participants to enjoy recounting their experiences and feel like their stories are important and worth hearing. I hope they felt that I truly listened and did my best to understand their point of view and truth.

Positionality Statement

I decided on a topic for my dissertation very early on in my Ph.D. journey. It came to me in the fall of 2016 as I took the course Impact of College on Student and Society. The professor had us use our textbook to choose and research a group that was underrepresented on campus so we could write our main paper of the semester over it. I choose student veterans because I felt they differed from other minority groups like Hispanics or African Americans, because those

minorities could still be service members. The idea of helping student veterans no matter their other statuses appealed to me. Also, because of the political climate of the time, I had seen some instances where student veterans on different college campuses were being persecuted by professors and other members of the campus community (Osborne, 2014).

These experiences reminded me of my favorite book, Pat Conroy's *The Lords of Discipline*, where a young man attends military school during a time of social and political upheaval in the United States. I have been a teacher for 20 years and have always tried to help those students who might stand out from their peers, and sometimes need a little extra support from someone in an authority position. When I was teaching at the university level, I had several students who were veterans, and I observed that many of them had a harder time in school than some of the other students, due to the way their peers and other faculty members on campus treated them. The student veterans were often asked to answer for military decisions they had nothing to do with or were asked to speak for all veterans about military issues.

Another reason I wanted to help student veterans is because of my family background. I have numerous family members who served in the Armed Forces; the two most important to me are my great-grandfather Mike Warden, who served in World War I, and his son, my grandfather Pete Warden, who served as a member of George S. Patton's 3rd Army in World War II. Neither man had a chance to attend higher education. so, in my mind, helping student veterans get through college would be like helping them and those like them. While both men

were intelligent, their limited formal education restricted them in what they could do and how far they could go in various employment positions. Helping student veterans get through college allows me to help other veterans experience greater opportunities after their military service.

Additionally, my wife said something to me about why I was so passionate about helping student veterans and wanting to pursue it for my dissertation. While it was something I had never considered, I believe she may be right about some of my motivation. She stated one reason she thought I wanted to study student veterans was out of guilt over never serving in the Armed Forces. After the events of September 11, 2001, some friends and I decided we would join the military if President Bush called for volunteers. In the end, he did not so we did not enlist. Then, around 2012, I tried unsuccessfully to join the Army Reserves as a chaplain's aide, hampered by work commitments that conflicted with the necessary training for that role. Therefore, according to my wife, helping student veterans is a way that I can serve those who have served their country. I want to be able to serve my country by helping those who have served in the military, and this research study can help me achieve that goal. I believe that my desire to help student veterans and my family background helped me relate and connect as I conducted interviews for this study. This allowed me to better understand student veterans and let them know they are supported and valued by people outside of the military.

Next, I should explain why I chose the location of my research and interviews. My family is from the area surrounding Alpha University. I have spent

many vacations, holidays, and family road trips there. I understand the way people there think and act because my family is the same. This means I am more comfortable around the local population and it also made them feel more comfortable with me when they heard about my family background.

Finally, I also need to state that because of my feelings in wanting to help members of the Armed Forces and those from the local area, I needed to be aware of my own biases toward those who might not be as supportive. As stated previously, I have seen faculty members and other college students treat student veterans disrespectfully and blame them for decisions that were made by their military superiors. When I collected data, it was important I ensure that I was not making the data fit into what I wanted it to say. While I did have an idea of what the data would be, there were instances in which I was totally wrong, and some of my assumptions were wrong as well.

Significance of Study

With the ending of the Iraq War and all troops being removed from Afghanistan, thousands of men and women are returning home to the United States. Historical college-going trends from previous wars suggest that many of these veterans would use the benefits of the G.I. Bill to attend college at almost no financial cost to themselves. While this increase in student veterans poses some challenges to universities across the nation, there are benefits to the institutions where they enroll. Existing literature has shown some understanding as to why these men and women are going to college, various programs that have been beneficial to them, and how well they have transitioned into the university

community. However, issues remain related to how to keep more student veterans enrolled in college programs. This contributes to the body of research that focuses on student veterans' experiences and perceptions in how they are welcomed and assimilated into the college community as a whole. The study asked student veterans about their experiences with university programs and policies, as well as student veteran interactions in class and other aspects of their college career with faculty, staff, and other students. Greater understanding of student veterans and their motivations for continuing their education fostered by this study may support campus leaders to adjust or create programs and policies that would benefit all student veterans.

This study used Veteran Critical Theory in an a priori fashion to shape the design of the study and ultimately the interpretation of the data. In this way, I hoped to add to the growing knowledge of student veterans' persistence and graduation from four-year institutions. For example, Mobley et al. (2019) used Veteran Critical Theory to study student veterans engineering in hopes of understanding their needs and if support systems put in place were actually helping student veterans move toward graduation. Atkinson (2019) also used Veteran Critical Theory to study female student veterans on college campuses. That study found some unique needs and perceptions of female student veterans that could help guide future studies of the same demographic group. Additionally, Tinoco (2020) conducted a mixed-methods study to discover possible needs, barriers, and challenges that student veterans who were enrolled at a Tier-1 Research University located in the Pacific Rim region. This study looked at how

student veterans transitioned into higher education and their relationships with peers and other members of the campus community. Therefore, this study examined a different group of student veterans; those who are studying at a Midwestern state, four-year university.

Summary

This chapter began with a general perspective of the research project, followed by an overview of the multi-case study approach, and Veteran Critical Theory, used in an *a priori* as a theoretical perspective, shaping the design of the study and ultimately the interpretation of the data. The remainder of the chapter consisted of the epistemological/theoretical perspective, problem statement, theoretical framework, purpose statement and research questions, the research setting, multi-case study methods, data collection and analysis, research ethics, positionality statement, and significance of the study. Used in unison, these sections show how this study explored the experiences and perceptions of student veterans and how their sense of belonging moved them closer or further away from degree completion.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

The case explored the experiences and perceptions of student veterans who worked or regularly spent time at the student veteran center of a public college campus in a Midwestern state. Through these descriptions, I sought to understand what helped them to persist in their studies, feel a sense of belonging, and continue moving toward graduation. Further, I explored how the student veterans saw themselves in the larger campus community due to their treatment by faculty, staff, and non-veteran students. Finally, I looked how the university itself helped and supported the student veterans in their goals toward graduation by the policies and programs set up specifically for military-connected students. The purpose of the study was to continue to fill gaps in the literature on student veterans on college campuses. Thus, the study was guided by three research questions:

1. What are student veterans' reported experiences with support systems in place specifically for them?
2. How do student veterans perceive the role of support services in meeting their goals and needs?

3. Using which tenets of Veterans' Critical Theory (Phillips & Lincoln, 2017) best explain the experiences student veterans have on campus and with a university community as a whole?

The use of case study methodology allowed student veterans to share their experiences so higher education professionals can begin to better understand the needs of student veterans and what best works for them. Through their descriptions of interactions with faculty, staff, and nonstudent veterans, student veterans at Alpha University who participated in this study offered insights into who and what helped them to persist in their studies and continue moving toward graduation. Further, I explored how the student veterans saw themselves in the larger campus community, including the community surrounding Alpha University, as a result of their treatment by faculty, staff, and non-veteran students. Finally, I looked at policies and programs set up specifically for military-connected students, as an indicator of how university staff and administrators supported student veterans in meeting goals toward graduation. Because of the bounded context of case study design, the student veterans' experiences at the university research site were unique to the support structures available specifically at the research university site and through the student veteran center where the participants worked or frequently spent time with other student veterans.

Study Focus

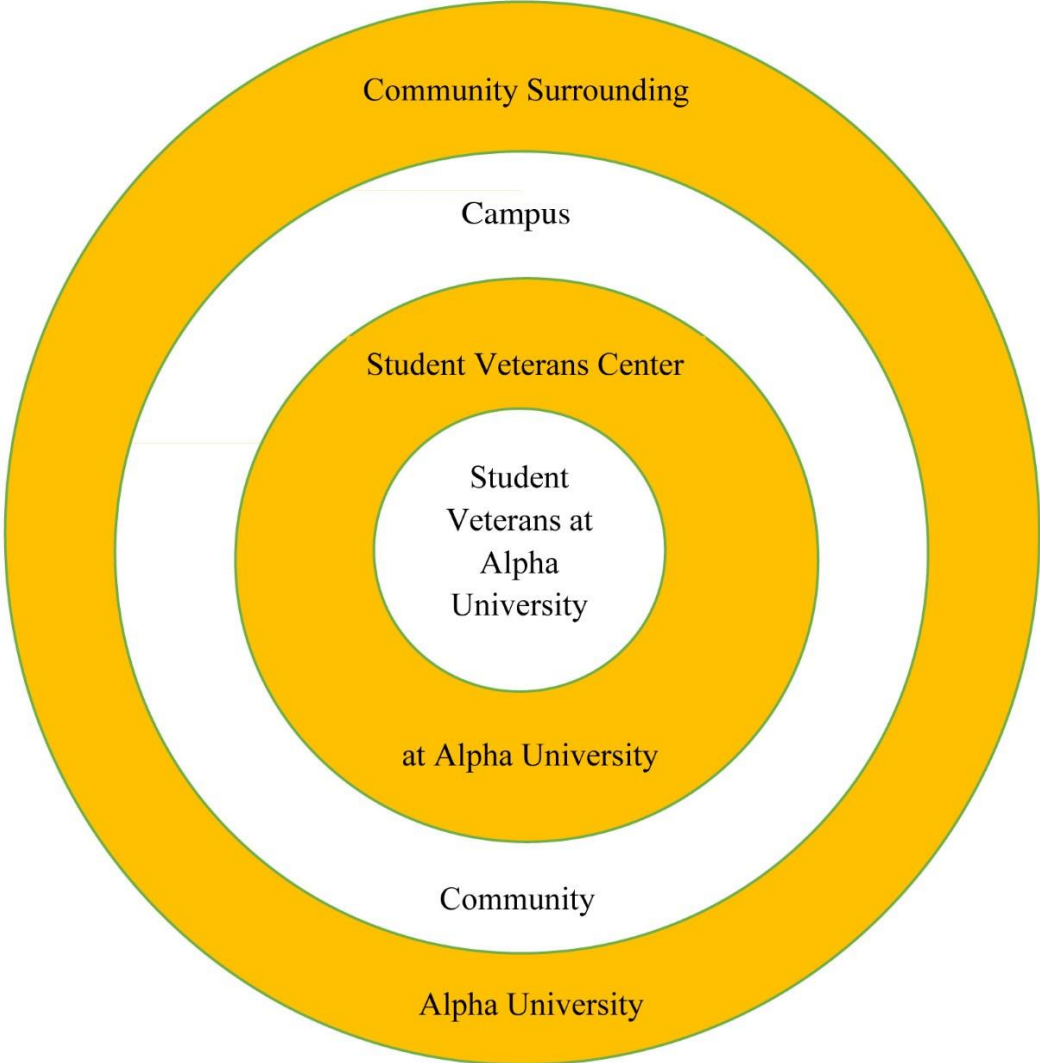
The context of the study is represented in Figure 4.1. The center circle represents the student veterans of Alpha University. The participants are

identified in a later section. The second circle is the student veteran's center at Alpha University. This is where the first interviews took place and where the student veterans socialize, work, study, and come when they need help understanding paperwork, apply for benefits, or just need a respite from college life and the outside world. The third circle is the Alpha University community such as buildings on campus where students gather, classrooms, athletic fields, and any other places where student veterans interact with faculty, staff, non-student veterans, and any other member of the university community. The final circle is the city and community that Alpha University is located in. This is where student veterans interact with the general public when they are not on campus, where they live, shop, socialize with others outside of the university community, and complete most of their day-to-day activities. While each ring of the circle is important and independent of the others, the roll of the overall location each exists in is extremely important. The location of the student veteran center, Alpha University, and the community that surrounds the university matters because of the attitudes, actions, and characteristics of the people who live and work there. The citizens of Alphaville have created a place that is indicative of their personal characteristics and the morals and values they hold most dear. The midwestern states have distinct characteristics that mold the way people live and act. As Sisson et al. (2007) state, no other place better exemplifies the values of market capitalism as well as ideals of social equality, civic culture, and local democracy. This allows for citizens in these states to conform and establish stability throughout their community. It also allows for Midwesterners to feel like they are

the guardians of the nation's traditions and that extends to how they feel about the military and its service men and women.

Figure 4.1

Representation of Study Focus



Students Veterans at Alpha University

The following section contains a small biography about each student veteran who chose to participate in the study. This is done so the reader can understand where each student veteran is coming from, a bit about their time in the service, and what they hope to accomplish after they finish their college degrees. It also serves as a way the reader knows where the majority of the data for this study was taken from and to put that data into some kind of context when it comes to student veterans at Alpha University.

Student Veteran Edward

Edward joined the military in 2017 and served for three years and four months. Their primary reason for joining the military was because every male on their mother's side of the family had served and he wanted to be a part of that tradition. When choosing what branch to join, Edward stated, he looked at each branch and each of them had something he did not feel would work for him. "I was not tough enough to be a Marine and I don't like open water so no Navy. In order to fly in the Air Force, I would have to be an officer and I wanted to go enlisted." This left him with the Army as the best choice. While joining the Army may have seemed like taking the path of least resistance, choosing that particular branch of the military gave Edward the opportunity to pursue a career in computers and cybersecurity.

After being stationed at Ft. Hood, Texas, Edward chose Alpha University "because I wanted to come home and be around family" after several years of missing out on family activities. Selecting a university close to where he grew up

made the transition into college easier because of the family support structure nearby.

The major Edward chose is IT Infrastructure. He hopes to work in computers after graduation going to different companies testing their security because, “You basically have a free pass to ethically hack them and see what vulnerability they have.” Edward also had secret clearance when he was in the military so he believes that would help him getting a job in cybersecurity after graduation.

