

Millennial Combat Veterans: How Identity Shapes Experience in College

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to the men and women of the United States Armed Forces with deep appreciation for their commitment to serve our country and the personal sacrifices that come with military service. More specifically, I would like to dedicate this dissertation to the student veterans at both research sites in Northwestern Massachusetts. On behalf of all student veterans throughout the country, thank you for the gift of your time, trust, and candor throughout this research. May you find peace in the journey that lies ahead.

“But little by little,
as you left their voices behind,
the stars began to burn
through the sheets of clouds,
and there was a new voice
which you slowly
recognized as your own,
that kept you company
as you strode deeper and deeper
into the world,
determined to do
the only thing you could do –
determined to save
the only life you could save.”

~Excerpt from *The Journey* by Mary Oliver

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Abstract of Dissertation

Millennial Combat Veterans: How Identity Shapes Experience in College

The purpose of this study was to build upon the growing foundational base of knowledge on the academic and social transitions of student combat veterans and contribute to a greater theoretical understanding of this population and how their perception of identity may influence their experience as college students.

The researcher conducted a qualitative study to explore the experiences of student combat veterans as they transitioned from the military to higher education and discovered how their perceptions of their own identity influenced their experiences in college. The researcher's investigation aimed to answer a primary research question: How do combat veterans perceive their own identity and what influence does this have on their experience as college students?

Hecht's (1993) Communication Theory of Identity (CTI) and Gee's (2000) conceptual identity model served as guiding frameworks for the development of interview protocols in a two-part semi-structured interview series. Nineteen student veterans ($n=19$) at two community colleges in Northwestern Massachusetts were interviewed. In addition to participant interviews, the researcher employed fieldwork throughout the study in an effort to provide the appropriate data triangulation, including observations during student veteran organization meetings and college-sponsored events, and informal conversations with student veterans, faculty, and staff at each site.

Analysis of the data consisted of the three levels of coding recommended by Strauss and Corbin (1998): (a) open (emic) coding, (b) axial coding, and (c) selective

(etic) coding. Seven initial categories of data and common codes were identified amongst all 19 participants at both research sites. These categories and associated codes were then evaluated by the researcher in the context of the research question and protocols for distinctive overlapping commonalities and parallel meaning, then grouped into core themes.

Four themes representing the collective experiences and perceptions of the participants emerged in the research: Perception of self, perception of others, inferred perception of self, and connections to other veterans. The researcher found each of these themes influenced the experience for participants as college students on multiple levels.

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CHAPTER 1

“The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeing new landscapes, but in having new eyes.”

-Marcel Proust

INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 made an indelible mark on our nation’s collective history. At the same time, the events of that day would ultimately awaken a conversation six decades in the making. The dialogue began with combat veterans returning from the battlefields of World War II. At its core, this historical and now contemporary conversation has been about the intersection of higher education in the United States and the needs of returning combat veterans transitioning from wartime service to civilian life and seeking a college education. According to DiRamio and Jarvis (2011), the current generation of student veterans, the millennials who have served since the turn of the century, should emulate the post-World War II generation of college students, entering the doors of higher education as well-trained adults who have made tremendous sacrifices for their country. Entrance into higher education can be highly complex with a variety of unclear steps and a path that is not necessarily direct or structured. The tremendous variability of enrollment factors in higher education present significant challenges to contemporary combat veterans (Elliott, Gonzalez, & Larson, 2011; Livingston, Havice, Cawthon, & Fleming, 2011). Integration into the academic environment is critical to retention (Kuh, Curce, Shoup, Kinzie, & Gonyea, 2008). Therefore, institutional commitment to providing the necessary blend of student services and academic supports to combat veterans is critical to the transition of these students to campus after the completion of their military service.

From the first flood of veterans to higher education in 1945 following World War II to the two million veterans from the current conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan that are eligible for educational benefits under the Post-9/11 G.I. Bill (McBain, Kim, Cook & Snead, 2012), the academy has struggled with “who” student veterans are and “what” unique needs they present upon arrival to campus. Titus (1944) said the complex relationships between veterans and college would require an intimate, institutional understanding of these needs if veterans were to be successful in college. Sixty-five years later, Ackerman, DiRamio, and Mitchell (2008) introduced a contemporary renewal to Titus’s (1944) statement about combat veterans when they said, “The experience of war makes those who fight a special group within the general population” (p. 5). Despite Titus’s (1944) call to the academy to pay close attention to student veterans upon their enrollment following World War II, there appears to be a notable lack of attention to this population in the higher education literature during the decades to follow. In fact, Ackerman et al. (2008) were some of the first scholarly voices to draw attention to the needs of student veterans returning to higher education from contemporary conflict. This paucity of literature related to student veterans in higher education since World War II underscores the need for further research related to this distinct sub-population of students on campus and the needs they present upon enrollment.

Since World War II, G.I. Bill benefit packages have varied over the last half-century and veterans have struggled to obtain and manage the educational benefits they need and deserve to go to college (Herrmann, Hopkins, Wilson, & Allen, 2009). The current conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan have awakened an important conversation for student combat veterans. This renewed conversation, stretching across six decades of

history, once again implores colleges and universities to take pause and consider the distinct population student combat veterans represent in higher education. The unique attributes of this population have endured both the test of time and societal context. Although it is difficult to chronicle the educational experiences of a group so widely dispersed, we need to better understand the world that veterans face when trying to go to college (Herrmann, et al., 2009).

Since 2001, two million active duty service members have been deployed overseas as part of Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) in Afghanistan and Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) in Iraq (Steele, Salcedo, & Coley, 2010). In 1947, half of American college students were veterans. Today veterans represent only about three percent of the student population (Sander, 2012, March). With only one-half of one percent of American adults ever having served in active duty, few people have connections to the military. This unfamiliarity risks breeding stereotypes about why veterans enlisted, their ideological beliefs, and what they did while in uniform (Sander, 2012, September).

As the United States considers the future of both of these wars, the higher education community once again grapples with an increase in combat veterans returning from active duty and arriving on college campuses across the country. For many veterans, the transition to college is the most difficult adjustment to be made when returning from wartime service to civilian life (Ackerman et al., 2008). The move from military to civilian life is a complicated endeavor, fraught with many complex and undefined decisions, unlike the clarity and direction provided to veterans during their military experience. Consequently, this population of students presents a unique set of

needs that will continue to require the adequate education of faculty, staff, and student peers to ensure a positive transition for combat veterans.

Higher education has a pivotal and research role to play in the deepening of familiarity with student veterans, with colleges and universities throughout the country poised to explore the challenges of veterans and engage civilians in finding solutions (Sander, 2012, September). The goal of this study was to further inform a framework of practice for higher education administrators, faculty, and staff tailored to the unique set of needs student veterans present upon arriving on campus and to broaden the theoretical understanding of this student population.

According to Herrmann et al. (2009), “approximately 65% of the general population has had some college education and 29% has obtained a Bachelor’s degree or higher. In contrast, approximately 41% of veterans attend college with only 15% obtaining a Bachelor’s degree or higher” (p. 7). McBain et al. (2012) found only 39% of colleges with dedicated veteran’s support services (such as academic advising, personal counseling, and co-curricular programming) have programs to train faculty and staff in how to better assist veterans and about 59% help veterans make the difficult transition from the battlefield to the classroom (p. 14). According to Ackerman et al. (2008), prior research involving student veterans has focused primarily on academic achievement and mental health, with less attention to the notion of transition. The unique needs of this distinct population of students as they prepare to transition from combat to civilian life and college warrant further study. This research is both timely and critical to addressing this lack of services and complex challenges facing a burgeoning population of student veterans in higher education.

Field (2008) found veterans are entering the doors of community colleges across the country in record numbers and prefer community colleges because they are more convenient and better able to cater to their needs. Similar to World War II, a significant number of veterans today are using their educational benefits to attend two-year institutions. Data from the National Center for Educational Statistics for 2007-08 show that of the top 500 institutions enrolling students using veteran benefits to attend college, over 200 were community colleges (Field, 2008). In addition, 43 percent of military undergraduates attended public two-year institutions (Radford, 2011). Radford (2011) found that overall, military undergraduates were most often enrolled in public two-year institutions during the academic year 2007-08, and four percent of all undergraduates at institutions of higher education and approximately four percent of graduate students were veterans or military service members (p. 3). About 16 percent of veterans utilize educational benefits to attend private institutions, roughly the same proportion as the general student body (Sander, 2013). However, at the most “highly selective colleges,” such as Brown, Harvard, or Yale, the numbers are noticeably smaller (Sander, 2013). Since the affordability and open access mission of community colleges continue to attract veterans to community college campuses across the country, this research study focused on the student experience of combat veterans at two rural community colleges in Western Massachusetts.

Problem Statement

In October 2011, President Barack Obama announced the end of the war in Iraq with all remaining ground troops to be withdrawn by December 2011. In May 2012, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) voted to approve President Obama’s exit

strategy in Afghanistan with all ground troops to be withdrawn by December 2014. These shifts in foreign policy related to the contemporary wars in Iraq and Afghanistan will undoubtedly add to the already growing population of student veterans making their way to college campuses across the country. The transition from the intensity of military life to a more self-sufficient civilian life can be overwhelming for veterans (Lighthall, 2012). Student veterans, often older and with more worldly experience than their classmates, will need the assistance of dedicated and caring professionals in higher education to help them make the transition to college through a better understanding of combat veterans, how these veterans find meaning in those past experiences, and how, ultimately, a combat veteran moves through the civilian world after leaving the military (Lighthall, 2012). This study aimed to inform the knowledge base of college and university administrators, shed light on the special population of students combat veterans represent and make contributions that will benefit their experience in college and adequately prepare them for future transitions after graduation.

The enactment of the Post 9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Act of 2008 is thought to be one of the most significant acts of legislation on behalf of active-duty and veteran students since the 1944 G.I. Bill (Cook & Kim, 2009). By 2011 more than 924,000 veterans had used the benefits offered to them (Lighthall, 2012). Although there was a public perception that the Post 9/11 G.I. Bill would eliminate the issues encountered by veterans and promote a seamless path to higher education, these resources alone do not adequately address the current problems student veterans encounter upon enrollment.

It is estimated that soldiers entering the service will deploy an average of 14 times

by the time they serve 21 years in the military (Adler, Huffman, Bliese, & Castro, 2005). Therefore, many of the students who will register for these benefits will have been in combat prior to enrolling in college. Combat deployments can often mean long stretches of time away from family and peers, lack of communication back home, harsh field conditions, and an unpredictable combination of anxiety, uncertainty, and threat (Adler et al., 2005).