Edward specifically sought out the Student Veteran Center because he was told by his commanding officer when leaving the military, it was where student veterans needed to go so they could apply for their military benefits. Edward started this process by going to the research university website and finding where the Student Veteran Center was located and when the best time to go there was. After spending time in the center, Edward began to know the people there and felt comfortable. When an email went out asking student veterans if they were interested in working as a Student Veteran Liaison, he thought it would be a good fit and applied. In the summer of 2021, he went through the interview process and was hired. To be eligible for this position, one need to be a student veteran or a dependent of one and be receiving benefits from the military so Edward qualified.

Student Veteran Annie

Annie joined the military in 2010 and served for five years. She joined the military because she was in an abusive relationship and did not have the family support she needed. Because she did not know what she wanted to do in life, she

“went and talked to the Army recruiter, and I was pretty much signed up. I was on the delayed entry program, so I'd meet with the recruiters once a week and we'd go for runs and they'd get you in shape. I did that for about six months before I left.”

Annie joined the Army and served as a military police officer. After leaving the Army she joined the Army Reserves and now serves in human resources. She was stationed at Ft. Leonard Wood, Missouri and did one tour of duty in Afghanistan. Annie did an associate degree in night school at Columbia College while on active duty and then chose Alpha University in nearby Springfield for her undergraduate degree. Annie largely chose AU because it was a bigger school and, she believed, potential employers would look favorably on a degree from Alpha University. Annie chose to double major in school in Criminology and Psychology. “There are so many things I can do with this but I haven't got it all figured out quite yet...” She expressed interest in focusing more on criminology in the future while continuing to work with veterans: “I really want to continue working with veterans because,” she explained, in her mind she “has the military foundation and now...this education.”

Annie also sought out the Student Veteran Center when she first came to campus. Since she was a non-traditional student, she was not required to meet with an advisor to pick classes or get help with the transition into the university community. Going to the center was needed to begin to process education benefits. The Student Veteran Center really helped Annie because while she was eligible for the Post 9-11 G.I. Bill, the center showed them how to get better

benefits because she was also collecting disability from their time in the Army. She became interested in becoming a Student Veteran Liaison because during her first visit into the Student Veteran Center she was told she could have done what she needed to do that day without physically coming in. She recalled, “I don't know campus. I don't even remember where I parked my car and I was upset.” When she expressed her frustrations to one of the counselors in the Student Veteran Center, and about this and how it didn't need to be that way, the counselor said, “Hey, you know, you would be a really good person to work in this office.” Annie was not so sure at first but “a month or two later, an email went out, saying if you want to apply to work here, you have to be using benefits and just send in a paragraph on why you'd be a good fit.” Annie thought, “I have office experience and I'm a veteran and I'm using benefits so I was hired on the spot.” Each of the student veteran liaisons stated something similar. Each found they could use their experience to help others in the same kind of situations.

Student Veteran Shannon

Shannon joined the military in 1992 and served for over 20 years. She joined the Army and served in numerous positions within Communication, Signal and IT, and Cybersecurity. “If it was a radio, telephone or computer,” she explained, “you saw me to get help with it.” She served the longest of the study participants and was stationed in numerous places. The ones she specifically mentioned were Ft. Jackson, South Carolina, Ft. Gordon, Georgia, Missouri State ROTC – Springfield, Missouri, Ft. Leonard Wood, Missouri, Baghdad, Iraq, and Najaf, Iraq. She chose Alpha University because it was close to her hometown

and had the major she wanted, Theater Design Technology and State Management. Shannon is still trying to figure out what she would like to do after graduation in the theater arts world.

Shannon found the Student Veteran Center due to a field trip she took through the community college she was attending to get their general education classes completed before entering a larger university. The purpose of the field trip was for the community college veteran support center to “hand off” the student veterans and introduce them to the support team at Alpha University. She became a Student Veteran Liaison through an interesting turn of events. While she was in the Student Veteran Center studying, when it became time for her to leave. “I went over and found the cleaning supplies without asking where they were, came over, wiped my table, cleaned it off as I’ve been trained to do in the military and went to put it back.” When one of the directors saw this, they told Shannon she did not need to clean up because others would take care of it. “I’m like, no, no, I clean myself up as I go. I mean, that’s how I’ve always been. And they were taken with that and were like, ‘do you want a job?’ and invited me to join their liaison team.” Shannon is also the oldest member of the Student Veteran Liaison staff.

Student Veteran Matt

Matt joined the military in 2011 and served for 10 years. He grew up in a military family with their father and grandfather serving so he moved around the world throughout their childhood to places like Germany and different cities in the United States. The military “was definitely not [his] first choice”: however, he

had “made some mistakes and the Army was a good way for me to correct myself.”

Matt served as a member of the military police and was stationed in Ft. Riley, Kansas; Ft. Leonard Wood, Missouri; Afghanistan (two tours), and Korea (one tour). He chose Alpha University because of the proximity to his wife’s family which would make the transition from the military to civilian life a little easier. The major he chose is Healthcare Administration. He also joined the ROTC unit at Alpha University so he could continue to be around the military life but also to be a mentor to those younger members thinking about joining the military after college.

Matt sought out the Student Veteran Center because he knew he needed to go through that office in order to receive his G.I. Bill benefits. He did not know where the office was at first; Matt remembers thinking it was a good thing the center was located in the main library building so getting there was easier. Of the student veteran participants in this study, Matt was the only one who was not a Student Veteran Liaison. I chose him to participate in the study because he was willing to participate but also because I wanted to have at least one person who did not work in the Student Veteran Center so I could get the perspective of someone who interacts with the center while not working there.

Student Veteran Blane

Blane joined the military in 2016 and served for 5 years. He got the idea of joining the Marines because he wanted to get out and see more of the world. “I wanted to go on adventure and see some of the world because I've always been

poor, so I never got to see like anything outside of my home state. So it definitely allowed me to explore a little bit.”

Blane served as an administrative assistant and was stationed in Quantico, Virginia; Newport, Rhode Island; Annapolis, Maryland; and San Diego, California. He chose Alpha University because it was close to his home and had the degree he was looking for, Computer Animation. “I’m looking to get into the visual effects field and just something artsy.” Eventually he hopes to work for a company like Pixar and use what he has learned with his degree.

Blane sought out the Student Veteran Center in order to make sure he was getting the benefits he was entitled to. Also, he wanted to have a place where he could meet other student veterans and hang out with like-minded people. Over time his participation in student veterans’ events turned into being asked to be a student liaison.

Student Veteran Ryan

Ryan joined the military in 2009 and served for 8 years. He got the idea of joining the Marines from his stepfather who had previously served. He had many other examples in his family to follow, too: “My grandfather was in the Marines. My great-grandfather was in the Marines as a Sergeant major. My uncle was in the Marines. My cousin was in the Marines, so it's kind of a, a family thing that we've done.”

Ryan served as a Parachute Rigger and was stationed at Okinawa, Japan; Camp Pendleton, California; Joliet, Illinois; and Sangin, Afghanistan. He chose Alpha University because of its location and because several members of his

family had previously attended. Originally, he planned to major in something that would help him become a firefighter. However, due to some medical issues he was not able to continue with that and changed to Communications Studies.

Ryan sought out the Student Veteran Center because when he was attending community college, his job was working for the Student Veteran Center there. His supervisor there was someone he saw as a mentor and he was hoping to find the same type of relationship at the Alpha University Student Veteran Center. Helping others like himself has become a passion for him and he hopes to continue with that after college. “My ultimate goal is to work in a college campus, hopefully in the veteran’s office. So, the more veterans I work with, the more contacts I get.” Therefore, Ryan getting a job at the Student Veteran Center was something he did in order to further his professional goals.

Colleen, director of the Student Veteran Center

Like many organizations, Alpha University’s Student Veteran Center has taken on the personality of its leader. Colleen, the director of the Student Veteran Center, is an integral part of activities related to student veterans at Alpha University. Colleen describes her role as a link between the military and student veterans as one of the most important aspects of her job. Doing her job well means making things better or easier for student veterans. For example, she explained the Army adopted a new platform to streamline student veterans accessing their benefits more than one year ago. This new system is not user friendly, and that has presented obstacles for her, and in turn for the soldiers: “if I don't understand this new system and it's not working for me, think how frustrated

the soldier is becoming.” For Colleen, making the Student Veteran Center at Alpha University a place where students know they can come to get help and receive all the benefits they are entitled to is one of the most important aspects of their job. She obviously took that aspect of her role very seriously, and as a result helped to create a center where student veterans felt safe and understood.

The Student Veteran Center

Dr. Steven Roberts, the Associate Vice President of Enrollment Management and Services (AVPEMS) at Alpha University, was part of the team that created the Student Veteran Center. He remembered the original set-up the university used for student veteran services. For many years only one person designated as the certifying official provided services for student veterans. With the retirement of the veteran certifying official, the assistant registrar overseeing registration inherited the certification responsibilities. The university quickly realized this was not a good long-term solution because that person had so many different responsibilities. Therefore, university administrators reorganized, repurposing a vacant position to create an assistant registrar for veteran student services.

Now dealing with student veterans and their issues was no longer a duty for the assistant registrar over registration, but it became somebody whose position was dedicated to veteran certifying veteran status to ensure students receive appropriate G.I. Bill benefits. Then the university decided to create an assistant director level position so the position could do more than veteran certification. The number of student veterans attending Alpha University had

risen from 550 to 700 during 2005 to 2010; more funds were needed to ensure each student veteran was properly supported and had a point-of-contact person on campus to assist them. University administrators applied for and received a federal grant in 2010, to fund a Student Veteran Center, a space on campus specifically for student veterans, and to create an additional support staff position. This meant there were now two positions; the assistant registrar who oversaw the area and a student support councilor, working specifically with student veterans. Then in 2014, the university established the current titles for those who oversaw the student veteran center: the Director of Veteran Student Services and the Assistant Director of Veteran Student Services.

The first Student Veteran Center was in the administration building on campus but this location was not the best space for student veterans to gather. It was located next to the counseling center. There were often complaints from the counseling center about too much noise. Also, some student veterans did not like being in such close proximity to the counseling center, and thereby making it possible to be seen coming and going from accessing mental health resources. Finally, students really did not want to go into the administration building and go up to the third floor to get to their space.

Meanwhile, there was another reorganization by the university and the student veterans' staff positions supporting student veterans were integrated into the adult student services office, which had previously been in a different division. Now there were four total full-time positions in a combined veteran student services and adult student services office.

Over time, relationships with former student veteran alumni were established by the Student Veteran Center through inviting alums to events like football games or other gatherings on campus. Dr. Roberts remembered the growth in the student veteran population, and the growth of the Student Veteran Center in terms of student and alumni involvement as part of the rationale for maintaining one of the adult student services positions within the Student Veteran Center. University administrators hoped to find a better space; this goal became a priority when a student veteran alumnus became interested in the center and wanted to donate money for a new space.

A project that had been ongoing at that time was converting space in the library to more student services offices. This was possible because as the library was moving to more digital resources, paper books were being removed and more space was available. The university had already created disability support services and a TRIO office in the library with its new open space and there was still more area available. So, through an alumni donation, the university was able to fund the new veteran's student center. That alumnus made their donation ongoing every year so it allows the Student Veteran Center to continue to serve that specific community. Dr. Roberts described these developments as an evolution "from no facility to an okay facility to a very nice veteran student center and from one more administrative assistant level veteran certified official to multiple positions." This growth and additional positions have been a benefit not just to the student veterans but also the university as a whole because as previously stated, when an assistant registrar had to oversee student veteran services, they had too many

responsibilities. Under this system student veterans are now being served by those who only job is to ensure they are getting the support they need without having to divide their attention with non-student veterans.

Emergent Themes

Three main themes emerged from the data collected via interviews and observations made during visits to Alpha University, and these themes reinforce the salience of depicting of the student veteran experience in layers of relationships as depicted in Figure 4.1. The first was how a camaraderie has been established in the Student Veteran Center through military humor, informal events, and the director creating a “safe space” for the student veterans. It was in this space where the student veterans were able to be themselves and allowed their military identity to come out. This theme corresponded to the first two bands, or layers, representing the student veterans themselves and the center where they spend most of their time. The second theme of the study was the lack of contention between the student veterans and those who had not served in the military, including professors and non-veteran students. This is represented in the third layer of Figure 4.1. The final theme that emerged was how the student veterans appreciated being told that others appreciated their service but were also uncomfortable with such thanks and praise. The context of this is how the outside world views veterans and how the student veterans were treated when they were not on campus but in the outside community that surrounds Alpha University. Again the location of Alpha University, situated in an area supportive of the military and those who have served comes forth in the data. This is the final and

outermost layer of Figure 4.1. Each layer or band of the circle is important and has different implications for how student veterans perceived themselves and those with whom they interacted within the college community and outside of it in the surrounding area. These three themes relate to one another because each place where student veterans interact with each other, the university community, and the community that surrounds the university, show support for student veterans. The participants each spoke of positive interactions and how felt during their time at Alpha University.

“Camaraderie” in the Student Veteran Center

One of the most important ways we see how the Student Veteran Center at Alpha University is a safe space is how camaraderie has been established. Each participant spoke of camaraderie and how important it was to them especially in respect to the student veteran center. One definition of camaraderie that exemplifies how the student veterans feel about one another and the veteran student center is mutual trust and friendship among people who spend a lot of time together. According to Gopalan and Brady’s (2020) research, this sense of belonging led students use campus resources like the Student Veteran Center to a greater extent, furthering their success while also buffering students from stress, improving mental health. Matt said, “We all came from a different background experience [and] you may never have met anybody, but you just automatically have something to talk about and it makes getting to know each other easy because you have a similar world view.” It was this sense of camaraderie that also

led to a sense of community where the student veterans feel a part of something bigger than themselves.