This population of students requires assistance with problems rarely encountered by other students at the institution (Herrmann et al., 2009). Multiple challenges facing veterans as they transition to college include: relearning study-skills, insomnia, increased stress, avoidance of public spaces, depression, and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) (Ford, Northrup, & Wiley, 2009). These factors pose potential barriers to a veteran's transition to college and overall persistence upon enrollment. According to a national survey, *Student Veterans: A National Survey Exploring Psychological Symptoms and Suicide Risk* (Lipka, 2011) conducted by the National Center for Veterans' Studies, nearly half of military veterans who are enrolled in college show significant symptoms of PTSD, a third suffer from severe anxiety, and a quarter experience severe depression. Almost half of those enrolled in college have contemplated suicide at some point, and 20 percent have planned to kill themselves (Lipka, 2011).

Despite the expanded benefits of the Post 9/11 Bill, many veterans will also encounter bureaucratic, financial, and enrollment barriers as they transition to higher education (Cook & Kim, 2009). The process of applying to college, gaining credit for military training and experience, and registering for veterans benefits can require completing a maze of bureaucratic forms, visiting multiple student service offices, and

scheduling follow-up meetings or phone calls to properly enroll and pay for college. For many combat veterans who are returning from multiple deployments, the process is complicated even further due to a “disruptive deployment” that interrupted their college experience. The disruptive deployment is similar to the term of “stopping out” for a civilian college student, who does not complete their plan of study in a normal time frame (Bauman, 2009).

Cook and Kim (2009) found the areas in which institutions of higher education could improve in serving combat veterans and other military students included: assisting students with their overall transition to the college environment, streamlining services such as benefits administration and enrollment, providing targeted academic advising/tutoring and career planning, offering networking opportunities for veterans to connect with peers, and providing professional development for faculty and staff regarding the transitional needs of veterans. In 2012, McBain et al. provided a comprehensive update to the original work of Cook and Kim (2009), underscoring earlier findings and the ongoing need for institutions of higher education to assess the services and supports they are providing to student veterans upon enrollment at the institution.

The researcher interest in this topic has evolved through both a professional and personal lens of inquiry. Professionally, the researcher has been connected to this topic, in some way, for seven years. As Dean for Enrollment at Greenfield Community College (GCC), the researcher is responsible for the oversight and day-to-day operations of all student affairs areas, including Enrollment Services, Financial Aid, Student Development, and Academic Support. Enrollment Services and Student Development encompass transition into the institution, through Admission, New Student Orientation

and Registration, while Academic Support provides resources promoting retention for students throughout their enrollment and transitions out of the institution through graduation and the Transfer Office. The researcher has had multiple opportunities to meet with student veterans, assist them with academic advising, and observe first-hand some of the barriers they encounter when enrolling at the institution and beginning classes. Personally, the researcher has witnessed friends who are combat veterans at Greenfield Community College and other institutions struggle with one or more personal challenges as they attempt to integrate into the curricular and co-curricular environment of the institution. Viewing combat veterans through both a professional and personal lens has fueled the researcher's scholarly interest in this topic.

Proper training for faculty and student affairs practitioners to meet the needs of combat veterans can be critical to veterans' effective transition to college and their overall academic success (Cook & Kim, 2009). Student and academic affairs leaders should consider providing all members of the campus community with opportunities to better understand the challenges faced by students who have experienced military combat that may be absent from their own background or knowledge base (Rumann & Hamrick, 2009). The findings and recommendations for future practice and scholarly inquiry in this study provide administrators and faculty on campus with the tools necessary to design, implement, and evaluate outcomes of services targeted to student veterans who have experienced combat.

According to DiRamio and Jarvis (2011), "Most transitions involve a changing of roles, which could include role loss – moving out of the role of combat soldier to civilian – or role gain commensurate with attending college" (p.12). Therefore, equally important

to the attention that must be paid to combat veterans as they transition from military service to higher education is the careful attention to veterans' overall experience as they enroll in college. Contemporary studies such as those conducted by Ackerman et al. (2008), Cook and Kim (2009), and Rumann and Hamrick (2010), have focused primarily on the veteran transition to higher education, paying less attention to the potential social psychological impact of combat and how the veterans' service may shape their personal identity, thus shaping their overall experience in college. Military combat service could be thought of as a life-changing event or "turning point" for veterans, representing a traumatic period that might be thought of as a time when they reconsidered their direction and meaning in life (Elder, Gimbel, & Ivie, 1991). Studies of World War II veterans suggested that their combat experience produced a "legacy of stress symptoms that persisted well after military service" (Elder & Clipp, 1988; Hastings, 1991). Little research exists related to how this legacy may impact our student veterans. Teachman and Call (1996) recommended it would be beneficial for future research to explore this psychological impact and how it affects a veteran's educational and occupational aspirations.

Participation in war is an extremely stressful experience and often creates an atmosphere of uncertainty, profound stress, unimaginable loss, and death. Such experiences may cause changed perceptions of personal identity (Reeves, Parker, & Konkle-Parker, 2005). As of August 2008, one third of those who have been deployed to OEF or OIF have served at least two tours of combat and more than 70,000 have been deployed three times, significantly increasing the likelihood of greater levels of PTSD, TBI, and depression (Danish & Antonides, 2009). Prior studies have suggested that

combat-related PTSD may differ from civilian PTSD. The experience of combat may have a lasting impact on the identity of individuals who have been deployed to war zones (Brown, Antonius, Kramer, Root, & Hirst, 2010). Taylor and Baker (2007) found that veterans diagnosed with PTSD presented lower levels of both psychosocial and moral development, suggesting a form of “arrested development” may be present for these veterans due to the prevalence of their PTSD.

Combat veterans describe frustration upon leaving the structure of the military and a loss of both self and purpose. Many combat veterans spoke of no longer knowing who they were (Brenner et al., 2008). Everyday activities outside the military seemed to have little value or purpose for some veterans. Still other combat veterans viewed their experience as more significant or profound (Brenner et al., 2008). For combat veterans who have recently returned from war, there is a desire to feel like their old civilian selves or feel more “porous-boundaries” between their identity as a soldier and a civilian (Sherman, 2010). Rumann and Hamrick (2010) found that critical to their transition was “generating and affirming a new identity grounded in cumulative experiences, capabilities, perspectives, and reflections” (p. 450). The core of this study suggests that if combat veterans are actively processing their military experience and re-negotiating their own personal identity while enrolled, this may significantly impact their overall experience in college. An understanding of how a combat veteran’s identity is impacted by war and how this identity shapes their experience is critical for college faculty, administrators, and staff to properly work with and assist this burgeoning population of students in higher education.

Purpose Of The Study

Since its inception, the Post-9/11 G.I. Bill or new G.I. Bill has offered over two million service members of the Iraq and Afghanistan conflicts unprecedented support for educational benefits. Due to the significant number of veterans from Iraq and Afghanistan returning from combat service, accessing these benefits and enrolling in college, ongoing study is warranted to determine the services and social support necessary to ensure these institutions are adequately prepared to meet the distinct needs of student veterans upon their arrival to campus. More than 500,000 student veterans and their families have utilized the Post-9/11 Bill benefits (McBain et al., 2012), As this population of students continues to increase, student and academic affairs leaders will need to consider providing members of the campus community with opportunities to better understand the challenges faced by military students who have experienced combat that may be absent from their own background or knowledge base (Rumann & Hamrick, 2009).

This study aimed to gain a better understanding of the challenges student veterans who have been in combat face while transitioning from military service to college, and how their perception of their own identities and identity negotiation may affect this transition. The research makes strides in filling the gap in contemporary research related to the transition of combat veterans to community colleges and helps identify the critical needs of combat veterans who enroll in college. Student veterans who have served in the contemporary conflicts of OEF and OIF are a relatively new phenomenon on college campuses and there is little empirical evidence available related to applying theories of identity development to combat veterans (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011). This research asks the question, “What does the transition look like through the lens of identity for combat

veterans?” Is the transition rooted in two identifiable points in time, or is the concept of transition for combat veterans and their negotiation of multiple roles a more fluid, ongoing type of process with an unclear beginning or end? Military combat stands out as one of the most stressful experiences and presents physical, emotional, social and cognitive challenges to veterans rarely experienced by their student peers (Elliott et al., 2011). The goal of this study was to add to the growing base of contemporary knowledge regarding veterans and to contribute to a greater theoretical understanding of this population of students.

The primary research question was developed to explore the experiences of student combat veterans transitioning from the military to college and how they perceive their identity may influence this transition and their overall experience in college. The primary research question for this study was:

- How do combat veterans perceive their own identity and what influence does this have on their experience as college students?

DiRamio and Jarvis (2011) identified a central element of the veteran transition from military service to civilian life for many veterans as the quest to find a new purpose and meaning to their lives. This process of self-discovery can be both encouraged and nurtured on a college campus if informed support structures are in place to meet the unique needs of student veterans.

The next five years of research – being called the “second wave” of student veteran research in education (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011) – have the potential to be groundbreaking in discovering the contemporary needs and identities of millennial veterans.

The choice to employ a grounded theory research design to this study was intended to address the paucity of the recent literature and make strides in adding to a greater theoretical understanding of this population through a method of discovery as outlined in the seminal work of Strauss and Corbin (1990). Since emerging in 2007, the body of contemporary research related to student veterans who have experienced combat is still in its infancy. A comprehensive understanding of the experiences of this population is best built upon the rigor of scholarly discovery using grounded theory methods of design. Building upon the work of groundbreaking student development theorists such as Erikson (1959), Chickering (1969), and Schlossberg (1984), this study aimed to provide its own theoretical contribution to the literature. The study was designed with an assumption that theory is an unfinished scaffold or fluid model of ideas that is best built upon prior research and contemplation of social phenomena that tests prior empirical and theoretical findings. This study adds to the body of literature that continues to inform the higher education community about student combat veterans and who they are as soldiers, civilians, and, most importantly, students.

CHAPTER 2

"...the members of the armed forces have been compelled to make greater economic sacrifice and every other kind of sacrifice than the rest of us, and they are entitled to definite action to help take care of their special problems."

Franklin Roosevelt's Statement on Signing the G.I. Bill, June 22, 1944

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

In order to be adequately understood, the experience of student veterans in the academy is best articulated through a historic lens, offering insight into the longstanding relationship between the military and higher education. It is also important to account for the overlapping characteristics between veterans of past wars and service members today. The following review of the literature is divided into four distinct areas. The first section provides a historical overview of the relationship between the U.S. military and higher education, including the early origins of this relationship and the educational benefits afforded to veterans through the original G.I. Bill and subsequent iterations following various military conflicts in U.S. history. The second section explores the ongoing conversations in higher education about student combat veterans, their perceived needs, and the impacts of combat as part of the returning veteran's overall experience. The third section explores the phenomenon of identity and provides a conceptual framework for understanding how identity may impact a combat veteran's experience of being in college. The fourth and final section of this literature review provides context for the choice in methodology for the study and discusses contemporary scholarly discovery of student veterans and their relationship to higher education.