Shannon also expressed this feeling of unity, based on student veterans shared military experience which “sets the bar for us. So, all of those social rules that any group coming together would...have to pre-identify before they could establish camaraderie, we already have.” She continued, describing the Student Veteran Center as feeling like a new military unit: “We’re already used to an established hierarchy and we carry along what we learned in the military. So what’s acceptable to that group is already predefined for us so we can quickly come together and figure out where we are within that group and who can do what for whom.” For Shannon, the successful transition into a new community at Alpha University came down to one simple reality: “We’re already used to the rules.”

This sense of camaraderie and unity found is common among student veterans on college campuses. Some, like the participants in Olsen et al.’s (2014) study, found this sense of camaraderie in formal support such as what Shannon in the Alpha University Student Veteran Center. The participants in the current study point to the importance for them of being able to come together in informal situations and bond with one another over their common experiences from the military. Humor was also an important part of camaraderie and the Student Veteran Center was important in allowing the student veterans to engage in types that outsiders might not understand or see as inappropriate.

Military Humor

Individuals' sense of humor came out in every-day interactions and during groups events such as an informal lunch held in the Student Veteran Center on St. Patrick's Day, 2021. At this meal, Shannon had made a traditional meal for St. Patrick's Day that consisted of corned beef and cabbage as well as other vegetables for the group to enjoy. The food was placed on a main table so participants could come and get food as needed. Everyone was seated throughout the center around tables of four or five. People joined in conversations at their own table, and across the room, moving in and out of each other's conversations. During the meal, student veterans enjoyed talking and making fun of each other in ways that showed they were a part of something bigger than themselves. For example, when someone said they were going to get more food, Edward jokingly yelled at them to leave some food for everyone and to quit being a "selfish bastard." The amount of name-calling and cursing at one another would probably be considered inappropriate in other spaces on campus but in the Student Veteran Center it seemed to be accepted and even encouraged. When Edward made his comment, other student veterans laughed and yelled in agreement. When talking about interactions like this Matt said, "you talk like you did back in the service because you know everyone in the center will understand you."

Soldiers on active duty do not typically have unlimited access to food; therefore, the squad members might indeed consider someone who ate more than other selfish. Humor serves many purposes among soldiers, sailors, and Marines. In the St. Patrick's Day story above, Edward used humor and the common experience of sharing food to make what could have been a serious point during a

deployment when food was being rationed. Participants in this study described using military humor to build camaraderie among student veterans in the Student Veteran Center.

Colleen facilitates camaraderie through small events like the St. Patrick's Day lunch, and informal meetings but often does not have to do much because the student veterans do it on their own and in their own way. One of the ways the student veterans' bond with one another is through making fun of those who served in a different branch of the military, but they understand they are all part of one big team. She said, "When they come in this door, they're just one big happy family. If you are a Marine, they hand them a crayon or if it's a Marines' birthday, somebody will make a crayon cake." The idea the Army student veterans want to convey is that members of their branch are more intelligent than the Marines, who are seen a blunt force instruments that the U.S. Military uses when violence is all that is needed. "They really rag on each other," Colleen said, "but it's all in fun."

Ryan said something similar when it comes to humor and what he called "dark humor. Whenever people experience traumatic events, comedy is relief for that. When you're in Afghanistan you to deal with messed up stuff, so you find other individuals that accept and understand you don't mean the bad things that are joked about." Ryan believes that other jobs such as inner-city teachers, social workers, firefighters, and police officers can relate well to soldiers and Marines because they also experience harder events in their jobs. That why people who have these traumatic experiences look for someplace like the Student Veteran

Center. He said, “you can come to the veterans’ center and be around other people that are typically going to have the same type of communication, comedy and all that stuff. The jokes can be a lot worse in our safe space.”

Blane agreed with this. “No one belittles anybody. If you’re belittling someone, you’ll get called out. We’ve got people in ROTC, admin, and grunts. People in the army and dependents too. Like it’s an ecosystem and we’re all part of it.” He also says he gets made fun of by other Marines because of the job he had. Rather than being what they would call a grunt in the field, Blane’s job was in an office so other Marines give him a hard time because his job can be seen as easier and not as physically demanding as theirs. “Marines are viewed as more of a hammer or blunt force. They might say things like, ‘Oh, you’re just an admin guy, but it’s all in good fun.” Knowing when to take things as jokes and when to take a comment personally is something Blane believes all the student veterans know because of their time in the service.

Shannon gave a similar assessment of how the student veterans treated one another. Outsiders might think it was mean or cruel; however, Shannon explained, “with every veteran that's coming here, we find our place, can let our hair down because we know who we are.” Those coming from a military background would recognize the jokes from other interactions with soldiers or Marines. So, the humor is to be accepted and enjoyed. The shared background of the student veterans allows for them to understand each other and share in the military culture they learned when they were enlisted. Shannon also said, “Veterans are known for having some crude humor compared to the rest of society, but we already know

that and expect that.” Humor, she explained “facilitates . . . camaraderie.” This common background of military service as a point of reference allows a new person to, as Shannon put it, “start expressing humor with each other and start finding ways to joke together.”

The importance of military humor brings up another important aspect of the student veterans, their military identity. While each of the student veterans occupy a space outside of their military status, the one that is most salient is their veteran status. Through their humor, the participants bond with one another like they did when they were in the military. This humor allows them to understand one another in ways that other students may not understand and deem inappropriate.

Informal Events

The sense of camaraderie is also evident at informal events that also happen throughout the year. For example, on Alpha University’s “dead day”, a day when there were no classes as students prepared for their end of semester finals, the Student Veteran Center was full of student veterans as they spent time together. During this occasion, Edward had set up a cornhole tournament that others could participate in, competing for bragging rights. There were several teams and a bracket was created and drawn up on a large white board. While the tournament took place, Colleen ordered sandwiches so the student veterans could share a meal. Those who came later were given parts of other’s meals when they arrived because the group did not want anyone to be left out.

Also, on this day, student veterans were coming in and out of the center to see what was going on and to say hello to others. Annie stopped by to say hello with her daughter, Ellie, who is a toddler. Ellie was running around and at one point was hit in the face with a beanbag thrown by someone participating in the cornhole tournament. While Annie was concerned about her daughter, she, along with everyone watching also laughed. The person who hit Ellie was pretty upset but Annie told them it was okay and just part of growing up. Annie later said she likes bringing her kids around the student veteran center so they can get to know the others and feel a part of the student veteran community. This day had activities and a community that was set up by the student veterans for themselves. Collen was there and walked in and out to see who the tournament was there and how was going but she allowed the participants to do what they wanted.

Another informal event that took place was during a day when most student veterans did not have class. Edward set up the television in the Student Veteran Center to watch the Lord of the Rings Trilogy. Some of the student veterans brought sleeping bags and other personal items to make themselves comfortable and laid down on the couches or the floor to watch the movies. Some student veterans came in and out and would stop for a while and watch with the others. As the day went on, food was ordered by those who wanted it and the student veterans spent time with each other in a relaxing environment where they could be themselves and enjoy a movie together. Anecdotes such as these recorded in field notes reflected the Student Veteran Center as a place where they could be themselves, create events for themselves, and spend time in community

together before the stress of finals. This sense of belonging that student veterans feel in the Student Veteran Center reinforces the idea they have a place that is just for them and builds a sense of community much like they had when they were in the military (Gopalan & Brady, 2020).

Support for Student Veterans

Support from university leaders for Alpha University's Student Veteran Center has been consistent. The administration of the university is consistent with the surrounding community in that they are supportive of the military and student veterans. Therefore, these men and women have worked to ensure student veterans have space that is specifically for them. This is not to say that Alpha University student veterans have always had this specific place because university support has also gone through an evolution. Prior to 2010, according to Dr. Roberts, in Enrollment Management Services, "the university was supportive of student veterans but there was a lack of awareness. For instance, university politics when we received the grant forced the university to find space for a veteran center rather than just an office where they would come for assistance." Because a space specifically for student veterans was something the university had not thought of previously, the typical thought went to identifying any available space, rather than finding the best place for them on campus. Fortunately, as time went on and more funding became available, there was support in trying to find the right space and determining the right number of funded positions. The large grant that made the creation of the Student Veteran Center possible ended in 2015. Faced with the need to identify a sustainable

funding source, Roberts responded by advocating for the university to assume this cost. Administrators agreed and today this added funding has been important to make sure the Student Veteran Center adequate staffing levels to support those who use the center. However, the university also put things in place to help individual student veterans as well.

According to Mrs. Campbell, the University Registrar, one of the most important things the university does to help support student veterans move toward graduation is allow preferential status for student veterans when registering for classes. Allowing student veterans to register for classes before students prioritized based on years of previous enrollment makes it easier for student veterans to get the classes they need and move toward graduation more quickly. Originally, student veterans did not have this benefit. However, when the Registrar's office was asked to give priority to student veterans by the Director of the Student Veteran Center it agreed. This request was granted because student veterans has asked because often times they had other responsibilities outside of school and needed to be able to attend classes when their schedule allowed for it. Additionally, the campus culture of wanting to help those who served in the Armed Forces came into play. This was a real way to ensure student veterans would get the courses they needed in order to move them closer to graduation at a faster pace.

Mrs. Campbell also works closely with the Student Veteran Center to make sure the Registrar's office and the Student Veteran Center are on the same page for the students. She said, "I do as much advocating as I can. We had a big

changeover in how we were able to do benefits with veteran students who were coming in using their army benefits when Army Ignited switched their platform over.” Army Ignited was the online platform that the Army used for student veterans to access various educational opportunities and support as well as guidance throughout their desired educational path. Therefore, the role of the registrar in ensuring academic records were up to date and available to the student veterans was to help with advocating on the university technology side of things, to help get reports written, and get systems running that were going help make things easier for the student veterans. Mrs. Campbell’s advocating for student veterans stems from her personal values that are also often shared by many members of the Alpha University faculty and staff, as well as the surround community of Alphaville: respect for the military and its members.

The Marines, as well as the Army require all veterans to complete a program related to the transition out of the military. The Marines’ Transition Readiness Program (TRP) “supports Marines in their successful transition to civilian life through a series of comprehensive transition and employment assistance events and services. It emphasizes a proactive approach that enables them to formulate effective post-transition employment, educational, and entrepreneurial goals” (Marine Corps Community Services, 2016). Marines have the option of the classes they take depending on what route they want to take in life. There are different tracks that Marines can follow to help them decide what they will do after they leave the military: the Employment Track that helps with resume building and knowing what military skills transfer well into the civilian

world. The Education/Vocational Tracks which compare the options of Higher Education or Technical Training Institutions to find which is the best option for the individual Marine. These classes are designed to provide the best path to the goals they hope to accomplish in the civilian world by focusing on specific needs what will be most useful. Therefore, if a veteran plans on using their military benefits for college or trade school, they would attend different programs than someone who plans to start a business or immediately enter the work force. While these classes are required, it is up to the Marine to ask the right questions and make sure their paperwork is done correctly in order to process and receive their military benefits. The problem with this is that many times the transitioning Marine does not know the right questions to ask and may need help knowing what paperwork to fill out and where to send it when it is completed.

In the same vein, the Army states completing their Transition Assistance Program (TAP) is “a Soldier’s responsibility. TAP provides information and training to ensure transitioning Soldiers, Retirees, and Soldiers’ dependents are prepared for their next step in life - whether pursuing additional education, finding a job, or starting their own business” (United States Army, 2022). The TAP program makes sure veterans can find what they need but soldiers need to be proactive and ask questions. The TAP website also states the program will include two-days of instruction with options that are similar to the Marines TRP: an Employment Track, a Vocational Track, and an Education Track. “Service members must elect at least one track but may attend more than one based on their post-transition goals” (United States Army, 2022). While both the Army and

the Marines have classes for veterans leaving the service, these programs may not help once the student veterans get on campus. This is another reason the Student Veteran Center is so important. It gives the student veterans a place to go where questions can be answered and paperwork can be filled out and explained so they do not feel they are alone in this process and plug in to a place where they will be listened to and supported.

The director knows the various military branches systems so well, and she has taught her student veteran liaisons the ins and outs of those systems as well. As a result, when student veterans need help, they know they can trust those at the center to ensure their military benefits will be delivered in a timely manner and their stress will be kept to a minimum. There was a general feeling that outside of the Student Veteran Center, the bureaucracy of Alpha University makes it possible for people to get lost in red tape. As a result, student veterans may not always know who they need to speak to when it comes to specific issues. Annie described “working here [at the Student Veteran Center, and] also using the services.” She said getting familiar with benefits and what I was entitled to when you exit the military is so important. Annie felt that, unfortunately, most students veterans did not pay much attention to the short block of instruction required by the various branches of the military for their service members who were transitioning to civilian life. Instead, she explained, they seemed to think they would just deal with school stuff later: “And then, you know, later comes and you're like, . . . what did I learn from that?” In this situation, she continued, “the veterans center [sic] helps you understand what you need to know.”

Matt agreed. He took a course before he left the Army designed to help him understand his academic benefits. However, completing the course did not translate to understanding what he needed to do when he got to campus. He stated the most important thing the Student Veteran Center has done for him was to answer his questions and make sure his paperwork was done correctly. He said, “I didn't fully understand the benefits that I was entitled to or how to start receiving those benefits.” The Student Veteran Center made sure he knew what needed to be done and that all paperwork was filled out correctly and turned in on time.

Understanding the needs of the student veterans helps build a sense of camaraderie because they understand someone is looking out for them. Edward said, “The most valuable thing the veteran center has done for me is offered me the work study position gets me the chance to work and spend time with other people that understand my situation and I understand theirs.” For Edward, the Student Veterans’ Center provides a nice stable job for veterans while also working around their class schedule so they don't have to worry about getting a part-time job outside of the university setting. This is consistent with Gopalan and Brady’s (2020) research. They found students who feel they belong seek out and use campus resources to a greater extent, furthering their success while also buffering students from stress, improving mental health.