The Military and Higher Education: A Full-Circle History

Early Citizen-Soldiers

Although America's first citizen-soldier regiments, now called the National Guard, were created in 1636 (Doubler & Listman, 2007), little history exists regarding the experience of student veterans in higher education prior to the U.S. Civil War. The immediate and long-term impacts of war, however, have been long-felt by our nation's veterans, including historical appearances of modern-day Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). During the American Civil War a soldier's first experiences with the brutality of combat and war were described as "seeing the elephant" (Grossman, D. A., 2009) and later during the First World War this condition was described as "shell-shock." In every war of the twentieth century, the chances of becoming a psychiatric casualty for some period as a result of the stress of combat or military life were greater than the chances of being killed by enemy fire, and during World War II it was reported that more than 800,000 men were classified as unfit for military service due to psychiatric reasons (Grossman, D. A., 2009).

Access to the early colonial colleges was limited and it was clear the main purpose of the colleges at that time was to identify and ratify a colonial elite (Thelin, 2004). Higher education had not yet experienced the transformative changes of World War II and the subsequent impact on access and affordability, democratizing higher education in the United States, as a result of the enactment of the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, more commonly known as the G.I. Bill.

The relationship between the U.S. military and higher education began with what Abrams (1989) described as almost an "absence of mind," arising from an after-thought stipulation in the Morrill Land-Grant College Act of 1862 that colleges and universities financed under terms of the act must offer military training as part of the curriculum.

Despite the fact the main purpose of the Land-Grant Act was to promote agriculture and the mechanical arts (Thelin, 2004), the Civil War was underway and Congressman Justin Morrill of Vermont saw the need for a continuing source of fostering military skills as the country continued to grow. The state of the country at that time allowed Morrill to persuade his colleagues to insert the stipulation with little debate (Abrams, 1989; Thelin, 2004).

For the first half century following the enactment of the Morrill Act, the military training stipulation appears to have had little impact (Abrams, 1989). It was not until the country's entry into global competition and a provision in the National Defense Act (NDA) of 1916, and subsequent NDA of 1920 that a Reserve Officers' Training Corps (ROTC) in civilian colleges and universities was formalized (Abrams 1989; Doubler & Listman, 2007; Thelin, 2004). The momentum of this program, however, was short-lived as the United States entered the First World War, stifling the opportunity for growth. It was not until the enactment of the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, following World War II, that the relationship between higher education and the military would eventually grow into a major phenomenon (Abrams, 1989), forever changing the landscape of higher education.

The Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944

The Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, historically known as the G.I. Bill, has been described as one of the most far-reaching events in the history of American higher education given its influence on physical infrastructure, expanded admissions practices, and government investment in entitlement programs (Kiestler, 1994). During this time period, the societal importance of academic work was emerging, in light of the

country's military efforts and a new focus on national concerns (Freeland, 1992).

Described as being born out of fear of mass unemployment and social unrest after World War II, the G.I. Bill in the decades since passing has gained an almost “mythical” status (Field, 2008). It has been often credited with promoting post-war prosperity, expanding the middle class, and democratizing higher education in the U.S. by making college a viable option for men from a diversity of backgrounds, including minorities, first-generation Americans, and those from low socio-economic backgrounds (Bound & Turner, 2002; Farrell, 2005; Stringer, 2007).

Title II of the G.I. Bill (P.L. 78-346, 58 Stat. 284m) aimed to provide support to veterans for education and vocational training through subsidized tuition and books as well as living expenses. Creators of the legislation sought to “replenish the nation’s human capital” (Serow, 2004, p. 483) depleted by the decline in college enrollments during the war and the hundreds of thousands of combat deaths and disabilities (Bennett, 1996; Olson, 1974; Serow, 2004). Initial governmental projections of veterans enrolling in colleges and universities drastically underestimated actual enrollments (Olson, 1974). Six months after the legislation was signed, President Franklin D. Roosevelt predicted enrollments would be in the hundreds of thousands, potentially 700,000 over several years (Bennett, 1996). Olson (1974) captured the skepticism many had of the bill at the time it was enacted saying, “No one believed the legislation would be an economic panacea. The appeal was that it would help the economy while providing something to veterans” (p. 29). The bill also sought to reward veterans for their years of service and sacrifice (Serow, 2004). President Roosevelt told Congress in 1943 that the nation was

“morally obligated” to insure that veterans and their families suffer no additional economic hardships after the war ended (Serow, 2004, p.483).

By the fall of 1945, 88,000 veterans had applied and been accepted for participation under the G.I. Bill (Bound & Turner, 2002; Olson, 1974). The bill continued to increase in popularity. By 1946, G.I. Bill enrollments surpassed 1 million, with the total benefits paid out by the federal government exceeding \$5.5 billion (Bound & Turner, 2002; Olson, 1974; Thelin, 2004). In total, over 2.2 million veterans, or one in every eight returning service men, attended college under the G.I. Bill (Olson, 1974). Subsequently, colleges and universities experienced a doubling of their enrollments. This demanded expansion of infrastructure such as buildings, classrooms, labs, and housing for veterans and their families (Thelin, 2004) as well as an expansion of the faculty and academic support staff. Prior to 1945, student enrollments across the system of higher education had declined substantially due to the military draft (Bennett, 1996; Serow, 2004; Thelin, 2004). Marcus Stanley (2003), contributing author to *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, described the law’s influence as more evolutionary than revolutionary, “maintaining a pre-war trend of rapid growth in higher education while moderately accelerating it” (p. 2-3). Bound and Turner (2002) arrive at a similar conclusion, that the G.I. Bill was less of a watershed moment for higher education, as sometimes depicted, than it was a boost to already increasing enrollments. Serow (2004) suggested the G.I. Bill did not create a broader demand for higher education, but merely subsidized those who would have attended even without federal support (p. 484).

While the scholarly debate of its broader impact is ongoing, the G.I. Bill has been described as innovative at the federal level. Unlike the Morrill Act of 1862, the G.I. Bill

provided funds directly to individuals. It was the first federal program to offer an entitlement program with portable benefits, benefits belonging to the individual not an institution, which recipients could use at the college of their choice (Bound & Turner, 2002; Olson, 1974; Skocpol, 1997). At a time when the annual direct costs of a college education averaged \$350, the \$500 Title II maximum grant combined with a cost of living allowance was equivalent to a full scholarship at most colleges and universities in the country (Bound & Turner, 2002; Olson, 1974; Serow, 2004). This direct support to individual veterans represented a historically unprecedented federal subsidy for college enrollment (Bound & Turner, 2002). The legislation gave individuals the ability to decide for themselves what was best for them, and the legislation freed colleges and universities to do what they do best: to teach (Bennett, 1996; Serow, 2004).

In addition to the fulfillment of its original objectives and inspiring two future G.I. Bills, the Servicemen's Readjustment Act prompted the establishment of the Presidential Commission on Higher Education (Kim & Rury, 2007; Olson, 1974). President Harry S. Truman at the time believed the veterans were taxing the resources of the nation's colleges and he charged the commission with re-examining the current system of higher education in the country in terms of its objectives, methods, and facilities in light of the social role it had to play for America (Olson, 1974). The resulting "Report of the Truman Commission on Higher Education" in 1947 offered a broad vision of expansion, diversification, and increased access in the system of postsecondary education in the United States (Kim & Rury, 2007; Olson, 1974).

The commission's objective, building upon the precedent set by the G.I. Bill, was to remove barriers to higher education by expanding grants for undergraduates and

fellowships for graduate students. Perhaps most importantly, the recommendations of the Truman Commission resulted in the expansion of junior colleges into the current system of community colleges across the country. According to Bragg (2001), “Having evolved from relative obscurity in the early 20th century, community colleges play a vital role in contemporary American higher education and have become the most important and single largest portal” (pp. 94-95). The community college role for veterans has stood the test of time according to Field (2008), who said, “like the veterans of World War II, the majority of veterans today are using their G.I. Bill benefits to attend institutions that offer two-year degrees or emphasize vocational training” (p. A1).

The Servicemen’s Readjustment Act has been described as a visionary federal policy, in like kind with the Northwest Ordinance of 1789 and the Homestead and Morrill Acts of 1862. Each of these policies recognized that for a nation to prosper, its individual citizens must also prosper (Hyman, 1986; Serow, 2004). Symbolically, the G.I. Bill has been widely accepted as an important moment for higher education, symbolizing a transition from a period when college was reserved largely for the elites, to the current era of access and affordability in higher education (Bennett, 1996; Clark, 1998; Serow, 2004). Although many of the World War II U.S. military forces had demobilized by 1947, the original G.I. Bill was credited to have increased veteran college completion rates by as much as 43 percent (Bound & Turner, 2002). Subsequent iterations of the G.I. Bill have followed, but benefits grew progressively less generous until the signing of the more recent Post 9/11 Veterans Education Assistance Act of 2008 (Steele et al., 2010), calling into question whether the legacy of the G.I. Bill meets the spirit of the original

legislation: to meet the needs of veterans in a way that matches the personal sacrifices they made for their country.

The Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1952

According to the 1951 Statistical Abstract of the United States, in 1947 more than one million veterans were attending colleges and universities, which represented approximately 48 percent of the total collegiate enrollment at that time. By 1950, this number had dropped to fewer than 600,000 veterans in higher education (Kim & Rury, 2007).

The World War II G.I. Bill helped to shape future iterations of the original legislation, including The Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1952, also known as Public Law 550 or more commonly, the Korean War G.I. Bill (Olson, 1974; Steele et al., 2010). Less than one month after the start of the Korean conflict, John Rankin, Chair of the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs, introduced legislation to extend benefits of the 1944 G.I. Bill to veterans of the Korean conflict (Bound and Turner, 2002; Olson, 1974). Two years later, the law was approved by overwhelming majority in the Senate and applied to those veterans who served between June 1950 and January 1955 (Olson, 1974).

Although certain provisions of the Korean War G.I. Bill such as unemployment insurance, job placement, home loans, and pay benefits paralleled the original G.I. Bill of 1944, there were distinct modifications to the education and training benefits (Cohen, Warner, & Segal, 1995; Olson, 1974; Teachman, 2005). Most notably, the act eliminated the first automatic year of job training benefit and the maximum payment of \$500 to colleges and universities for tuition, books, and fees while increasing the monthly

subsistence payments to individual veterans (Bound & Turner, 2002; Olson, 1974; Steele et al., 2010). The Korean G.I. Bill awarded a day and a half of training for each day served and reduced the maximum training allowance from 48 months to 36, which ultimately worked against a person who served less than two years (Olson, 1974). Through the increased monthly subsistence payments, portable education benefits were now in the hands of the veterans themselves, rather than being paid directly to colleges and universities (Olson, 1974; Steele et al., 2010). This increase, however, failed to offset the abolition of the tuition payments and cost of living at the time, rendering less powerful benefits to Korean War veterans in comparison to veterans of World War II (Olson, 1974).

Historically, there exist several reasons explaining why the Korean War G.I. Bill differed from the first original legislation. Olson (1974) said, “The prosperity and veteran contentment of the postwar years had frightened away the ghosts of the 1930s who had haunted those responsible for the 1944 G.I. Bill” (p. 106). Changed economic conditions in the country had altered the underpinnings of the 1952 Act. No longer was there a fear of a widespread recession or social unrest with the return of Korean War veterans as there was at the time of the original G.I. Bill (Bennett, 1996; Bound & Turner, 2002; Olson, 1974; Serow, 2004) and Congress called for a review of the G.I. Bill and other educational programs. The House Select Committee to Investigate Educational Programs under the G.I. Bill, also known as the Teague Committee for its head Olin E. Teague, proved to be one of the most influential in all of the investigations and hearings surrounding the evaluation of the educational programs (Olson, 1974) and subsequent recommendations for revision to the original legislation.

Olson (1974) presents two other plausible reasons why the Korean War Act differed from the original G.I. Bill legislation. First, the Veterans Administration (VA) and various congressional committees, while praising the college portion of the Act, found administrative abuses over tuition, fees, and book payments were prevalent (p.106). As the existing colleges were unable to meet the demand of increased enrollments, those eligible for G.I. Bill benefits were vulnerable to the increasing number of “diploma mills” and opportunistic agencies offering less than credible education in exchange for receipt of tuition, fee, and book benefits (Thelin, 2004). A second belief in the academic community that drove the decision to decrease education benefits in the Korean G.I. Bill was that the original G.I. Bill had been far too generous (Olson, 1974). Members of the academy sought to alter veterans’ benefits in the new bill to better reflect the current economic and social climate of the country at the time.

The Association of Land-Grant Colleges and Universities suggested that the situation of the country was different in the 1950s compared to 1945, and it was time to adopt a new approach (Olson, 1974). The association declared that military service was a universal duty not necessarily to be rewarded with entitlements (Olson, 1974). Unlike the original G.I. Bill, written to reward veterans for their years of “service and sacrifice” (Serow, 2004), the association recommended adopting a program that was “in the national interest, not in the selfish interest of either institutions or individuals,” and payments should not cover the full cost of tuition (Olson, 1974, p. 106). This was a profound difference from the spirit of the original G.I. Bill and reflected societal conditions of the time (Cohen, Warner, & Segal, 1995; Olson, 1974; Teachman, 2005) and a sociopolitical shift in the country’s view of returning veterans. In its final report

(U.S. Cong., 2d sess., 1952), the Teague committee sealed the fate of the educational benefits package in the Korean War G.I. Bill by suggesting the level of assistance provided in the original bill encouraged many veterans to go to school more for the subsistence payments rather than for a primary interest in education (Olson, 1974). This opinion was accepted by The House Committee on Veterans' Affairs and included in its recommendations for the 1952 legislation. By 1958, there were approximately 400,000 veterans in higher education, representing just 15 percent of all students, at a time when growth of college enrollments began to accelerate (Kim & Rury, 2007). Kim and Rury (2007, p. 306) said veterans had "ceased to be a factor in enrollments," laying the groundwork for further reduction in educational benefits in what would later become the Veterans' Readjustment Benefits Act of 1966.

The Veterans' Readjustment Benefits Act of 1966

On March 3, 1966, Congress passed the Veterans' Readjustment Act, also known as the Vietnam G.I. Bill (Olson, 1974; Steele et al., 2010). Funds from the G.I. Bill had been unavailable from 1955 to 1965, so for the first time, benefits of the G.I. Bill were awarded retroactively to veterans who had served during peacetime (MacLean, 2005). As written, the proposed legislation was for the Vietnam era veteran whose service occurred after January 31, 1955, and reflected the conditions of the society at the time and recommended even fewer benefits for veterans of the Vietnam conflict (Cohen, Warner, & Segal, 1995; Olson, 1974; Teachman, 2005; Teachman & Call, 1996). The new legislation extended benefits to a person with 180 days of service or more versus 90 days in the Korean bill, the legislation awarded only a day of training for each day served and reduced monthly allowances (Olson, 1974). Despite the favorable impact of the

World War II and Korean Bills, Congress once again limited the written provisions of the Vietnam Bill. This has been attributed to several factors: the economy was stronger in 1966 than it had been in 1944 or 1952, the magnitude of the Vietnam War had not yet reached that of the Korean conflict, there was growing opposition to the war nationwide, and finally, the prime concern of those behind the bill had changed (Olson, 1974). Rather than to protect the economy as in 1944, the motivating force behind the 1952 and 1966 G.I. Bills was to reward veterans with an individual benefit (Olson, 1974).

Unlike World War II and Korean War veterans, Vietnam era veterans were at a disadvantage in obtaining higher education compared to their non-veteran counterparts (Teachman, 2005; Teachman & Call, 1996). Educational opportunities for civilians were increasing rapidly during this period of our history, and the value of citizen educational programs expanded to a point of equal or better than educational benefits associated with military service (Cohen et al., 1995; Teachman & Call, 1996). Consequently, while veterans of the Vietnam era obtained more education than veterans of World War II or Korea, they could not keep pace with the educational attainment of non-veterans, leading to an ultimate deficit in years of schooling for Vietnam veterans (Teachman, 2005; Teachman & Call, 1996). In fact, Rothbart, Sloane, and Joyce (1981) and Card (1983) found that Vietnam era veterans had a lower occupational status than non-veterans, further suggesting that the negative influence of military service on education and occupation status attainment may vary based on historical and societal context (Teachman & Call, 1996).

Following the end of the Vietnam War, the U.S. military changed its policy related to the acquisition of personnel, ending the draft in 1973 and transitioning to an all-

volunteer force. As a result, the military found itself in competition with civilian employers and subsequently increased the income of enlistees similar to that of high school graduates at the time (Binkin & Bach, 1977; Cohen et al., 1995; Cooper, 1978). Cohen et al. (1995) speculate that lower pay during the Vietnam era would have also made obtaining an education difficult for enlisted men, further widening the gap between the educational attainment of Vietnam veterans and their counterparts of World War II and Korea. It would be more than ten years after its signing before any further modifications to the G.I. Bill of 1966 would occur.

Veterans Educational Assistance Program of 1977 and The Montgomery G.I. Bill of 1984

Benefits under the Veterans' Readjustment Act of 1966 were discontinued in 1976 (Cohen et al., 1995; Gilroy, Phillips & Blair, 1990). In 1977 the G.I. Bill was replaced by what was called the Veterans' Educational Assistance Program (VEAP), which, yet again, offered fewer benefits to veterans than its predecessor. Unlike the Vietnam G.I. Bill, the maximum tuition and stipend benefit under the VEAP was \$5,400 versus \$16,500, and benefits went only to those who elected to participate when enlisting and made contributions of \$100 per month (Cohen et al., 1995). The U.S. Government matched the contributions two-to-one up to \$2,700, but the military pay levels at the time made it difficult for junior enlisted personnel to participate (Segal & Cohen, 1990). This imbalance in educational benefits and rising tuition costs outpaced the amount of benefits afforded to veterans, limiting access to college and universities for many. It was not until 1981 that the U.S. Army supplemented VEAP benefits with the Army College Fund (Cohen et al., 1995). Nicknamed "Ultra VEAP" this supplement offered extra benefits up

to \$12,000 to selected personnel, but to qualify one had to be a high school graduate and score a 50 or above on the Armed Forces Qualification Test (Cohen et al., 1995).

In 1984, Congressman Gillespie Montgomery from Mississippi reintroduced an expanded G.I. Bill that offered educational benefits to almost all active-duty service members (Stringer, 2007; U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2011). Recipients were required to make \$100 per month contributions from their base pay and were subsequently eligible for up to 36 months of benefits for education and training programs based on individual eligibility criteria, length of military service, and type of training (Steele et al., 2010; Stringer, 2007). Those enlisting were offered a one-time “use it or lose it” opportunity to buy into the Montgomery G.I. Bill, and if they did not have the foresight to sign up or could not afford the \$100 per month contribution, they forfeited any future opportunity to receive educational benefits (Allen, 2007) to attend college or receive further training. Additionally, only those veterans who served full-time in the U.S. military were eligible to receive benefits (Olson, 1974). Members of the National Guard or Reserves only served one weekend a month or two weeks during a summer, and were only eligible for benefits while enlisted (Marklein, 2007).

Gaps in the Montgomery G.I. Bill did not account for the hundreds of thousands of National Guard and Reserve troops that would be deployed overseas during contemporary conflicts. Combat tours of duty lasting more than a year left some military personnel with little or no educational benefits (Marklein, 2007; Steele et al., 2010; Stringer, 2007). The onset of the war in Afghanistan and Iraq has put the National Guard and Reserves, America’s earliest citizen-soldiers, at risk of not completing their college education as planned. Therefore, the passage of the Post-9/11 Veterans Educational

Assistance Act of 2008 could be considered a “just-in-time” overhaul of the G.I. Bill at a time when America and its citizen-soldiers needed it most, signaling another sociopolitical shift in the provisions of the bill, capturing the spirit of the original legislation as written by Congress in 1944.

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

Military forces serving in Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) in Iraq and Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) in Afghanistan increasingly include a large percentage of activated National Guard and Reserve units from around the country (Rumann & Hamrick, 2010). In 2005, Congress authorized the first update to the Montgomery G.I. Bill since 1984. Called the Reserve Educational Assistance Program (REAP) (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2010), this program ensured that Reservists called to active duty after September 11, 2001 receive Montgomery G.I. Bill benefits similar to those of other active duty service members (Steele et al., 2010). Although the Montgomery Bill and REAP were helpful in defraying the cost of tuition and related expenses for student veterans, the benefit level was far from sufficient to cover full-time tuition and living expenses at some public institutions and most private universities (Yeung, Pint, & Williams, 2009). This reality for student veterans ultimately led Congress to pass the largest policy overhaul of the G.I. Bill in history, offering the most generous benefits for veterans since the original G.I. Bill of 1944 (Steele et al., 2010; U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2010).