“Safe Space”

Colleen has created a safe space in the Student Veteran Center where everyone is accepted and, in her words, “protected.” When recruiters wanted to come in and get the student veterans to reenlist or when reporters wanted to

interview student veterans, they were not allowed in the student veteran center. She told them, “If they want to talk, they’ll come to you.” Colleen very obviously cared about her student veterans and wants to protect them as best she can so they can concentrate on being students and having the best educational experience possible at Alpha University. Shannon talked about how Colleen was perceived by the student veterans who frequent the Center: “I have watched her with people that have come on campus wanting to interact with veterans and she did not just politely decline but go after them. We are roughly about the same age and I am still her child.” This protectiveness by the director for the student veterans was something they all spoke about. It also reinforces the feeling that the Student Veteran Center is a safe space for all the student veterans. Annie said, “I just need to talk to her, not even about school stuff. She’s very busy but she makes time for us when we need her for anything.” Ryan stated something similar. Colleen, he said, “not only helped me with college but when I was struggling with transitioning and getting adjusted to civilian life...that really stood out to me.” Finally, Blane stated, “Any question I have ever had, I have always been able to come to [Colleen] and she’s been able to answer it. And if she didn’t know, she’ll call the VA and find out for me.” He then concluded talking about Colleen by saying, “It’s never like ‘go figure it out for yourself.’ She has always been very helpful.” By creating a safe space, Colleen and the Student Veteran Center has allowed student veterans to feel at home there and be themselves. This allows them to bond in ways that outsiders might not understand but that makes sense to other student veterans.

Osborne's (2014) study found to ease their transition into higher education, student veterans articulated the necessity of connecting with fellow veterans for both social support and to receive "straightforward information" regarding strategies for navigating through the complexities of the campus. Therefore, the hiring of student veterans on campus creates staff members who possess an understanding of military life and the challenges of transitioning into college life. This also allows for student veterans to know there are supportive members in the campus community while also ensuring there are people who understand their point of view and how best to help them. Blane spoke about the importance of the Student Veteran Center in terms of the opportunity this place provided for him to be around people who understood him. Colleen and her assistant make sure he has everything he needed; "if they don't know, he continued, "they'll call the VA and find out for me. It's never like go fish it out yourself." He believes that type of caring and proactive support helped not just himself but all those who came into the Student Veteran Center. Finally, this understanding of military life also helps the student veterans create a new unit much like they had when they were on active duty in the military. This is consistent with Hawthorne et al. (2013) who found that student veterans often look for others who have had similar experiences, in an effort to replace the cohesion of their military unit with a familiar peer group.

Life Experience Disconnect

Unlike participants in Osborn's (2014) study, no one reported negative interactions with faculty members at Alpha University based on the student

veteran's prior military service. While there were instances of not understanding or always getting along with non-student veterans, no participants felt their military status was a reason for their experience. Participants did, however, describe situations in which they felt they were treated differently by faculty as compared to people participants in this study referred to as, simply, "other students," both inside and outside of classes. One of Matt's instructors allowed other students to complain about being challenged in class rather than explaining that debate in classes is expected and appropriate on a college campus. The faculty member seemed to Matt to be protecting younger students from the student veteran in a debate. Matt's instructor told him, "You need to back off a little bit because they're not ready" for emotional debate in class discussions. The instructor's comment upset Matt, who described feeling he was doing nothing wrong, just pointing out where the student was incorrect, without trying to insult them or hurt their feelings. When he was in the military, Matt was taught to take criticism, learn from it, and use it to help him grow as a soldier. Therefore, receiving this correction from the instructor surprised Matt, who referenced his own belief that if people are not stretched intellectually then they will never mature and grow as a person. The military wants its members to grow so when student veterans encounter those who are not willing to try and do the same, it is hard for them to relate.

In the literature it is common for student veterans to have trouble understanding other students since civilian students are often at different points in their lives and student veterans are older and have more life experiences. Student

veteran participants in Jones' (2013) study expressed difficulty understanding the lives of non-veterans' students. Civilians complained all the time about trivial things and were often considered to have a nonchalant attitude about homework, studying, and school in general. Annie described a lack of connection between most student veterans here." Other students frequently invited her to go and party with them, but she preferred to go home, cook dinner for her children, and spend time with her husband. Some student veterans had trouble understanding why they would be looked down upon for taking care of their responsibilities and saw it as a personality flaw in the civilian students, one that would be corrected quickly in the military at the junior soldier level. Matt said the "Army teaches soldiers to find a solution to a problem, not to accept a situation and complain about something without trying to fix whatever is wrong."

Another difference the student veterans perceived between themselves and the civilian students was a lack of discipline and how that relates to a lack of maturity. The military teaches its members to have discipline in everything they did which means they had to grow up fast because no one was going to be responsible for their own duties except themselves. However, the student veterans believed that did not always translate to the civilian world because they felt many civilian students never had never had to fully take care of themselves and depended on others to do some tasks for them. The student veterans also felt this was especially true of college students who had just left home for the first time and were so young. Matt saw this lack of discipline on numerous occasions: "There definitely was this period of culture shock for almost the first month

where communication was very hard. I've had easier times communicating with people who do not speak English than I have communicating with people younger than me.” Edward went on to explain that he felt most of the younger students were “spoon-fed” too often when they were younger and that made it harder for him to relate with them. “I had to work on my patience because I'm used to structure and expectations of how the people around me think and feel. You work with them every day, you're trained the same, you work the same.” Student veterans believe this lack of discipline translates to a lack of maturity. Both Matt and Edward felt if civilian students were forced to have more discipline in their lives, then they would be able to manage college and life better while also being able to understand student veterans better.

Edward understands that everyone does not need to think and feel the same but he finds it difficult to deal with others that take things personally when you disagree. “We're free to disagree, but people take disagreement almost personal. It's very strange to me. I had a very hard time with that.” Edward also felt that these younger students say things without knowing the facts, “But then when I point that out, suddenly I'm the bad guy. It makes communication difficult.” Matt felt that other students needed to be allowed to debate and lose so they could learn from it and understand, as he put it, that debates are won with facts and not emotions. Not being able to understand how to debate or seeing other points of view can also be attributed to a lack of maturity that can come with age and experience. Annie shared that interacting with younger, traditional students was difficult for her because, she explained, they were not in the same

place in their lives and their responsibilities were so different. Not understanding another's point of view can cause some friction. Annie has felt this on numerous occasions. She said, "in terms of like relating to younger students, I feel like I'm like, 'sorry, man. I really want to help you but I just don't know how' I think the age gap is the difference."

One could argue that what Edward and Matt are feeling is common when looking at the cognitive development of students during their college years. Perry's (1970) model defined cognitive strategies and assumptions that student adopt as they develop intellectually. Of the four stages of Perry's Model, most non-veteran students would be in Stage One: Dualism; the belief that all problems have correct answers and that authorities can furnish these answers. At this level things are seen as black or white, good or evil. However, the participants in this study have progressed into Stage Three: Contextual Relativism or Stage Four: Commitment Within Contextual Relativism. Student veterans recognize that important challenges have more-defensible and less-defensible solutions rather than a single correct answer or no answers at all. Additionally, the student veterans can recognize that reasonable answers often depend upon the contexts and value systems in which the problems occur. Therefore, non-veteran students may have a hard time having their opinions and beliefs questioned because they lack context outside of their own experiences and see the world in black and white. This also means they take such questions as personal attacks while the student veterans see such questions as helpful to personal growth and how learning is supposed to be. When student veterans were in the military, they knew

there was more than one way to complete a mission and were taught to not to be constrained by conventional thinking. Therefore, student veterans do not see their questions as attacks but rather a chance to learn from each other and enhance the learning process for everyone involved.

Edward stated he was worried that he would have problems with non-military students when he began college. This stems from stories he heard from other veterans about student veterans and civilians having a hard time understanding one another. Also, he said, "I was worried about how I would interact with people because for three years I only interacted with people who are in the military; the people that know your struggle, people you suffer with, and they understand it's hard." Edward was 22 when he entered college and in most of his classes, he was with students who were 17 or 18. "They haven't really matured or lived on their own so you can't really talk to them about any of that. They don't want to talk to people who are older because you don't really have much in common." While Edward said he would be willing to socialize and interact with other students that are not student veterans, he finds it hard because there is so little they have in common due to age and former military status. Therefore, the issues between student veterans and other students are based more on the two groups being in different places in their lives rather than them seeing each other as military versus non-military. It also shows again how the student veterans see their main identity through their veteran status. Even when interactions with other students are not hostile, the student veterans see themselves as different with different needs and motives for the things they do and value.

Ryan agrees with this assessment. However, he also understands that student veterans also bring perceptions about how they might be viewed by other students. He had heard from veterans that sometimes they get asked about things they did in the service such as “Did you kill anyone?” or “Do you have PTSD?” He said, “When would you ever ask anybody that whenever they're going through something? Somebody that's been in a car wreck or somebody that lost a friend of theirs, you don't ask them. It's a very insensitive question to ask.” Therefore, he believes that some student veterans may be wary of being in social situations with non-veteran students because they have heard about those types of encounters and do not want to have the same experiences. Another reason student veterans may feel this way is because of the unrealistic and negative ways returning soldiers are portrayed in movies and television shows. For example, pop culture depicts rare disorders (e.g., dissociative identity disorder) as relatively common, mentally ill individuals as aggressive and dangerous, and mental health treatment as melodramatic; electroconvulsive therapy and ethical indiscretions are commonly found in pop culture's depictions of mental health treatment, whereas images of psychiatrists prescribing medication are a rarity. Research suggests that such inaccurate portrayals result in increased levels of stigmatization and a decreased willingness among individuals to seek mental health treatment (Dickstein et al., 2020). This means student veterans may limit their involvement with non-veteran students just to avoid having to answer such questions.

Lack of Contention

Throughout the literature about student veterans and their perceptions about how they are treated on campus, one of the most important aspects is how they interact with faculty members. Participants in a variety of studies have documented faculty showing an anti-military bias in their attitudes toward military service in general as well as the post-9/11 conflicts in particular (Barnard-Brak, et al., 2011), and using derogatory language to describe service members and student veterans (Ackerman, et al., 2009; Elliot, et al. 2011). For example, a participant in Ackerman et al.'s (2009) study of combat veterans as college students reported a professor who used the word "terrorist" in reference to U.S. military personnel, including the veteran themselves. In another study, a student veteran stated his professor referred to the U.S. troops as "baby killers and torturers" (Elliot, et al., 2011, p. 287).

Counter to findings in earlier research, participants in the present study did not report any negative experiences with their faculty. Shannon described the faculty at Alpha University as "entirely supportive. I've yet to see one non-supportive faculty member." She had not expected anyone to be openly antagonistic toward her, but perhaps somewhat ambivalent to her student veteran status, "like, 'oh, you're a soldier.'"

Alpha University faculty, at least in the experience of participants in this study, do not reflect the negative attitudes about military service and war reported by Barnard-Brak et al.'s (2011) participants. In fact, in some instances, faculty even show deference to student veterans because of their status, providing support or help that might not have been available to other students. For example, Matt

told a story about asking an instructor for additional time to complete an assignment due to a ROTC event one weekend. "I've had military training coming up that would interfere with a project and they gave me additional time, but they're not affording that to other kids." Matt was surprised by these experiences; he thought he would have to get an official letter from his commander to prove he was actually training. "The instructor said 'No, no, I trust you. It's fine.'" Matt "hope[d] that if something happened to some other student they would extend the same notion, but I haven't seen that." Matt felt it was quite remarkable how willing the faculty have been to work with him and take him at his word. On the whole, participants in this study described experiences in direct contrast to findings such as those by Barnard-Brak et al. (2011), describing faculty members who were distrustful of student veterans and their motives. In that 2011 study, faculty members stated they believe some student veterans used their status to get out of work and tried to take advantage of their status.

More often than not, student veterans participating study described most experiences with faculty in a positive light. Edward and Shannon had good experiences, never seeing another student veteran treated poorly by a faculty member. In many cases, an instructor did not know the military status of their students or when they did know, did not treat them differently than non-student veterans. In many cases, the student veterans stated faculty just treated everyone the same and did not want to get to know them on a personal level. Therefore, the student veterans believe that being a student veteran or having any other military or non-status was not something faculty was concerned about because they were

never directly asked about their status. Annie said, “Most of the time the professors did not know I was a student veteran because they never asked and I never told them. It was not something that was pertinent to the class.” Several student veterans said something similar. Of the participants in the study, four stated no one asked about their veteran status so they did not volunteer it.

Another participant who mentioned a positive experience with a faculty member was Blane. He spoke of a member of the Art History department who was very welcoming and helpful to him. “Her husband was in the Army and she really understands veterans and the process that we're going through,” he said. “If you're having an issue, she's more than welcome to talk to you and provide her insight of what she knows and what her husband went through.” To have someone who was willing to go out of their way and talk about their past experiences with someone who could relate to him was invaluable to Blane. The faculty member’s openness was something that made him feel connected with a faculty member and know he was not alone in his experiences and feelings.

Faculty members are not the only group that can help determine if student veterans feel supported and welcomed on campus. Support staff interact with student veterans on a regular outside of the classroom. According to the student veteran participants, even maintenance or janitorial staff members at Alpha University go out of their way to show deference and concern for student veterans. Shannon relayed a story about another student veteran who, in her words, “has issues he brought back from Afghanistan”: even janitorial staff will...take a moment and just check on him...because he can be gruff but when

he gets like that to just give him some space and try to be as understanding as possible.” In another instance, Rick spoke of a secretary on campus who had connections outside of school. He stated, “When I was struggling with transitioning (into the college setting) she helped me to get my school schedule worked out and assisted me in getting into (physical) therapy.” This interaction made Ryan feel more comfortable on campus because there was someone who was going out of their way to make sure he was getting the help he needed. Given that two participants in this student reported being surrounded by a supportive community at the university level due to university staff that went out of their way to check on them and show support, these student veterans stated this made them feel at home and that they were in a welcoming environment.

Thank you for your service!

The final main theme that emerged from the data is the participants’ reaction to being told that others appreciated their service. While each participant appreciated the sentiment behind this phrase, they were also uncomfortable with such thanks and praise. The context of this is related to participants’ experiences with members outside the university community in the city that surrounds Alpha University. Each of the student veterans stated the people who live in this city - where 4.3% of the city’s population served in the Armed Forces - were supportive of the military and that this is common in this part of the state. With so many veterans returning from combat zones around the world and many people wanting to make servicemen and women feel more comfortable when they got home, one of the things that many non-military citizens say to veterans when they encounter

them throughout the community is “Thank you for your service.” Each participant spoke about feeling somewhat conflicted where this practice is concerned. Martin (2022) also describes veterans who feel uncomfortable when they are recognized or explicitly thanked for their service. In the past, when people have come up to Edward and thank him for his service, he has not completely comfortable. In fact, he continued, “I would say most veterans, feel like they don't deserve it, they didn't earn it, or they were just doing something that everybody should be willing to do. We were not doing it to get attention.” A veteran featured in Martin’s (2022) volume on Veteran Identity and the Post-9/11 Generation described something similar. Once, when standing during a recognition of service members, they “watched [others’] eyes go up and down...a gaze, not one cast in judgement but attempts to discern exactly what a ‘veteran’ looks like. The ritual results in no longer being a part of the crowd.” It was this feeling that truly made him feel uncomfortable. “To be recognized as exceptional” he continued, “is still to be recognized as different” (Martin, 2022, p. 14). In similar situations, Matt has also responded by thanking the person for their support but has never really gotten accustomed to this type of interaction. “I find that I'm not very good at taking compliments as it is so when people thank you for your service, I feel awkward a little bit.” Overall, he would just like to be treated like everyone else and not have people make a fuss about his service. Annie’s feelings were similar. “I feel like I did my job. So, when thank me, it makes me uncomfortable because I don't know how to respond on to it. Like, ‘You're welcome’ seems very like stuck up I don't

like the feel of that.” Annie, like Matt, has decided to say, “Thank you for your support.”

The student veteran who had the most unique response to those who told them “Thank you for your service” was Shannon. She stated “saying ‘Thank you for your service’ has become a social convention and something we are supposed to do, therefore, it cheapens it when people say it just because they feel they are supposed to.” Therefore, as Shannon sees it, she appreciates people recognizing her service but would rather them actually do something than just use words to show their own appreciation. “If you see me at a restaurant, don't interrupt my meal with my family. If you're moved to tell me ‘Thank you,’ do it quietly. Tell the waitress to go take \$10 off my bill or buy me a beer.” Martin (2022) states, “Though nonveterans sincerely want to express their gratitude, the separateness, when combined with superficial understanding of service members and the wars they fight, results in the phrase ‘thank you for your service’ having a different meaning to veterans” (p. 140).

Some people might argue that because student veterans do not always like having people tell them, “Thank you for your service,” they should not receive special treatment on campus. The student veterans would not agree with this but feel other groups also give a lot and make sacrifices so they should be thanked for their service as well as have special support as well. For example, Ryan believed that social workers, inner-city teachers, firemen, and police officers should also be treated the same way as veterans. “Police officers have to deal with pretty messed up stuff daily and firefighters that do the same thing; inner-city teachers and

social workers help kids in bad situations. They should be supported by society just like we do (*sic*)." Matt agrees and said, "others serve society as well and should be treated with respect and thanked for their service as well." Therefore, these student veterans believe what they do is important but there are others in society that have jobs and positions that are just as important and should be treated as such.

When trying to understand student veterans when it came to their feelings about being told "Thank you for your service," it could be somewhat confusing or even contradictory. The student veterans are proud of their military service and feel the support they receive from the Student Veteran Center is important and something they earned while at the same time being uncomfortable when non-military citizens thank them for serving. One could make the argument that if the student veterans are uncomfortable with their military status, they do not need special services on campus. However, the participants of this study would say there is not a contradiction. When they are in the Student Veteran Center, they are with their comrades-in-arms and feel a part of a community where they understand one another and can relate to the experiences of other student veterans and that is something they need. When a random person comes up to them and thanks them for their service, they do not always know where that person is coming from in terms of their thanks. Is that person thanking them because they truly care or is it just a new social convention where they feel they must say something positive?

While student veterans expressed discomfort when hearing the phrase “Thank you for your service,” they all described the city surrounding Alpha University as a great place to be a veteran because of the support they see from the general public. Matt, the student veteran who is a member of the Alpha University ROTC, compared his experiences in the surrounding community to two previous duty locations. In both instances, residents of the town did not like the nearby installation; Matt felt as though he was “walking on eggs sometimes and I haven't had any of those issues here.” Annie agreed and said, “I think [Alphaville] is a very pro-military area, so we get pretty good feedback. There's VFW here in town and they do a lot of military affiliated stuff here. If you want to be involved in it, they're very welcoming.”

The Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) mission statement is: To foster camaraderie among United States veterans of overseas conflicts. To serve our veterans, the military and our communities. To advocate on behalf of all veterans. Their vision is to ensure that veterans are respected for their service, always receive their earned entitlements, and are recognized for the sacrifices they and their loved ones have made on behalf of this great country (VFW, 2022).

While the student veterans believe the VFW is a worthy organization, it is not something they feel the need to join. I spoke to Richard Spurlock, a VFW Life Member who was stationed in Korea. He stated that most young people felt the VFW was for older service members like those who served in World War II, Korea, and Vietnam. He said, “While there is a common bond between us, there is a generational gap.” Ryan agreed saying, “as far as me and probably 99% of our

generation that went to Afghanistan and Iraq, what we did compared to what they did, they went through way, way worse.”

There were three major differences between the most recent student veterans and those who came before them. The first was that in 1973 the United States moved to an all-volunteer force (Vespa, 2020). Before then, many who served in the military were drafted and did not have a choice. Secondly, soldiers in previous conflicts did not know when they would be coming home. The only time frame they were given was when the war was over. Finally, the number of casualties between generations was very different. During World War II, 291,557 service members died in battle. In Korea the number was 33,739; Vietnam, 47,434. The Amount of service members killed in post-9/11 War Operations, 7,057 (Department of Veteran’s Affairs, 2021).

Ryan spoke of the time spent away at war and the number of casualties his generation experienced. “We had a tour of duty and a date when we would be leaving, they didn’t. They had a kind of learned helplessness of ‘I have no clue when I’m getting outta here.’ So that pays a big mental difference.” Knowing when they were going to see their families again and be back in the United States on a certain date made the mental part of being stationed overseas so much easier. Ryan believes the older generation of veterans went through more hardships than his generation did so the two generation have difficulty relating to one another. For many older veterans, the VFW was one of the only places they could go for support and where there were others who had similar experiences. Today, there are numerous organizations that work to help veterans and make sure they have

the support they need and for student veterans, the organization that is situated to the best to help them is the Student Veteran Center at Alpha University.

A Success Story?

When looking at the Student Veteran Center at Alpha University and its leader, Colleen, it could be seen as a success story in terms of individual and institutional support for student veterans. Each of the participants described feeling as though they were a part of something special when they were in the student veteran center. For some of them, it had begun a relationship with them to make ensure they received the benefits they were due from the military and continued with the center giving them a job and a way for them to help fellow student veterans. Also, the student veteran center gave them a place where they could be themselves and allowed them to create a new unit like they had when they were serving. Through formal and informal events, the student veterans bonded with one another and created a space that was safe and allowed them to express their veteran identity without fear of being judged.

Colleen's caring and protection added to the feeling of the student veteran center being a safe space for them. Her dedication not just to the student veterans but making sure she understood changes the military and government were making in respect to military benefits means she is more effective at her job and knows how best to help those she is serving. Her has a proactive approach when it comes to her job and does not wait for there to be a problem before she acts. This is seen by the student veterans who see her as a passionate advocate for them and someone who can be trusted to act in their best interests.

Summary

This study explored the experiences and perceptions of student veterans at Alpha University. Through the student veteran participants, they described their relation to the student veteran center, their interactions with non-veteran students, faculty, and staff on campus, and how they also interacted with the people of the city that surrounds the university. Through this study, more student veteran's voices were added to the conversation on student veterans in higher education. Through the data analysis the study also identified how student veterans saw themselves in the community outside the university, the university community, as well as their relationship to the student veteran center that is specifically in place to help and support them. It also showed the importance of the location of Alpha University and how the community that surrounds it is so important due to community support of the military and those who have served.

CHAPTER V

DISSUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This study explored the experiences and perceptions of student veterans at Alpha University, a public college in a Midwest state. Through the student veterans' descriptions, I sought to explore what helped student veterans persist in their studies and continue moving toward graduation. Further, I explored how the student veterans saw themselves in the larger campus community due to their treatment by faculty, staff, and non-veteran students. Finally, I also hoped to find how the university itself helped and supported the student veterans in their goals toward graduation by the policies and programs set up specifically for military-connected students. The purpose of the study was to continue to fill gaps in the literature concerning student veterans on college campuses. Therefore, the study was guided by three research questions:

1. What are student veterans' reported experiences with support systems in place specifically for them?
2. How do student veterans perceive the role of support services in meeting their goals and needs?

3. Using which tenets of Veteran Critical Theory (Phillips & Lincoln, 2017) best explain the experiences student veterans have on campus and with a university community as a whole?

Through this study, more student veterans' voices were added to the conversation on their specific demographic in higher education. The study also identified the student veteran center as a place for student veterans to come together for support, information, camaraderie, and respite when needed.

To address the research questions, the study employed a phenomenological case study design. This qualitative method allowed for student veteran participants to share their experiences so higher education professionals can begin to construct an understanding the needs of other student veterans. However, because of the bounded context of case design, student veterans' experiences at Alpha University were unique to the support structures available specifically there.

Experiences and Perceptions of Campus Support Services

The first two research questions which guided this study served to understand student veterans' experiences with support systems that were specifically in place to help and support them, and further to explore whether and how those support systems met their goals and needs. This study was able to capture experiences the participants had in utilizing specific services including the student veteran center and support staff.

Services

Participants in the study cited two main support services they utilized: the student veteran center and ability to have their military benefits processed. In addition to these services, the perceptions and experiences with the director of the student veteran center is included due to her involvement in both. She is also the main source of contact when student veterans need to understand their benefits both on campus and from the military.

Establishing student veteran centers have been identified as a best practice to create a veteran-friendly environment (Griffin & Gilbert, 2015). The student veterans in this study found fellowship and camaraderie in utilizing the student veteran center. They described the student veteran center as a place where they felt a sense of belonging and a place where they could be themselves. They also could relate to other student veterans based on the commonality of the veteran identity. Previous studies support this finding that peer support generated through veteran student centers contributed to the student veterans' sense of belonging (DiRamio et al., 2008; Jenner, 2019).

Another reason student veterans utilized the student veteran center was due to the relationship that developed between them and the director who ensured their military benefits were processed properly and in a timely manner. In DiRamio et al.'s (2008) study, issues related to educational benefit processing manifested as a major stressor for student veterans. However, in this study, participants stated they rarely had issues with processing benefits due to the director of the student veteran center being so effective at her job. The

participants felt that the support they received from the director was one of the biggest reasons they did not have the stress that was found in other studies when it came to issues with receiving their military benefits. Because the student veterans felt the director did her job well and effectively, they believed there was nothing to worry about when it came to all their military benefit paperwork. The director ensured forms were filled out properly and turned in to the proper place on time so there would not be any lapse or delay in receiving the benefits to which they were entitled.

Peer Support in the Student Veteran Center

As seen through the military culture of camaraderie, peer support in the student veteran center was a crucial part of support for the participants in the study. Previous studies show that peer support generated through student veteran centers contributed to the student veterans' sense of belonging and remaining in school (DiRamio et al., 2008). Participants of the study needed peer support ranging from a friend group to getting insights on military benefits. Also, the student veteran center also served as an academic support system, because they could work with one another through study groups or just use the center as a quiet place to study, since it had a separate study space reserved only for student veterans.

Another way the student veteran center was used with their peers was in creating a culture that replicated a military atmosphere. The student veterans sought to interact with other student veterans finding companionship and camaraderie in their veteran identity. The student veterans were able to use

military humor that may have been seen as out of place in other parts of campus.

This shows that the student veterans came to the student veteran center to interact with those who had had similar experiences and could relate to them.

Most of the student veterans who participated in the study were also employed by the student veteran center as student liaisons. These men and women wanted to use what they had learned to help those who were new to campus and those who might be struggling. The director was always looking for those who took initiative and were willing to be an advocate for their student veteran peers. The need for finding peers was consistent with their unit experience in the military and the support of mentorship that was available from the director.

While the purpose of this study was not to specifically investigate the academic experience inside and outside the classroom, several student veterans described experiences they had with non-military peers and faculty at Alpha University. While no participant had a truly negative experience, there were times when they felt they needed to adjust their behavior when interacting with their non-military peers. One of the challenges that student veterans described was having a hard time relating to traditional college students because of the differences in their ages and experiences. Several participants stated they could only relate to other student veterans because those who had not served had different ways of debating and a hard time accepting when someone challenged their beliefs. Also, non-student veterans often had different priorities when it came to their college experience than those who had served. Due to these interactions, some student veterans masked their veteran identity so it would make

it easier to navigate their classroom experiences. If no one knew they were student veterans, then there were less or different preconceived notions about how they should act due to their previous military service.