The Post-9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Act was passed in 2008 (P. L. 110-252, H.R. 2642). This new law expands benefits available to OEF and OIF veterans by paying tuition and fees on the student’s behalf and providing a monthly living

allowance and annual book stipend directly to the student (Steele et al., 2010). Both current and former service members, including National Guard Reservists, who have served on active-duty for at least 90 cumulative days after September 11, 2001 qualify for the new G.I. Bill, and veterans who have completed three years of active duty qualify for 100 percent of the benefit (Steele et al., 2010; U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2011). Much like the original G.I. Bill, recipients of Post-9/11 benefits have their tuition and fees paid directly to the institution, therefore reducing the out-of-pocket burden of educational and tuition benefits which are capped to match the undergraduate tuition costs of the most expensive state institution (Steele et al., 2010). Recipients may also enroll in the “Yellow Ribbon” G.I. Education Enhancement Program, a public-private partnership that aids users in paying tuition at more expensive graduate schools and private colleges and universities (Steele et al., 2010; U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2011).

The enactment of the Post 9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Act of 2008 marked an important renewal of America’s commitment to U.S. service members and, in the spirit of the original bill, rewarding veterans for their “service and sacrifice” to the country (Serow, 2004; Steele et al., 2010). A year after the Post 9/11 Bill was enacted on August 1, 2009, more than 500,000 current and former service members had applied for benefits, and just over 300,000 had used their benefits to enroll in higher education (Steele et al., 2010). Two million returning service members from Iraq and Afghanistan are eligible for Post-9/11 G.I. Bill benefits (McBain et al., 2012). The influence of the Post 9/11 G.I. Bill, with its increased benefits afforded to active duty service members,

will likely have a comparable lasting impact on higher education as did the original G.I. Bill of 1944 (Simon, Negrusa, & Warner, 2009; Yeung et al., 2009).

Colleges and universities across the country must both revisit the historical conversation and engage in the ongoing discussion regarding the complexity of challenges facing this burgeoning population of combat veterans to higher education. In order to fully understand and meet their needs, we must first understand who these veterans are as individuals when they arrive on our campuses.

Combat Veterans in Higher Education: A Conversation Six Decades in the Making

The current conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan have awakened an important conversation for student combat veterans. This renewed conversation, stretching across six decades of history, once again implores colleges and universities to take pause and consider the distinct population student combat veterans represent in higher education, their unique attributes and needs that have endured both the test of time and societal context.

Student Combat Veterans: Who Were They Then?

For more than half a decade following World War II, veterans represented the majority of students on college campuses throughout the country. The original Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944 presented success in the unexpected and overwhelming enrollments of veterans in higher education. The Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944 also presented surprise to what educators expected veterans would be like versus what they turned out to be (Olson, 1973, 1974). The changes that occurred on campus were welcomed by most faculty, but some were skeptical of the veterans and their opinion of education in the early years (Bennett, 1996; Olson, 1973,

1974). James B. Conant, President of Harvard University (1933-53), found the G.I Bill “distressing” because he believed it failed to distinguish between those who could be successful in college and those who might be least capable of success among the war generation (Olson, 1973, p. 33). Shaw (1947) predicted that the “social and personal backgrounds of the student veterans may be expected to vary from primeval to gold-coast” (p.18). However, despite their early fears of the impact of veterans to the academic community, the majority of faculty were quickly impressed by the commitment and capacity of the veteran population (Bennett, 1996). Veterans were older, more mature, highly motivated, and tended to be better students than the general population (Bennett, 1996; Garnezy & Crose, 1948; Hadley, 1945; Kinzer, 1946; Kraines, 1945; McDonagh, 1947; Olson, 1974).

Olson (1973) said, “When the G.I. Bill was made into law, no one in their wildest imagination anticipated veterans would attend college in such numbers” (p. 602). Veterans of the time tended to come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and represented a population of students who had not previously been afforded the opportunity to attend college (Bennett, 1996; Olson, 1974). Shaw (1947) said, “All the veteran sons and all the veteran daughters of all the people will be economically able to go to college” (p. 18). Student veterans were serious about their studies, demanded more realistic curriculum (McDonagh, 1947), and brought important life experiences to the classroom (Bennett, 1996). Over time, faculty adjusted their curriculum to meet the needs of veterans by incorporating more practical elements to their courses while maintaining a foundation of theory to support their pedagogy (Bennett, 1996).

Early fears that veterans would be liabilities as college students were quickly dismissed. Olson (1973) said, “The veteran generation established perhaps the most distinguished record in the history of higher education” (p. 604). Love and Hutchison (1946) found the grade point average (GPA) of veterans to be slightly higher than the general population, and with few exceptions, veterans who had been in college before World War II and had returned to the classroom were doing much better scholastically since returning (p. 226). Findings from additional studies supported the idea that veterans did better college work after their service than they had before (Hansen & Patterson, 1949; Thomas & Pressey, 1948). Garnezy and Crose (1948) found the veteran group of students averaged .10 of a grade point higher than non-veteran students when the two groups were adjusted for sex, marital status, race, academic classification, and entrance exam scores (pp. 549-550).

One of the most ambitious and sophisticated studies of college veterans was the Fredericksen-Schrader (1951) study financed by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching (Federicksen & Schrader, 1951; Olson, 1973, 1974). The study was based on an in-depth questionnaire administered to 10,000 students in 16 colleges during the spring semester 1946-1947 (Olson, 1973, p. 605). The study found that veterans received superior grades versus non-veteran students, were older and more motivated, and committed a similar amount of time and attitude towards their college experiences (Fredericksen & Schrader, 1951; Olson, 1973). Additionally, the study found that 10 percent of those surveyed would not have gone to college without the assistance of the G.I. Bill and another 10 percent who probably would not have gone to college without some kind of financial assistance (Olson, 1973). Findings from studies

that followed Frederickson and Schrader's work were generally consistent with Frederickson and Schrader (1951), and found that veterans achieved higher grades than non-veterans (Clark, 1947; Garnezy & Crose, 1948; Gowan, 1949; Love & Hutchinson, 1946; Paraskevopoulos & Robinson, 1969). A later study conducted by Joanning (1975), comparing the academic performance of Vietnam veteran and non-veteran college students, found that as a group veterans achieved slightly higher grades than non-veterans and the GPA of those who had attended some college before their service were markedly higher (p. 10). The findings of this study are consistent with earlier studies, supporting the assertion that academic achievement of student veterans is equal to or greater than non-veterans.

The roots of the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944 were measures aimed at jump-starting a post-war failing economy, and the persons responsible for it believed that the economy and not the veterans needed readjusting (Olson, 1973). However, as student veterans flooded the campuses, it became clear to colleges that they were a distinct population of students, deserving of appropriate accommodations in college programs and policy. Accordingly, to accommodate veterans many colleges were encouraged to offer refresher courses, award appropriate credits for military training and experience (McDonagh, 1947; Titus, 1944), and modify academic calendars and admission policies (Olson, 1973). One of the characteristics about veterans that was most anticipated and discussed was their maturity (Hadley, 1945; Kraines, 1945; McDonagh, 1947; Ritchie, 1945; Titus, 1944; Toven, 1945; Washton, 1945). Shaw (1947) said, "Many (veterans) have been through the valley of the shadow, they are older boys and men, and will present a new personnel phenomenon in higher education" (p.18). Student veterans

represented a range of experiences and challenged the traditional practices of college training, and colleges at the time were bracing to meet the needs of veterans with an appreciation for their future roles in society (McDonagh, 1947). Early recommendations for college counselors were that veterans should be treated as adults, regardless of age. Ritchie (1945) said, “He (veteran) has had adult experiences and in his own mind is adult” (p. 367). Titus (1944) recommended the colleges establish a board or committee to meet the needs of veterans as they presented themselves, and to identify mature faculty to work with and counsel them appropriately. Toven (1945) suggested that one of the most effective methods of helping veterans adjust to civilian life would be to provide them with an educational program specifically tailored to their unique needs.

In addition to changes in academic policy, curriculum, and admission practices, colleges were told to prepare for the very real and unique differences between veterans and non-veteran students given the veterans’ combat experiences (Hadley, 1945; Kraines, 1945; Ritchie, 1945; Toven, 1945). Kraines (1945) said, “The veteran who goes to college will present many problems quite different from those of the usual college student” (p. 290). It was expected that returning veterans would be presenting both physical and psychological symptoms of their combat experience that would be different than non-veteran students (Hadley, 1945; Kinzer, 1946; Kraines, 1945; Olson, 1973). Physical injuries as a result of wartime experience such as impaired hearing, eyesight, or mobility among a range of other possibilities for personal physical barriers existed for student veterans returning from World War II, Korea, and Vietnam.

Perhaps more challenging than physical disabilities, were the hidden psychological disabilities veterans were expected to present upon arrival to college

(Hadley, 1945; Kinzer, 1946; Kraines, 1945; Toven, 1945). Student veterans, as a result of combat, were predicted to have developed chronic nervousness, restlessness, or neurotic symptoms that are real to the person, but with no physical basis (Kraines, 1945). Difficulty in concentration, irritability, an inability to sit for long periods, and avoidance of crowds, as a result of what was then, called “battle nerves,” were common symptoms predicted to affect returning combat veterans in higher education (Kinzer, 1946; Kraines, 1945). Kraines (1945) said,

The veteran who becomes a student has a need for re-orientation of his relation to society, for establishing techniques of thinking, and for acquiring emotional stability. Since a man is a total organism, his efficiency in college work and his adjustment to school life will be seriously affected by these problems if they remained unsolved (pp. 291-293).

Despite their seemingly successful ability to maintain a GPA competitive with other non-veteran students, concerns about the impacts of hidden disabilities for student veterans continued throughout the post-war era. The question of student veterans’ emotional stability or instability bore on the question of a need for psychiatric or psychological services at colleges and universities (Frederickson & Schrader, 1951).

After the surge of World War II veterans to higher education subsided, veterans began disappearing from college campuses along with most of the special arrangements that had been afforded to them. Colleges in the early 1950s began to resemble closely their pre-war selves (Olson, 1973).

Korean War veterans became a minority on campus, never having an influence on higher education matching that of their World War II peers (Olson, 1973). Herrmann et al. (2009) said after the first G.I. Bill the educational support from the government and the people for veterans continued a downhill slide throughout the Korean, Vietnam, and

early Gulf War conflicts, in part due to the controversial nature of the Korean and Vietnam wars themselves. Korea and Vietnam were both undeclared and deemed unwinnable wars, and the rightness of purpose that motivated the efforts of World War II was replaced with ambiguity. Therefore, returning veterans of these conflicts did not feel understood or appreciated (U.S. House, 1973). Although a number of studies have been conducted related to Vietnam era veterans, according to U.S. House (1973), “There simply aren’t enough statistics or longitudinal studies on the psychological characteristics of Vietnam era veterans, but evidence suggests they are significantly different than World War II veterans (U.S. House, 1973, p. 77).