The Student Veteran Center Director

While the first two research questions focused on how student veterans were supported and if Alpha University was helping them move toward graduations, the answers to those begin and end with the director of the Student Veteran Center. This is because the primary school official who student veterans interact with is Colleen. She is the person who the student veterans depend on and go to for help and advice, and she intentionally functions as a gatekeeper, limiting access to student veterans who regularly visit the center in her efforts to guarantee a welcoming, safe space. The student veterans described an individual who was professional, approachable, personable, and responsive. These are the qualities that the Council for Advancement Standards (CAS) outlined within the human resources standard for veteran and military programs and services (Council for the Advancement of Standard in Higher Education, 2012). While the participants did not directly identify the director as a mentor, they described her as someone they valued for guidance and advice. This type of guidance and advice was not just limited to military matters. The participants felt they could ask her about anything. This also included the ability to contact her outside of student veteran center hours. The student veterans knew they could email or call her at any time, and she would respond to them as soon as possible. This corresponds with the study DiRamio, et al., (2008) conducted which determined that a holistic process

in supporting student veterans centered on identification, orientation, and mentoring of enrolled student veterans was needed to assist individuals in navigating the college system toward graduation.

Considering the military experiences for the student veterans in this study, formal and informal mentorships were a strong part of their training and military experience. Therefore, it makes sense that the student veterans relied on the director when they came to Alpha University. This was seen in the director advocating for the student veterans needs and made it a point to know about their past military experiences. While the director was? is not a member of the military, she comes from a military family. Numerous members of her family, including her husband and son have served, which she believes makes her a better advocate for Alpha University's student veteran population. It also explains why some of the participants view her as a mother figure. It is a role she has had in the past and informs her experiences with those on campus. Also, when the director knows so much about a student veteran's military past, it helps her to know what specific benefits a student veteran qualifies for. The director makes it a point to know the latest information coming from the military so that information can be used and/or passed on to the student veterans so they can get the maximum benefits they are entitled to.

Finally, the culture the director has established in the student veteran center is one of openness, diversity, and camaraderie. The student veterans of this study spend time in the student veteran center more than anywhere else on campus and often come in on days when they do not have classes. Student

veterans know they always have a place to have fun, share a meal, or just spend time with other student veterans whenever the student veteran center is open. Also, the director makes sure there are social events both formal and informal on a regular basis. These range from lunches where different people bring food, game competitions where the students compete for bragging rights, and movie days where student veterans can come and go as they please. Each time I was on campus and stopped by the student veteran center, I witnessed the student veterans having a good time and working and playing hard. In some ways, this case gives insight into what works, at least for some student veterans, when a university finds someone who is dedicated to serving student veterans and supporting them as they move toward graduation.

Veteran Critical Theory

Phillips and Lincoln (2017) added to the critical perspectives available for exploring experiences of particular student identities with their Veteran Critical Theory, which challenges the status quo of an institutional system and the structures intended to support student veterans. Applying critical social theory to the experiences of student veterans acknowledges that institutional systems may actually disadvantage, exclude, or otherwise harm student veterans even though these systems are attempting to provide support. Veteran Critical Theory revises tenets previously articulated in other traditions, positing 11 guiding principles for examining institutional systems and/or evaluating policies, procedures, and practices related to the experiences of student veterans. The 11 tenet can be further distilled as aligned with the three aspects of critical theory identified by

Tierney and Rhoads (1993): marginalization and emancipation, the role of culture, and the role of power. Using VCT as an analytical tool per Jaeger et al.(2013) facilitated a focus on these three particular aspects of Alpha University student veterans' experiences with support services provided by the institution.

Marginalization and Emancipation

The first aspect of critical theory from Tierney and Rhoads (1993) are based on marginalization and emancipation. Society not only has class hierarchies but also race and gender hierarchies as well. The critical theory perspective acknowledges institutional systems may actually disadvantage, exclude, or otherwise harm individuals despite an intent to support them and move them toward their goals. Therefore, student veterans may experience various forms of oppression and marginalization from those who are supposed to their support academic success and promote graduation. While the student veterans at Alpha University do occupy spaces where power structures and systems interact, they do not appear to be in conflict with other members of the university community. The Student Veteran Center works with other parts of the university in unison to ensure student veterans are being supported. Most participants stated they have not encountered university staff creating problems or extra issues due to their student veteran status. The one exception to this was Matt stating a professor asked him to be less confrontational with another student during an in-class debate. While Matt disagreed, he also felt the professor was trying to protect a student who was immature and not ready to have a serious debate. This interaction with the professor was not based on Matt being a student veteran, it

was due to the difference between an older student who had a real-world experience and a younger person student who did not have similar experiences. Also, while student veterans do use language that other students may not understand, this does not cause conflict because the student veterans know how to understand non-military language with non-veterans.

Solórzano and Yosso (2002) state, “Critical race theory recognizes that the experiential knowledge of people of color is legitimate, appropriate, and critical to understanding, analyzing, and teaching about racial subordination” (p. 26). One tenet of Veteran Critical Theory is that it values narratives and counternarratives of student veterans. Therefore, student veterans are allowed to create a counternarrative against what some might think and feel toward student veterans in higher education. The student veteran participants stated other students did not treat them poorly or assume there was something wrong with them because they had served in the military. Also, the student veterans use the Student Veteran Center to surround themselves with others who have similar experiences so they can give support to one another.

The experiences of participants in the present study push back against the idea where that student veterans are deficient in their thinking process and unprepared for the rigors and demands of university study that were seen in studies such as Osborne’s (2014) where student veterans had to contend with overt and non-overt forms of oppression from both peers and university personnel. The data from the student veterans is that the faculty and staff at Alpha University did not treat student veterans differently from other students in class. If

anything, faculty who knew a student veterans' status often went out of their way to make sure the student veteran was getting everything they needed for class. There were no stories or anecdotes of student veterans being belittled or bullied in class by professors or other students.

There is an argument that by giving student veterans other or different support faculty and staff is another form of deficient thinking. I would make the counterargument that faculty and staff are giving support to student veterans in order to help them be successful and that this support is trying to keep student veterans in school, Fernandez et al. (2019) suggested something similar, calling for colleges and universities to identify ways to support veterans across diverse backgrounds in order to ensure that they not only have access to the college experience but also that they have every opportunity to successfully complete their own college degrees. This is no different than support services that are in place to help first year students, first generation students, or student athletes. When Phillips and Lincoln (2017) created their tenets of Veteran Critical Theory, they saw those who viewed student veterans as being deficient were not willing to give them any supports to help them or, in a worse care scenario, push them to leave the university.

While other studies have shown that faculty or staff on college campuses believe student veterans often suffer from PTSD or other psychological or physical trauma (Osborne, 2014), no student veteran at Alpha University described marginalization based on (perceived) mental health status. The participants stated those who knew about their veteran status did not disrespect

them or treat them as “damaged goods” due to this status. While they were not always comfortable with others telling them “Thank you for your service”, such words had been spoken to each student veteran and showed the campus and surrounding community value veterans, even if sometimes those words seemed to be more of a social norm rather than a genuine feeling.

When it came to student veterans experiencing microaggressions by people throughout the campus community and surrounding area, the data was some of the most interesting of the study. I assumed this would be one of the most prevalent problems experienced by student veterans given descriptions from participants in studies by Arminio and Grabosky (2013), DiRamio et al. (2008), and Fernandez et al. (2019). However, none of the participants in this study spoke of instances of this in their experiences. The faculty, staff, and other students at Alpha University did not belittle them or express displeasure at them being on campus overtly or through microaggressions. Therefore, when it comes to Veteran Critical Theory and the tenets based on marginalization and emancipation, the participants in the study felt they were not subjected to microaggressions or other forms of persecution from other students or faculty and staff. The student veterans have been able to create their own narratives about their military experiences and are comfortable throughout the university community. Additionally, the student veterans use the Student Veteran Center to surround themselves with other who have similar experiences so they can give support to one another.

A distinguishing characteristic of critical theories is the acknowledgment that a member of one disadvantaged group may identify as a member of multiple

groups. Critical race theory acknowledges that racial oppression is often compounded by alternate forms of oppression such as gender, race, sexual orientation, and age (Phillips, 2014). Student veterans are not a homogeneous group that experience only veteran status differently. Student veterans are diverse in their age, gender, sexual orientation, marital and parental status, military branch, rank, deployment history, and combat experience. While the participants stated that being a student veteran is an important part of their identity, it is not the only aspect of their identity with which they identify.

Phillips (2014) stated that student veterans should have the choice whether or not to disclose the fact that they have had military service. His study found that some student veterans do not want to reveal this due to the fear that some non-veteran students may judge them or assume they are suffering from PTSD or other issues because of their military service. Additionally, veterans may experience the undergraduate or graduate program in a very different way than more traditional or civilian students. Maturity level can often “other” a non-traditional student within higher education (Read et al., 2003). Several participants had a hard time interacting with their non-military peers because of their differing ages, and because they did not have the same life experiences and were not as mature when debating controversial subjects. One participant felt it was better to just not engage with non-military students because it was just easier and not have an argument with them. This relates to the idea that student veterans can be “unknowable” by non-student veterans due to assumptions made by non-student veterans and the student veteran’s inclination to undermine those

assumptions. These assumptions from both the student veteran and non-student veteran can make it difficult for them to engage with one another because of the difficulty of seeing each other's point of view (Phillips & Lincoln 2017).

Also, within the term "veteran" there is a laundry list of ways that veterans identify (branch, rank, service history, military occupation, deployment history, combat experience, reason for discharge, time spent in the military, active-duty status, reservist status, etc.). While in the military, many of these identifications are literally on a soldier's uniform; student veterans make a conscious decision whether or not to reveal these specialized characteristics beneath the umbrella identification of "veteran." At Alpha University, the student veterans did not take a student veteran's former rank as something that needed to be considered when interacting with each other. The student veterans knew what branch each member had served in, but they did not treat each other differently due to time served or rank.

Some of the student veterans in the study were married and parents, so they had challenges that were different from their younger, non-veteran peers. One participant stated that she had a hard time relating to non-veteran students who were younger and wanted to go out and party when they were done with classes. All she wanted to do was go home and spend time with her husband and kids. Because of their different and multiple identities, student veterans may experience multiple levels of isolation. Over time, non-veteran students may stop asking the student veterans to hang out or spend time together. This is not because non-veterans are trying to ostracize them, but there is a realization that the student

veterans have different responsibilities and priorities than those who are not married or parents.

Finally, Phillips and Lincoln (2017) challenge the act of essentializing or developing blanket policies, procedures, and programs, specifically those constructed by civilian assumption, fear, or reaction. While it can be argued that student veterans can be “unknowable” due to assumptions by those who are not veterans or who do not understand the military, the Student Veteran Center at Alpha University does its best to meet each student veteran where they are and tailor support for each individual. This is done by having student veterans meet with the student liaisons and having them work together to ensure each student veteran understands the benefits they are entitled to and how to receive them. Alpha University does not create programs or policies from a place of fear. By having student veterans serve as liaisons in the Student Veteran Center, the director is able to hear directly from those who use the center and need its support, so she can make informed and appropriate decisions. Therefore, the marginalization that was seen in other studies (Arminio & Grabosky, 2013; DiRamio et al., 2008; Fernandez et al., 2019) does not occur at Alpha University.

The Role of Culture

The second aspect of critical theory from Tierney and Rhoads (1993) is based on the role of culture. Culture is seen as a web that is both the sharper of and shaped by social interaction. The military has its own culture with unique traditions, mores, and customs which have been brought by the student veterans to Alpha University and the Student Veteran Center. The Alpha University

administration has worked to create programs and policies that work for student veterans and value their input as well as ensure their services do not just give cursory support. Also, faculty at Alpha University have not been known by the student veterans to assume student veterans are not college ready and are suffering from various issues that have been seen in other studies (Osborne, 2014; Livingston & Bauman, 2013).

Phillips and Lincoln (2017) stated “Veteran culture is built on a culture of respect, honor, and trust.” While this tenet is not the same as the others in Veteran Critical Theory, I believe it is one of the most important aspects of this theory because it provides an important foundation to how student veterans interact with the other tenets. Phillips and Lincoln (2017) state, “there was a sense that the list of tenets was incomplete. No tenet addressed how veterans’ socially learned values of respect, honor, and culture were being assaulted in civilian spaces.” Moreover, policies and procedures that colleges and universities put in place that seem to undermine these characteristics may damage or destroy the foundation of student veterans’ relationships with their institutions and the members of the university community. As policies, procedures, and practices are dissected, administrators must recognize how they can capitalize on student veterans’ culture or how their current agendas may undermine or be perceived as undermining this culture.

This tenet based on veteran culture is also important to understand as it can highlight how veterans may respond to some of the other tenets of Veteran Critical Theory. For example, the literature explains that many veterans do not

gravitate towards psychological or academic support structures because they are either embarrassed or do not like the idea of asking for help. For some student veterans, asking for help means showing weakness to non-veteran peers. This reluctance to identify needs can also result in a failure to name perceived oppression, marginalization, discrimination.

A culture of trust further solidifies the importance of the ninth tenet (Some services advertised to serve veterans are ultimately serving civilian interests) as veterans are more likely to believe that a fellow veteran would be able to serve them. The culture of respect helps to understand frustration that can stem from deficit thinking, as well as interactions with university or college community members who do not share the student veterans' sense of respect or honor. As policies and practices are discussed and implemented, it is important to recognize how they may bolster or be perceived as undermining this culture, especially if their success requires student veteran buy-in.

Again, the Student Veteran Center of Alpha University understands this tenet even if they do not say so directly. The Alpha University website states their values in support of student veterans on campus. Two sentences really speak to this tenet of cultural respect in Veteran Critical Theory. The first is: "We advocate for our military-affiliated students and their dependents by working with local, state and national organizations to promote the needs and rights of veterans." Second: "We conduct our work with integrity, honesty, and high professional standards, and believe that all individuals should be treated with affirmation, dignity, and respect."