Operation Desert Storm, which began in January, 1991 and swiftly ended in February, 1991, marked the beginning of the Gulf War Era but prompted few changes to veterans’ overall education benefits as a component of the Montgomery G. I. Bill (U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs, 2011). This position related to educational policy is quite consistent with the numerous subsequent iterations of the G.I. Bill previously discussed. In fact, the lack of attention to the needs of veterans from subsequent U.S. conflicts following World War II, leading up to OEF and OIF, could be thought of as in direct contradiction to the goals of the original Servicemen’s Readjustment Act of 1944, to develop human capital as a productive national investment (Herrmann et al., 2009). Unlike the original Bill, the needs of veterans have not been central to the Montgomery Bill legislation. It would not be until the enactment of the Post-9/11 Veterans Education Assistance Act of 2008 that once again the government and the people would focus proper attention to the service and sacrifice of veterans returning from the United States contemporary conflicts of Iraq and Afghanistan.

Student Combat Veterans: Who Are They Now?

Current U.S. military operations require more intensive and prolonged use of military power than at any time since Vietnam (Hosek, Kavanagh, & Miller, 2006). Since October 2001, over two million U.S. troops have been deployed for Operations Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom (OEF/OIF) in Afghanistan and Iraq, with military discharges on average amounting to nearly 375,000 per month (Radford, 2009; Steele et al., 2010). Of this number, more than 800,000 soldiers have deployed multiple times (Radford, 2009). The 1991 Persian Gulf War introduced large-scale activations and deployments of the nation's citizen soldiers, National Guard personnel, in support of the combat efforts that would continue with OEF and OIF (Rumann & Hamrick, 2010). Many of these military personnel did not imagine they would ever go to war when they enlisted (Sloan & Friedman, 2008). These two ongoing wars have created unprecedented strains on the all-volunteer force, including frequency of deployment and exposure to hostile combat conditions (Hosek et al., 2006). Due to limited support services available to them, National Guard troops can sometimes have a more difficult transition than those serving in the Army (Kiely & Swift, 2009).

Twenty-five percent of veterans separating from the military are expected to enroll in college within two years (Hughes, 2011). Not since the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944 have colleges and universities across the country seen such dramatic increases in student combat veteran enrollments. The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE, 2010) devoted a portion of its investigation and findings to student veterans. The NSSE (2010) found that student combat veterans were predominantly male, older, enrolled part-time, more likely to transfer and take distance

education courses, and were considered first-generation college students. Returning veterans demonstrate many of the characteristics of non-traditional students, including having work and family responsibilities, a delayed entry to higher education, and membership in a low to middle quartile of socioeconomic status (ACE, 2008; Brown & Gross, 2011). Although veterans were found to be attending all types of institutions, they were more likely than non-veterans to attend public institutions and less likely to attend baccalaureate arts and sciences colleges or the most research intensive doctorate granting universities (NSSE, 2010, p.17). According to the Department of Veterans Affairs, for-profit and community colleges continue to dominate the list of institutions veterans attend using their education benefits (Sewall, 2010), and the number of student veterans attending private elite colleges are sparse (Sander, 2013).

Similar to their counterparts from World War II, combat veterans from OEF and OIF enrolling in higher education tend to be more mature and motivated in their studies than the general student population (Ackerman et al., 2008; Brown, 2009; Brown & Gross, 2011; Herrmann, Raybeck, & Roland, 2008; Mangan, 2009; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010). This heightened sense of maturity has led some combat veterans to find frustration with their younger peers and often influence behavioral outbursts of student veterans in the classroom or the university as a whole (Byman, 2007; O'Herrin, 2011). However, more concerning was the perceived lack of campus support found by first-year combat veterans in comparison to non-veterans (NSSE, 2010). Student combat veterans in particular, were found to have more family and work obligations, but spent the same amount of time studying as non-veterans. However, these same veterans were less

academically engaged in key areas such as deep approaches to learning and perceived lower levels of support from their campuses (NSSE, 2010, p. 18).

Common injuries to deployed OEF and OIF service members include physical injuries such as amputations and Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) and psychological “hidden” injuries such as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) or depression. Unlike prior wars in U.S. history, combat veterans from current conflicts are surviving their injuries and returning to civilian life in unprecedented numbers (Tanielian & Jaycox, 2008). During the Vietnam War 12 to 14 percent of all combat casualties had a brain injury, but because their mortality rate was 75 percent or greater, returning soldiers with brain injuries made up only a small fraction of veterans (Okie, 2005). In the current OEF and OIF conflicts, the survival rates of serious combat injuries are dramatically different. According to the Department of Defense, 85% of injured soldiers survive their injuries due to improvements in body armor and modern medical evacuation systems. This has led to an increased number of troops returning from combat with PTSD, TBI, or both. These “invisible wounds” of modern warfare are likely to take their toll on the strongest willed student veterans and present potential obstacles to their success in college (Tanielian & Jaycox, 2008).

PTSD is characterized by the re-experiencing of a traumatic event, usually in the way of nightmares or intrusive thoughts, and is associated with a host of chemical changes in the body’s hormonal and autonomic nervous systems (National Council on Disability, 2009). Symptoms of PTSD include: difficulty with concentration, attention and memory, avoidance or numbing and hyper-arousal or hyper-vigilance (Paulson & Krippner, 2007; Tanielian & Jaycox, 2008). TBI can result from the head suddenly and

violently hitting an object, or when an object pierces the skull and enters the brain tissue. Symptoms of TBI include delayed thinking, memory problems, attention deficits, mood swings, frustrations, headaches or fatigue (National Council on Disability, 2009).

Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) so frequently co-occur that they have been called the “signature” injuries of the Iraq and Afghan conflicts (Jones, Young, & Leppma, 2010; Tanielian & Jaycox, 2008).

According to the recent National Survey of Student Engagement (2010), about one in five combat veterans in college reported having at least one disability, twice that of non-veterans. Approximately one-third of those combat veterans previously deployed are likely to be diagnosed with TBI, PTSD, or major depression, and about five percent will report symptoms of all three conditions (Tanielian & Jaycox, 2008). Given this rate of diagnoses, it is likely that a large percentage of combat veterans transitioning to college in the future may present physical and emotional conditions such as TBI or PTSD and requiring unique support from other traditional-aged students (Shackelford, 2009).

Students diagnosed with one or both of these conditions will undoubtedly struggle both in and out of the classroom and may be hesitant to self-identify these or other disabilities acquired during their military service (Shackelford, 2009). Consequently, these veterans who have served in combat situations present unique and unanticipated challenges for faculty, administrators, and staff, as well as the veterans themselves (Shackelford, 2009).

Ackerman et al. (2008) said that colleges and universities must be prepared to provide services to students who have physical disabilities or psychological disabilities such as PTSD. Identifying students with hidden disabilities such as TBI or PTSD may be difficult if students do not disclose the diagnosis upon arrive to the campus. Greene-

Shortridge, Britt and Castro (2007) found that although many soldiers experience psychological problems related to combat, there is a lag in those who actually seek help for the condition. PTSD, in particular, still carries a stigma in the military that causes many combat soldiers to withhold information that may result in such a diagnosis (Hodge, 2010; Warner, C., Appenzeller, Mullen, Warner, T., & Grieger, 2008).

The combat veterans of OEF and OIF present unique educational and cultural needs in order to make a smooth transition from the military to a civilian college environment (McBain, 2008). Many of these veterans have expressed frustration in the bureaucratic structure of higher education and the difficulty they have experienced navigating this structure upon their discharge and return to civilian life (O'Herrin, 2011; Cook & Kim, 2009; Radford, 2009). It would appear that, as Olson (1973) stated, our system of higher education has reverted to a structure resembling its pre-World War II self, creating similar barriers to combat veterans that existed at the time of the first Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944. Similar to the scholarly predictions post-World War II, contemporary recommendations for easing the transition of OEF and OIF student veterans from soldier to student have included: modified admissions practices, veteran student orientation, proper academic credit for military training and experience, transition services, opportunities to connect with veteran peers, dedicated advising and counseling, assistance with benefits navigation, professional development for faculty, and accommodations for physical and psychological disabilities (Ackerman et al., 2008; Ackerman & DiRamio, 2009; Cook & Kim, 2009; Herrmann et al., 2009; Persky & Oliver, 2010; Radford, 2009; Steele et al., 2010).

Combat and Personal Identity

“In war, there are no unwounded soldiers.” – Jose Narosky

Veterans as Adult Learners

As previously stated, veterans returning from World War II and entering college were older, more mature, highly motivated, and tended to be better students than the general population, having a lessened degree of patience for younger learners (Bennett, 1996, Garmezy & Crose, 1948; Hadley, 1945; Kinzer, 1946; Kraines, 1945; McDonagh, 1947; Olson, 1974). Could this heightened level of maturity render adult learner attributes, causing veterans to assume an adult learner role in the classroom despite their age? Again, similar to their counterparts from World War II, combat veterans from OEF and OIF enrolling in higher education also tend to be more mature and motivated in their studies (Ackerman et al., 2008; Brown, 2009; Brown & Gross, 2011; Herrmann, Raybeck, & Roland, 2008; Mangan, 2009; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010).

Kasworm (2005) shed light on the limited research that has examined the different attributes of adult undergraduate student identity. The more significant studies have included the academic performance and achievements of World War II veterans, evening students, and returning adult women in higher education. Dominant frameworks for past research on student involvement and role identity have not taken into account the complexity of maturation and identities shaped by life experiences of adult learners (Kasworm, 2003; Kasworm, Polson, & Fishback, 2002).

Given that student veterans of the contemporary conflicts of OEF and OIF are older, more mature, and present adult learner attributes upon arrival to college, it behooves those in the academic community to better understand the nature of identity as it relates to student veterans and how their own perceptions or negotiation of their

identity may influence their overall academic experience and performance once they have transitioned to college. In her study, Kasworm (2005) explored cultural and social mediation of identity at intergenerational sites of learning and found that “student identity of an adult in an intergenerational classroom context represents co-constructed understandings and beliefs based in day-to-day engagement in the classroom, the adult students’ goals and expectations for collegiate studies and their life roles and experiences” (p. 8). This suggests that for combat veterans there is the potential for co-constructed meaning and perception of their own personal identity based on their engagement with other students in a classroom context and their exposure to the military and combat environment.