Another way I was able to see how important this tenet of respect was in the Student Veteran Center was in the interaction with the student veterans with one another. As stated previously, sometimes student veterans choose to keep their veteran status to themselves and do not always share it when they are in class. However, when in the Student Veteran Center, the student veterans are allowed to be proud of their service and know they are a part of a new “unit” there. Almost immediately, when a new student veteran enters the center, they already understand the military-based cultural values, such as respect, honor, and trust. Even if they do not know anyone, they sense they are among friends and those who are like them. At the same time, when student veterans are outside of the Student Veteran Center, there is not the same level of respect and trust. For example, several participants reflected on their frustration with student behaviors that ran counter to these values, such as traditional students being unprepared for class, interrupting a professor, or not contributing to team projects. These types of behaviors would not have been tolerated or accepted in the military so it can be difficult for the student veterans to relate to their peers when they act like that.

Another way to view the role of culture is also through the location of the university and the attitudes of citizens in the surrounding area. Alpha University is located within 100 miles of a large military base that serves the surrounding community and where many new recruits go through basic training, and over 4% of the Alphaville community served in the Armed Forces. According to each participant, the community that surrounds Alpha University is very supportive towards veterans and the military.

Another anecdote that supports this as well is how students from the local high school are supported when they choose to join the military. At each of the five high school graduations from Alphaville Public Schools in May 2022, after the graduates entered the arena, the Pledge of Allegiance was said and the first student group recognized was those entering the military. This show of respect toward the nation and those high school students who had signed on to serve is evidence the community takes patriotism and respecting the military seriously. As some participants stated, the local area is more conservative politically than other places they were stationed or lived, and made them feel more comfortable as a member or former member of the military. Phillips and Lincoln (2017) did not mention the location of an institution, or the role of local community as a contribution when it came to another source of support for student veterans. This is something student veterans might want to take into consideration when choosing a school to attend since areas like the Alpha University community readily support veterans and the military, making it a hospitable location for those who have served.

The Role of Power

The third aspect of critical theory from Tierney and Rhoads (1993) is based on the role of power. Fundamental to critical theorists' notion of power is the possibility of resistance on the part of those who are the target of oppression. Even those most marginalized have the potential for offering resistance against oppressive forces (Tierney and Rhoads, 1993, p. 321). At Alpha University, the Student Veteran Center ensures those who use its services are supported, so they

understand the policies and programs the university has in place. This helps to ensure student veterans know the ins-and-outs of university bureaucracy, so they can make sure they are getting the benefits they are entitled. Therefore, participants felt at home at Alpha University, and that they were not at a disadvantage in dealing with the university. Additionally, while the majority of those who work at Alpha University are not veterans, they are still supportive of those who are.

When looking at university staff and administrators' support for student veterans, one thing that many universities seek is to attain the distinction of a Veteran Friendly Campus or Veteran Friendly Status (APSCU, 2013; Riddell, 2013). In the initial interview with Colleen, the director of the Student Veteran Center, she was asked if one of the goals for Alpha University was to attain Veteran Friendly Status. Her response was surprising until she gave her reasoning. Achieving Veteran Friendly Status was not something that was a priority because of how universities earned that title. Colleen discovered that one organization only granted this status based on the amount of money the university gave the organization. Therefore, Colleen stopped participating in such rankings because they did not mean that student veterans were actually being helped. Colleen is a member of the National Association of Veteran Program Administrators which advocates for student veterans on Capitol Hill. When new policies come down the pike, they let legislators know how those policies are affecting the institutions and service members. In doing this, Colleen's priority is to ensure that those who are making decisions about student veterans understand

the implications of their decisions. Therefore, being labeled a Veteran Friendly Campus does not matter, she explained, if government policies hinder the university from doing everything it can to help student veterans.

Though non-people of color engage in Critical Race Theory, non-LGBTQA+ individuals employ queer theory, and able-bodied people write about critical disability theory, due to the unique experiences of student veterans, they should be leading the conversation about student veterans. This is something that Alpha University does well with the Student Veteran Center. In order to work as a student liaison in the Center, employees must be getting military benefits which helps them help others because the student liaisons use the system for themselves. Phillips and Lincoln (2017) do not believe that civilians should be excluded from policy debates, legislation, or conversations about student veterans, but they believe due to the unique nature of student veterans, they should be empowered by those in power and those who make policy decisions. Therefore, student veterans should have a voice on campus when it comes to policies and programs that affect them.

Alpha University does this well because one of the most prominent voices on campus is the Student Veteran Center. Everyone who works at the center has a connection with the military. The director's spouse and son have served in the Armed Forces as well as other members of her family. The director has meetings with others in campus administration, and they come to her to ask advice and see how various potential policies might impact student veterans.

Within the Student Veteran Center, this tenet is also shown by the student liaisons who work in the center and advocate for the other student veterans because they understand one another. Each of the student workers who are employed by the Student Veteran Center is a student veteran. In fact, utilizing their military benefits is one of the requirements of the job. Several participants of the study told of their experiences in getting a job at the Student Veteran Center and how it was important to them that the person helping them was a student veteran. These stories had a common theme in that the student veteran went to the center to get help or was using the center as a place to study. When the student veteran encountered a student liaison who was working there, the liaison was able to relate to the student veteran needing help and often knew exactly the course of action that needed to be taken. Without this understanding, helping student veterans who came into the center would be much more difficult. Also, during these interactions, the student veterans were able to use language each understood when it came to their time in the service and the benefits they were receiving or needing. Policies and practices that pertain to student veterans are more easily related to other student veterans because they come from a similar background and common experience. These interactions also make other student veterans more likely to use the Student Veteran Center because they know the people there genuinely care about them because they served in the Armed Forces and are seen as comrades-in-arms.

Finally, the student liaisons of the Student Veteran Center know what to look for when it comes to helping other student veterans. Many time they were in

the same positions earlier in their academic career, so they understand the struggles that other student veterans may be facing. These student veterans knew the benefit of having someone who could listen and understand common frustrations. Additionally, when student veterans can understand what they need to do in order to maximize their benefits, it is easier for them to help others in the future, so it makes sense that the Student Veteran Center requires its student workers to be receiving military benefits. If the student workers do not know how to get benefits for themselves, it would make it more difficult for them to help others when they have issues learning the system and making sure they get everything they are entitled to.

For example, one reason some student veterans choose to attend Alpha University is because it is located in a state that has specific benefits for those who served in a combat area or theater. The Returning Heroes Education Act benefits student veterans who served in the military in armed combat in a full-time capacity under a call to active service authorized by the President of the United States or the Secretary of Defense for a period of more than 30 consecutive days. The educational benefits for the Returning Heroes Education Act are that all public institutions of higher education must limit the amount of tuition such institutions charge to combat veterans to \$50 per credit hour, as long as the veteran achieves and maintains a cumulative grade point average of at least 2.5 on a 4.0-point scale or its equivalent. The monetary benefit of this act greatly helps student veterans since it lowers the tuition cost per credit hour to \$50, which is much lower than the \$257 per credit hour for in-state residents (Department of

Higher Education & Workforce Development, 2021). Making sure all the paperwork is in order for this benefit can be challenging to some student veterans. However, when others who have qualified for and are receiving these benefits work for the Student Veteran Center, they use their knowledge and experience to help those who are just beginning the process. Additionally, the student veterans who are new to these benefits find it easier to trust those who have been receiving them, and know when they have questions, they will be answered truthfully and accurately.

This also means that the director instructs the student liaisons to inform her when they meet someone who might be a good fit for future employment. Since student liaisons only serve while they are in school, each year new student veterans are needed to replace those who have graduated and moved on. Therefore, each student liaison worker is a recruiter for the Student Veteran Center. Since the student liaisons see what is going on both inside and out of the center, they are some of the best people to ask concerning future openings and who would be a good fit and a good employee. Student veterans act the most like themselves when around other student veterans, so this is a factor when hiring for student liaison positions, because the student liaisons probably know the possible hire better than anyone else on campus.

Using the three lenses Tierney and Rhoads (1993), the data showed how the director and student liaisons of Student Veteran Center at Alpha University work to give student veterans a voice and enable them to advocate for themselves and each other. This allows the Student Veteran Center to continue the culture

that student veterans had when they were in the military and to empower them throughout their educational journey. Through the Student Veteran Center, Alpha University provides programs and policies that are unique to the student veterans it serves and ensures these students understand what benefits they are entitled to and how to obtain them. With this support, the participants do not feel marginalized on campus and this allows them to be themselves while supporting each other.

Finally, when looking at Veteran Critical Theory, it should also be noted that this theory were less useful as analytical tools than initially anticipated. There were only 3 tenets of VCT that illuminated salient information about Alpha University when looking at the data taken from the student veteran participants. There are several possibilities as to why the other tenets were less useful for reading the data collected from this particular campus.

The first of them has to do with geography. The community surrounding the university is very supportive of the Armed Forces. Therefore, to look down or disparage student veterans would be out of place in this community. While there were some interactions that were not completely positive when it came to student interactions, those interactions were not based on how students felt about veteran status. The interactions had more to do with student veterans being more mature than their classmates and being able to understand and engage in debates and civil discourse. Therefore, tenets that deal with microaggressions do not highlight significant aspects of the student veteran experience at Alpha University. Phillips

and Lincoln (2017) did not seem to consider the location of a student veterans university or college when considering the tenets of their theory.

Next, Colleen, the director of the student veteran center has created a place where the student veterans who regularly and frequently spend time in the center feel safe and able to be themselves. When someone came into the student veteran center who was not a member of the staff or a student veteran themselves, Colleen made it a point to find out their intentions and acts as a gatekeeper to the student veterans. I was able to see that firsthand when I came into the student veteran center the first time so I could meet her and ask if I could interview student veterans for this study. She would not let just anyone come into the student veteran center to ask questions or recruit for other events unless she deems it is in the best interest of the student veterans. Therefore, the student veterans feel protected and supported on campus, especially when they are in the student veteran center.

Finally, because Colleen does such a good and competent job at making sure student veterans understand and receive the benefits they are entitled to, other tenets of VCT that deal with non-veterans having control over student veterans or those that push a non-veteran agenda did not prove useful in reading the data collected at Alpha University either. While Colleen did not serve in the military, she comes from a military background and understands how to help the student veterans navigate the red tape and bureaucracy of Alpha University which helps limit frustrations that might occur without her help. Therefore, while VCT may highlight more salient details at universities or colleges where there is more

negative discourse among student veterans and non-student veterans, it does not work well as an analytical tool to explore more deeply the experiences of participants at places where student veterans feel supported and are taken care of by a campus organization or program such as the Student Veteran Center at Alpha University.

Limitations

While the results of this study have practical applications for student veteran centers and help to fill a gap in the literature on student veterans, the study did have limitations. Student veterans who participated in this study had an overall strong sense of veteran identity and wanted to be associated with the Student Veteran Center. There was not one student veteran who chose to suppress or ignore their student veteran identity and did not engage in the student veteran center. Also, the amount of student veterans who participated in the study was also small. While some studies had similar number of participants, others engaged higher numbers of student veterans. The unknown in this study was what student veterans needed who did not engage with others at the student veteran center. While this unknown may have implications for future studies, it was a limitation in that this study only gained descriptions and experiences from participants who voluntarily chose to engage in the services at the student veteran center and with others who spent time there. Therefore, this study did not engage with student veterans who chose not to use the Student Veteran Center or those who did use the Center or had a negative experience. The study also did not have any participants who used the Student Veteran Center as a military dependent who

receive benefits due to a family member who served. Additionally, the study did not engage with non-student veterans and what their opinions were toward student veterans and the Student Veteran Center. Finally, while I did interview three members of Alpha University's administration, there are other administrators on campus who have dealings with student veterans who might have strong feelings about student veterans and the Student Veteran Center.

Further, the phenomenon of student veterans' experiences in this study was bounded by the context of the cases i.e., the specific student veteran participants in the study. The contexts and structures created by the student veterans were unique because each student veteran's experience with the military was unique as well as the experiences they have had since coming to Alpha University. A similar study conducted at the same university with different student veterans should not expect similar participant experiences. The research site is in the midwestern United States. The political climate of the state and United States region where the institution is located has been described as pro-military (Maley & Hawkins, 2018). The research site has also been cited as a politically conservative campus (Princeton Review, 2020). This example of the geographical location of the research site provided a unique context within this multi-case study.

Given the methodology used in this research, the findings cannot be generalized to the student veteran population. When it comes to the context of the research site, it is located in an area that is seen as veteran- and military- friendly and employs a director who is passionate about serving the student veteran

population. The director of the student veteran center is not a military veteran but is related to several people who have served in the U.S. military. Also, the director identifies as a woman which was somewhat unique to this study because most leaders of student veterans' centers are men (Hunter-Johnson et al., 2021).

Implications for Practice and Future Research

The findings from this study offered some implications for practice and future research. An intentional outcome of this study was to identify practical applications to apply to the university setting. The interview protocol allowed for student veteran participants to identify areas in which their campus can better support them. Although one limitation was a small number of participants, student veterans from Alpha University provided excellent data about what their institution was doing to support student veterans and move them closer to graduation.

Implications

One finding from the study is for the practice at Alpha University is that student veterans did not always know what they could do from home and what they needed to come into the student veteran center to accomplish when it came to filling out paperwork or making sure their benefits were being processed. As Annie stated, she wasted a trip because during her first visit into the student veteran center she was told she could have done what she needed to do that day without physically coming in. Gopalan and Brady (2020) found students at four-year schools who feel they belong seek out and use campus resources to a greater extent, furthering their success while also buffering students from stress,

improving mental health. This means making information more accessible to student veterans from home will make them more confident when they do come to campus because they will already know “some of the answers (Wert, 2016).” Therefore, the student veteran center could create a website page on the Student Veteran Center page that explains what can be done online and what needs to be done in person. Student veterans were trained to handle timely information while in the military so many expect that when they enroll in higher education.