Kasworm (2005) also found that adult learners co-constructed their sense of who they were in relation to their age, status and role, and what these actions should be in the classroom context. These students actively believed their commitment to college influenced their learning and engagement, and they believed, on the whole, their life experiences and roles made them different from younger, more traditional college-aged students. Adult learners in this study also reported experiencing changing student identities influenced by a complex array of actors and structures in the classroom as well as their own self-construction of college student behaviors based on their own dynamic adult role life experiences (Kasworm, 2005). This would also suggest that for combat veterans, their own life experiences in the military and combat could have a profound influence on what may be active identity negotiation by these students while on campus or in the classroom.

Student veterans present their own array of unique and diverse backgrounds and life experiences to the college campus compelling practitioners to better understand these students as potentially complex individuals, with multi-dimensional co-constructed identities. The work of this study provides important next steps in broadening the theoretical understanding of student veterans by adding to the existing literature, focusing specifically on core identity and how the perception of their identity may impact the students' experiences in college.

Conceptual and Theoretical Identity Frameworks

Identity can be thought of as a set of meanings that define who one is based on individual experiences, what role one holds in society, which group one belongs to or which characteristics make one unique (Burke & Stets, 2009). "People possess multiple identities because they occupy multiple roles, are members of multiple groups and claim multiple personal characteristics, yet the meanings of these identities are shared by members of society" (p. 3). Student combat veterans could be thought of as holding multiple roles in our society: The role of soldier, civilian, student, brother, sister, spouse, and/or parent, etc. William James (1890) first theorized people have as many "selves" as we have interactions or experiences with others. We take on many identities over the course of a lifetime and at any point in time these identities could be activated (Burke & Stets, 2009). If, as suggested by Rumann and Hamrick (2010), veterans are continuously renegotiating their own personal identity as they transition from a military environment to college, a combat veteran could be seen as a student in one context, but also may simultaneously be negotiating multiple identity roles of soldier, citizen, or peer as part of their daily experiences in college.

Conceptual Framework

According to Jones and McEwen (2000), although past research has often considered differences according to gender, age, or other social conditions, models for intersecting social identities have not been frequently researched or tested. College students may, in fact, have other identity orientations such as social class, religious or professional identities (McEwen, 1996). This study explores the identity orientations that may exist for combat veterans as they transition from the military to civilian life, and how these identity orientations may impact their experience in college.

Earlier work by Deaux (1993) conceptualized identity as being defined both internally by self and externally by others given socio-cultural context. Deaux (1993) provided a foundation for understanding multiple identities. The body of research in this study helped to shape understanding of multiple identities and underscore the importance of salience, socio-cultural context, and overlapping identities (Jones & McEwen, 2000). Despite advancing the ongoing research of multiple identities, these studies did not provide models for multiple identities or define a process by which multiple identities are developed or negotiated (Jones & McEwen, 2000, p. 406).

Jones and McEwen (2000) developed a conceptual framework offering an overview of relationships among college students' socially constructed identities and a conceptual lens that recognizes each dimension of identity cannot be considered in isolation from the others. Building upon the works of Reynolds and Pope (1991), Deaux (1993), and Jones (1997), this model of multiple dimensions of identity describes the construction of identity and the influences of social context on the negotiation of identity (Abes, Jones, & McEwen, 2007). At the center of the model is the core sense of self,

representing one's own core personal identity, surrounded by contextual identities formed by influences such as family background, socio-cultural context, and life experiences.

Jones and McEwen (2000) took the first step of incorporating meaning making into the model, providing a richer portrayal of what relationships students perceive among their personal and social identities, but also how they come to perceive them as they do. However, their study did not specifically address how the students' perceptions of their own identity might impact their overall experience in college. Additionally, in discussions of external influences, Jones and McEwen (2000) did not discuss student veterans and how the identity of a combat veteran or their past experiences in the military may influence identity negotiation and their experience in the college environment.

Gee's Four Ways to View Identity

The conceptual identity framework developed by Gee (2000), Four Ways to View Identity, was chosen to help guide the study given its applicability to this study and the fact it was originally developed to address social and contextual changes in our contemporary world that may cause people to form "multiple, changing and fluid identities" (Gee, 2000, p. 121). The paucity of literature related to student veterans, specifically the study of identity, and the unique aspects of contemporary war require a new lens by which to view student veterans in higher education today.

Gee (2000) said, "When any human being acts and interacts in a given context, others recognize that person as acting and interacting as a 'certain kind of person' or even as different kinds at once" (p. 99). This conceptual model on identity is built upon four perspectives on what it means to be a "certain kind of person": Nature-identity, Institution-identity, Discourse-identity, and Affinity-identity. For the purposes of this

study, the “certain kind of person” would be student veterans who have enrolled in higher education after one or more combat deployments to modern day conflicts in the Persian Gulf. The perspectives presented in the model are not separate from each other, but interrelate in complex and important ways (Gee, 2000, p. 101).

The source, or “power” of the Nature perspective (N-identities) is a force over which there is no control (for example, gender), such as nature, unfolding through a natural process of development rather than from societal factors. This could be thought of as one’s “core” identity.

For Institution perspective (I-identities) the source of power is not nature, but an institution, with the power working as “authorization” or levels of laws, rules or traditions. For veterans, I-identity could be that of “student-veteran,” representing both the alignment and conflicts associated with the laws, rules, and traditions of the military vs. those in academia. This research explores how the negotiation of these two identities impacts a veteran’s experience in college.

The Discourse perspective (D-identities) power rests with the discourse or dialogue of other people as it relates to the “subject.” Therefore, the source of this power is neither nature nor institution, but those rational individuals that treat, talk about, and interact with the “subject,” not because they are bound by institutional rules, laws, or norms, but through a process of “recognition” – individuals recognize the subject in a certain way, which in turn helps him/her to construct a discourse- or dialogue-based identity. For example, might a student veteran of the current OEF or OIF conflicts view themselves differently from veterans of the Vietnam conflict given the societal discourse about the war and the overall national opinion of the military versus the wars themselves?

How might this discourse-identity impact the student-veteran experience in college given the nature of academia to promote open and controversial dialogue regarding sensitive topics such as war, the roots of war in our society, and the military as an agent of those wars?

Finally, for Affinity perspective (A-identities), the power that determines it is a set of distinct practices. In this case, the source of this power is not nature, an institution, or even other people's discourse, but rather an "affinity group." An affinity group may be made up of people disbursed across a large space, such as across the country, however they share allegiance to, access to, and participation in specific practices that provide each of the group's members with requisite experiences. In the case of combat veterans, the affinity group could be that of being a veteran, being a member of a particular branch of the military, or perhaps being a combat veteran versus those veterans who have not seen active combat. Each of these groups can be made up of subjects disbursed across the country, each sharing their own unique attributes with allegiance to and participation in distinct practices associated with the military environment.

Taylor (1994) said that one cannot have an identity without some sort of interpretive system that provides a foundation for recognition of that identity. Gee's model (2000) provides a conceptual framework to help better understand how student combat veterans may perceive their own identity and how this view impacts their overall experience in college. This understanding, coupled with the results of this study help to inform future institutional practice in support of all student veterans, including those of the contemporary conflicts of OEF and OIF.

Communication Theory of Identity – A Guiding Frame

Hecht (1993) outlined the initial conceptualization of the Communication Theory of Identity (CTI), and has subsequently used the theory to study identity negotiation among different cultural groups (p. 133). Hecht's theory (1993) was chosen as a guiding framework for this study given its congruence with Gee's (2000) conceptual framework and its illustration of how the frames of identity in the framework may both complement and compete with each other, demonstrating the complex, fluid nature of identity. It is hypothesized by the researcher that the identity of student combat veterans is equally fluid and complex, warranting a more in-depth analysis of identity for these students using a tested framework as a guide to the work.

According to the CTI, identity is inherently a communicative process in which messages and values are exchanged (Orbe, 2004), and is located within four distinct "frames": (1) within individuals, (2) within relationships, (3) within groups, and (4) communicated between relational partners and group members. These frames should be thought of as permeating all discussions of identity, are not static or linear in nature (Hecht et al., 2003), and frames should be studied simultaneously to demonstrate ways in which the different frames of identity may be complementing or competing with each other at any given time.

The CTI model works well with Gee's conceptual framework (2000). The first frame of identity is the personal frame, whereby identity is the result of a person's self-cognitions, self-concept, and sense of well-being (Golden, Niles, & Hecht, 2002), similar to the N-identity introduced by Gee (2000).

The second frame involves the enactment of identity to others, focusing on the messages a person sends to express his/her own identity. Individuals may use direct or indirect messages to reveal their identity (Hecht & Faulkner, 2000).

Again, similar to Gee's (2000) D-identity, the third frame of the CTI is a relationship frame, focusing on how identity emerges through our own interactions with others, such as through discourse in the Gee (2000) conceptual model.

The fourth and final frame in the model is a "communal" frame, occurring in the context of a larger community or group, where identity is held in the collective or public memory of a group that, in turn, bonds the group together (Hecht et al., 2003). Possessing a group identity that represents a shared identity of all of its members mirrors Gee's (2000) A-identity or affinity identity, where the group has requisite experiences or shared norms.

The CTI as a guiding framework has been determined as an effective utility to the study of different cultural identifications such as first-generation college students, and how multiple identities are negotiated across various contexts (Orbe, 2004). This framework, when viewed in conjunction with the conceptual lens of Gee's (2000) model, is well suited to the study of combat veterans, how they may perceive their own identities, and how this perception impacts their overall experience in college. If in fact combat veterans experience identity negotiation or renegotiation as they transition from the military to college, using the CTI as a guiding frame provides a unique opportunity to explore the complexities of multiple identity negotiation for combat veterans both inside and outside the college classroom.

Millennial Combat Veterans: An Ongoing Discovery of Their Experience

The choice to employ a grounded theory research design to this study was intended to address the paucity of the contemporary scholarly literature related to student veterans in higher education and make strides in adding to a greater theoretical understanding of student veterans who have experienced combat. Grounded theory and phenomenological techniques were utilized in this study through a method of discovery as outlined in the seminal work of Strauss and Corbin (1990). Since emerging in 2007, the body of contemporary research related to student veterans, in particular combat veterans, is still in its infancy. A comprehensive understanding of the experiences of this population is best built upon the rigor of scholarly discovery using grounded theory methods. Relying on groundbreaking student development theorists such as Erikson (1959), Chickering (1969), and Schlossberg (1984), this study aimed to provide its own theoretical contribution to the literature, and is designed with an assumption that theory is an unfinished scaffold or fluid model of ideas that is best built upon prior research and contemplation of social phenomena that tests prior empirical and theoretical findings.