Another finding from the data was that sometimes student veterans at Alpha University also qualify for other benefits due to other statuses they hold such as being a member of a minority group, a non-traditional student, or any other demographic in which they are a member. Delgado and Stefancic (2001) explain that “Pressures to ‘serve’ student veterans may eventually focus so much on veteran identity, that engaged faculty, staff, and administration may miss the ways that student veterans identify and seek assistance based on additional identifications.” Another practice that Alpha University could implement is that student veterans are also informed of other benefits they may qualify for due to them being a member of another demographic or category. Some participants felt the Student Veteran Center was so focused on them utilizing their military benefits, they sometimes did not think about non-military benefits some students might qualify for.

An additional finding in the study was that participants described that while each branch of the military had classes to help them transition into higher education some of them were not that helpful. For many of the participants,

leaving the military had them concerned about many different things so they did not pay as much attention in these classes as they should have. Whether one particular military branch was good or bad at helping their members transition into higher education, the fact remains that there are basic needs and questions that student veterans had when coming to Alpha University. DiRamio et al. (2008) stated when a student veteran is transitioning onto campus, they will need to “learn the ropes” (p. 81), becoming familiar with rules, regulations, norms, and expectations of the new system. Therefore, Alpha University could create a basic transitional program for student veterans just coming onto campus. Campus administrators would benefit from reviewing transitional information prepared for other campus populations such as non-traditional or graduate students. The transitional information provided to students from these other backgrounds is likely to be similar to student veterans due to their comparable age, marriage, or parental status. For example, information related to local schools, daycares, doctors, dentists, etc. could be of great help to those just moving into the surrounding area. This also leads to a practice that Alpha University does well.

The Alpha University Student Veteran Center employs student veterans as student veteran liaisons to work in the center so they can relate to student veterans using their services. These student veteran liaisons are receiving benefits, so they know how to fill out the proper paperwork, know standard procedures, and who to ask for help when needed. Also, because they are student veterans, other student veterans feel comfortable talking to them and asking them for assistance because there will be no judgement. Hawthorne et al. (2013) found that student veterans

often look for others who have had similar experiences, in an effort to replace the cohesion of their military unit with a familiar peer group. These student veteran liaisons also do an excellent job setting up formal and informal social events at the student veteran center, so the center becomes a place where student veterans come to hang out and build relationships with one another. Additionally, these student liaisons also look for student veterans to replace them when the present group of liaisons graduate. This allows for a sense of continuity in the student veteran center that makes it more effective as people move on after working there for two to four years.

Osborne's (2014) study suggests the need for more study on the relationships between student veterans and staff on campus due to student veterans having a unique cultural background and experience challenges in higher education. This implication for research is one of the greatest strengths at Alpha University. The director of the center is someone who has dedicated a large part of her life to helping student veterans. She is a protective, caring, and influential force for the student veterans, and they see her as someone they can look up to, someone who is willing to meet them at a deeper and more personal level, and someone who is willing to fight for them as the need arises. Each participant had at least one story when they felt valued by the director. and how she did something for them that they felt went above and beyond what they expected. When someone enters the student veteran center, who is in charge becomes apparent very quickly. At the same time, the director carries her power and influence lightly. Her presence commands respect, but it is not through

intimidation or by subduing those around her. She commands respect by showing respect and getting to know each person who comes into the center. The student veterans know she cares about them. Just like they would with a commanding officer they are loyal to, they would follow her into battle if asked. The director makes sure she knows everything she needs to so she can serve her student veterans effectively. This dedication is noticed by the student veterans, and they truly appreciate her efforts on their behalf and it makes the student veteran center at Alpha University more supportive and welcoming to those who need its services.

Finally, where student veterans attend college can have a huge influence on whether they will succeed and graduate. Citizens and community leaders in the areas surrounding universities where student veterans attend can have an important impact on student veterans through their support or lack thereof (Armino & Grabosky, 2013, p. 282-283; Jackson, et al. 2013, p. 271-272). This study has shown that having a university that is surrounded by those who support the military, as well as near a large military installation, it makes it easier for student veteran to feel at ease outside of the campus community. Alpha University's location in a community that supports and explicitly values the military and veterans means student veterans feel welcomed and do not fear being out in the community. Having organizations such as the VFW can be helpful but Alphaville has shown its citizens support veterans and want them to feel a part of the overall community. Such feelings of belonging and inclusion can only help student veterans feel supported when they are off campus and these feelings are

more likely to keep them in school and push them towards graduation. The lack of microaggressions or other negative actions by members of the Alpha University community toward participants in this study have made it easier for them feel accepted and a part of the university community. This also means student veterans can concentrate on their studies and move toward graduation rather than having to fight to justify their inclusion into the campus community. While student veterans at Alpha University may not always understand their university peers who have not served in the military, there is no animosity based on military status that student veterans have to fight or push back against.

Future Research

The opportunities for future research are available when it comes to the experiences of student veterans and higher education. For instance, the study only focused on student veterans who work or spend significant time in the student veteran center. Therefore, because this study's participants chose to spend time at the student veteran center, they may have had a more positive outlook on the center than other student veterans at Alpha University who were less engaged, such as the two individuals who declined to participate in the present study. It is possible there is a population of student veterans that do not want to be involved in the student veteran center or do not take part in the social aspect of the center. This may be a choice based on their needs or that they do not feel welcome for some reason. These men and women might have different perspectives of the student veteran center and its effectiveness in helping student veterans than the participants in this study.

Additionally, this study could be done with a particular sub-population for student veterans such as women or African Americans at Alpha University. Also, the focus could be with a specific branch of the military. Due to the demographics of the university, I only interviewed white student veterans and only those who had served in the Army or the Marines. Another study with participants who were non-white and/or served in other branches of the military or who were receiving benefits based on a family member who served in the military may yield different results as to what student veterans needed for support.

Another study that would also be helpful would be about student veteran graduates. While I do not believe any of the student veterans I interviewed felt any pressure to say only good things about Alpha University or the student veteran center, graduates might be more open about their time in college since they have already moved on. Also, student veterans who are in graduate school may have different needs than undergraduates. Therefore, a study with only graduate student veterans would also fill a gap in the literature due to their specific and particular needs that differ from undergraduate students.

Finally, while I did interview the student veteran center director and she was an important part of this study, she was not the focus. A study that focused specifically on those who run student veteran centers would be helpful. This way a different perspective about what student veterans need for support could be identified and gaps in the literature could be filled. Additionally, I did not speak with the assistant director of student veteran center at Alpha University. That

individual would have their own sense of purpose and may differ in the goals and needs they have for student veterans.

Summary

This study explored the experiences and perceptions of student veterans on a public college campus in a Midwest state that I have named Alpha University. Through the student veterans' descriptions, I sought to explore what helped student veterans to persist in their studies and continue moving toward graduation.

Through this study, more student veterans' voices were added to the study of student veterans in higher education. This study also explored how the student veterans' experiences and perceptions with others throughout the community, both inside and outside of Alpha University, supported their journey in their college studies. To address the research questions, this study used a multi-case study design. This qualitative method allowed for student veteran participants to share their experiences and perceptions so other higher education professionals can understand them better and their needs as student veterans.

While more studies are taking place that focus on student veterans, there are still gaps in the literature. This study fills a small gap and provides information that could help higher education professionals at other institutions guide their programs. As more student veterans leave the service and enroll in higher education, it is important for institutions to acknowledge and understand their needs. Supporting these men and women and making them feel more comfortable on campus benefits the entire community and makes the university experience better for all students.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A

RECRUITMENT EMAIL

Dear student veteran,

You are being contacted because of your status as a student veteran at your university. I am a doctoral student at Oklahoma State University studying the experiences and perceptions of student veterans as they move toward graduation in higher education. Would you be willing to meet with me for approximately 60 to 90 to talk about your experiences as a student veteran? I am particularly interested in:

- Your experiences with campus services for student veterans.
- What experiences with the campus have enhanced or created a barrier college success.
- Your overall experience as a student veteran on your campus.

I appreciate your consideration in participating in this study. Participants will be compensated for their time. Please contact me at (405) 365-8786 or email me at cdc@okstate.edu to notify me of your interest in participating or with any question you may have.

Sincerely,

C.D. Clark

Appendix B

INFORMED CONSENT LETTER

US VS. THEM? HOW STUDENT VETERANS PERCEIVE THEMSELVES WITHIN THE UNIVERSITY COMMUNITY

Name of student researcher: C. Daniel Clark
Address: 1709 NW 172nd St. Edmond, OK 73012
Telephone number: 405-365-8786
Email address: cdc@okstate.edu

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this class activity with the student researcher, a graduate student at Oklahoma State University. This form outlines the purposes of this research activity and provides a description of your involvement and rights as a participant. The purposes of this research activity are the following:

1. To gain insight into the following research questions:

What are student veterans' reported experiences with support systems in place specifically for them?

How do student veterans perceive the role of support services in meeting their goals?

Using Veteran Critical Theory, what tenets best explain the experiences student veterans have on campus with university community as a whole?

2. To gain experience formulating and conducting qualitative research methods, including interviewing, observation, and document analysis. This research fulfills a course requirement for a doctorate in Educational Leadership and Policy Studies directed by Dr. Tammi L. Moore, Co-Director, Center for Public Life at OSU-Tulsa. Main Hall 2439, Tulsa, OK 74106. Email tami.moore@okstate.edu.

(The participant signs two copies; the participant receives a copy, and the student researcher retains a copy)

Appendix C

INITIAL INTERVIEW QUESTIONS AND IRB APPROVAL LETTER

Background

1. Where did you grow up and where did you go to high school?
2. Why did you decide to join the military?
3. What was your favorite part about being in the military?
4. Why did you select this university?
5. What expectations did you have coming into college or university?

Experiences and Perceptions of Personal Interactions

6. Describe your overall experience transitioning from the military to college.
7. Using your experiences, describe the faculty's attitude toward veterans.
8. Tell me about an interaction with a faculty member that has stuck with you.
9. What have been the most challenging adjustments to college? The easiest?
10. Tell me about an interaction with a classmate or fellow student outside of class that has stuck with you.

Experiences and Perceptions of University Policies and Procedures

11. What services does your school provide that are specifically designed for veterans?
12. Which of these have you used and what were your experiences using these services.

13. What services does your college or university not provide that you wish they did?

14. Would you recommend this school to other veterans? Why or why not?

Questions for University Administrators who work with Student Veterans

15. What made you want to work with student veterans?

16. What makes student veterans different than non-student veterans?

17. What programs and/or policies does your university have in place to support student veterans?

18. What do you think could be improved to help student veterans move toward graduation?

20. What is your sense of student veterans being integrated in the larger campus community?

21. Is there anything else you would like to add about your work with student veterans?



Oklahoma State University Institutional Review Board

Date: 03/04/2022
Application Number: IRB-22-81
Proposal Title: Us vs. Them? How Student Veterans Perceive Themselves within the University Community

Principal Investigator: Daniel Clark
Co-Investigator(s):
Faculty Adviser: Tami Moore
Project Coordinator:
Research Assistant(s):

Processed as: Exempt
Exempt Category:

Status Recommended by Reviewer(s): Approved

The IRB application referenced above has been approved. It is the judgment of the reviewers that the rights and welfare of individuals who may be asked to participate in this study will be respected, and that the research will be conducted in a manner consistent with the IRB requirements as outlined in 45CFR46.

This study meets criteria in the Revised Common Rule, as well as, one or more of the circumstances for which continuing review is not required. As Principal Investigator of this research, you will be required to submit a status report to the IRB triennially.

The final versions of any recruitment, consent and assent documents bearing the IRB approval stamp are available for download from IRBManager. These are the versions that must be used during the study.

As Principal Investigator, it is your responsibility to do the following:

1. Conduct this study exactly as it has been approved. Any modifications to the research protocol must be approved by the IRB. Protocol modifications requiring approval may include changes to the title, PI, adviser, other research personnel, funding status or sponsor, subject population composition or size, recruitment, inclusion/exclusion criteria, research site, research procedures and consent/assent process or forms.
2. Submit a request for continuation if the study extends beyond the approval period. This continuation must receive IRB review and approval before the research can continue.
3. Report any unanticipated and/or adverse events to the IRB Office promptly.
4. Notify the IRB office when your research project is complete or when you are no longer affiliated with Oklahoma State University.

Please note that approved protocols are subject to monitoring by the IRB and that the IRB office has the authority to inspect research records associated with this protocol at any time. If you have questions about the IRB procedures or need any assistance from the Board, please contact the IRB Office at 405-744-3377 or irb@okstate.edu.

Sincerely,
Oklahoma State University IRB

VITA

Christopher Daniel Clark

Candidate for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Dissertation: US VS. THEM? HOW STUDENT VETERANS PERCIEVE
THEMSELVES WITHINT THE UNIVERSITY COMMUNITY

Major Field: Educational Leadership and Policy Studies: Higher Education
Administration

Education:

Completed the requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy in Educational Leadership and Policy Studies: Higher Education Administration at Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, Oklahoma in May 2023.

Completed the requirements for the Master of Arts in 20th Century United States History at Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, Oklahoma in 2005.

Completed the requirements for the Bachelor of Arts in History and in Religion at Baylor University, Waco, Texas in 1998.

Experience:

Harding Charter Prep High School Oklahoma City, OK Fall 2017 to Present

ASTEC Middle School Oklahoma City, OK Spring 2017

Mid-America Christian University Oklahoma City, OK Fall 2010 to Fall 2016

Oklahoma State University-OKC Campus Oklahoma City, OK Spring 2007-Spring 2012

Santa Fe South Charter Schools Oklahoma City, OK Fall 2001-Spring 2010

Scholarship of Application:

Moore, T.L., Stout, M.D., Brown, A., Hall, N., Clark, C.D., & Marpaung, J. (2021). Cowboys Coming Together: Campus-based dialogues on race and racial equity. *E-Journal of Public Affairs*, 10(1).

Earned Diversity Honors Cord from CEHS – Oklahoma State University 2021