Erikson (1959) has been called the progenitor of psychosocial models, seeing stages of personal development beyond childhood and into adulthood, and placing emphasis on social context and the acquisition of strengths built throughout one's lifecycle rather than a fixed period of time (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). He outlined eight stages of psychosocial development, each with its own life challenge that ultimately leads to progression, regression, standstill, or recurring encounters with the challenge (Erikson, 1959). Chickering's early developmental model was built upon the work of Erikson (1959), proposing that establishing central identity was dependent upon movement along seven vectors of development: (1) developing competence, (2)

managing emotions, (3) developing autonomy, (4) establishing identity, (5) freeing interpersonal relationships, (6) developing purpose, and (7) developing integrity (Chickering, 1969). Despite the groundbreaking nature of Chickering's earlier model, a review of subsequent research and findings that had tested the model led to a renaming and reordering of some of the original vectors (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). This subsequent research was critical to the refinement of Chickering's original developmental model (1969) and provided the necessary findings to strengthen his overall theory.

Scholarly theory in social research is inherently fluid and relies upon studies such as this one to encourage discovery as it relates to social phenomena, and research questions and methods that are intended to build upon prior work such as the early models of development introduced by Erikson (1959) and Chickering (1969). According to Anyon (2009), "Theory helps us to understand, expand our understanding of, and critically judge what counts as relevant knowledge, appropriate units of analysis, research questions, methods, data, and analysis and explanation. Theory should be thought of as a guide to the research but should not exclusively drive the methods of the researcher or impede his/her own personal thinking and reflection" (p. 8).

Presumably based on their own methods of free thought and personal reflection, Ackerman et al. (2008) were first to introduce Schlossberg's Theory of Adult Transitions (1984) to provide insight into the potential short- and long-term effects of a student veteran's transition from the military to the college classroom. Schlossberg (1984) built her original theory on the prior research of other scholars, including Erikson (1959) and Chickering (1969), out of what she saw as a need for a framework that would "facilitate an understanding of adults in transition and lead them to the help they needed to cope

with the ordinary and extraordinary process of living” (Chickering & Reisser, 1993, p. 108). Using a grounded theory approach, Ackerman et al. (2008) applied emergent themes from their qualitative analysis to the “Moving In, Moving Through, Moving Out” model for adult transitions presented by Schlossberg et al. (1989). Ackerman et al. (2008) described their themes as “fitting neatly” into this model and provided for some early contributions to what will become the larger theoretical understanding of student veterans and their experiences in college. This important study marked the re-emergence of attention to student veterans and contemporary exploration, but by no means signaled the end of the work. It was merely a precursor to works, such as this research study, that continue to build upon the theoretical foundation of literature.

Rumann and Hamrick (2010) chose to study student veterans and their experiences enrolling in college through a lens of adult transitions using the work of Goodman, Schlossberg, and Anderson (2006), but also incorporated the multiple dimensions of identity model (Abes et al., 2007; Jones & McEwen, 2000) into their theoretical and analytical framework. This study intended to build upon the earlier work of Ackerman et al. (2008), by incorporating the 4 S System of Factors (situation, self, support, & strategies) as developed by Goodman et al. (2006) into the theoretical framework and analysis. Findings from this study suggested student veterans may indeed be actively processing their military experiences while simultaneously negotiating their own personal identity as part of their experience while in college (Rumann & Hamrick, 2010). Since this study did not focus primarily on identity or identity development further research in this topic area adds to the greater theoretical understanding of this

population by exploring how student veterans experience college and subsequently construct a more complex sense of self as part of their overall transition.

A recently published grounded theory study by Livingston et al. (2011) aimed to investigate and describe student veterans' navigation of college re-enrollment and build upon the base of growing knowledge on their academic and social experiences.

Schlossberg's (1984) theory related to the uncertain and vulnerable nature of transitions was used for theoretical validity. The emergent themes and analysis presented in the results of this study provided the first transition model tailored specifically to student veterans: The Student Veteran Academic and Social Transition Model (SVASTM) and recognized student veterans as comprising a growing subculture of college students in need of attention (Livingston et al., 2011). The model was developed to explain an emergent-grounded theory that explained student veterans' re-enrollment management, initial academic challenges, and their social transitions that may be the most problematic. Livingston et al. (2011) present a model with four cornerstone categories that influence re-enrollment: (1) Military Influence, (2) Invisibility, (3) Support, and (4) Campus Culture. In their analysis and discussion, Livingston et al. (2011) suggest how these four cornerstones may play a part in the re-enrollment and social transition of student veterans to college. It is an important step in the ongoing development of a greater theoretical understanding of this population of students, a goal that is at the heart of this study.

DiRamio and Jarvis (2011) said the first wave of research related to student veterans conducted since 2007 is coming to a close and research over the next five years should be grounded in existing theory and previously published empirical studies. The researcher for this study concurs with DiRamio and Jarvis (2011), however, also argues

that this grounded theory study is essential to the well-being of the thousands of future student veterans entering college, tests the boundaries of prior inquiry, and make strides in advancing the research beyond existing theory or previously published empirical studies. Weiss (2009) wrote, “The body of theory in research is like poetry; a world of speculation and hypothesis, a world that seeks to tell the truth about a given situation, but a truth with no clear edges. In reading poetry or conducting research, one does not and should not look to find answers alone, but rather hopes to find a new way of looking at something that may have been there for a very long time” (p. 76). Student veterans have had a relationship with higher education for almost seven decades. This study breaks new ground for student veterans and goes beyond the currently defined edges of inquiry related to this population.

CHAPTER 3

“To be without method is deplorable, but to depend on method entirely is worse. You must first learn to observe the rules faithfully; afterwards modify them according to your intelligence and capacity.” – Lu Ch’ ai, 17th Century Master of Chinese Brush Painting

METHODOLOGY, METHODS, AND DESIGN

Although formal assistance programs for student veterans such as the G.I. Bill have existed since 1944 and a history of a presence of veterans on college campuses exists, there is a lack of research that addresses the distinct academic and support services needs of student veterans who have had combat experience. An extensive scan of the literature suggests a significant gap in the research addressing the personal experiences combat veterans bring with them to a college campus as part of their overall transition. Ackerman et al. (2008) said the scholarly literature on student veterans is limited, and there is a distinct need to update the literature for emerging student veterans, particularly those who have served in Iraq and Afghanistan. The two purposes of this study were to add to the growing foundational base of knowledge on the academic and social transitions of student combat veterans and to contribute to a greater theoretical understanding of this population and how their perception of identity may influence their experience as college students.

Although there is a public perception that the Post 9/11 G.I. Bill is built upon lessons learned and will eliminate the prior challenges met by student veterans and promote a seamless path to higher education (Cook & Kim, 2009), the resources alone will not solve the current problems student veterans encounter upon enrollment. This population of students continues to need assistance with problems rarely encountered by other students at their institutions (Herrmann et al., 2009). This research makes strides in

filling the gap in the research related to the transition of combat veterans to college in helping identify their unique set of needs, setting them apart from other college students.

This chapter explains and justifies the choice of research methodology and methods, presents the research question, and introduces the research design and methods. Presentation of the research design will include the selection of research sites and participants, data collection and analysis, researcher subjectivity, study validity and ethical considerations.

Methodology

This research study utilized a qualitative methodological design and a constructivist paradigm. The constructivist paradigm, rooted in Greek philosophy, is the view that all knowledge and meaningful reality is contingent upon the human experience, being constructed in and out of interaction between human beings and their world, developed and transferred within a social context (Crotty, 1998). Constructivism is appropriate to this study since the goal of the research was to better understand the complex lived experiences of student combat veterans, by design allowing them to define subjective meaning to the experience or phenomenon represented by the research question.

Given that the goal of this study was to better understand the unique perceptions of student veterans who have experienced combat and their construction of meaning based on lived experiences, the choice of a qualitative methodology is appropriate. According to Maxwell (2005), there are five intellectual goals for which qualitative studies are especially suited: 1) Understanding the “meaning” for participants, 2) Understanding the particular context within which the participants act, 3) Identifying

“unanticipated” phenomena and influences, 4) Understanding the process by which events and actions take place, and 5) Developing causal explanations. This qualitative study utilized the goals outlined by Maxwell (2005) to better understand how student combat veterans construct meaning based on their lived experiences, how this meaning influences the perception of their own core identity, and how this perception influenced their overall experiences in college. Qualitative methods are best suited to this study given that the participant responses provided depth and breadth to the data and analysis, deepening its meaning and overall contribution to the literature.

Qualitative research is often used when there is a lack of theory or when current theory does not effectively explain the phenomenon. When conducting qualitative research, the researcher seeks to understand how participants interpret and make sense of their world (Merriam, 2002). When choosing qualitative research, inquirers will make certain philosophical assumptions (Creswell, 2007). Using what Creswell (2007) describes as an “ontological assumption” (p. 60), this study embraces the idea of multiple realities with the intent of interpreting and reporting the perceived multiple realities of participants. Evidence for these realities are “grounded in the data using multiple quotes based on the actual words of participants and presenting their different perspectives” (Creswell, 2007, p. 61).

The decision to use qualitative grounded theory research design and methods for this study originated from a paucity of contemporary literature and foundational knowledge of the research topic. According to Creswell (2007), grounded theory is a good design when a theory does not exist to explain the phenomenon of interest. Grounded theory is also employed when theories may be present but are incomplete

because they do not address potentially valuable variables of interest to the researcher. Further, the strategies used in data collection and analysis using grounded theory methodology result in the generation of a theory that explicates a phenomenon from the perspective and in the context of those who experience it (Birks & Mills, 2011). According to Strauss and Corbin (1990, 1998), the primary purpose of grounded theory methodology is to develop a theory that explains the phenomenon under investigation. The paucity of literature and the need to broaden the theoretical understanding of student veterans and their experience in college underscores the importance of this research and the choice to apply a grounded theory approach to the study.

The origins of grounded theory methodology are found in the seminal works of Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss (1967), who introduced the notion of generating theory from the data itself as opposed to testing existing theory. Using grounded theory, data is systematically gathered and analyzed through the research process, and the researcher does not begin a study with a preconceived theory in mind. Rather, the researcher begins with the area of study and allows the theory to “emerge” from the data being collected. The use of grounded theory methodology presumes that a theory derived from the data is more likely to resemble the participant reality being studied, rather than stringing together concepts derived from experience or speculation of the inquirer (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Using the critical components of inductive grounded theory methodology, including “constant comparative analysis and theoretical sampling” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 21), this study explored the experiences of student combat veterans as they transitioned from the military to higher education and discovered

how their perceptions of their own identity influenced their experiences in college. Constant comparative analysis allows the researcher to continually reframe the research data and protocols, contributing to the scientific rigor of the study. Using theoretical sampling the researcher intentionally explored theoretically relevant responses of the participants that offered rich information and context to the overall study (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

The choice of grounded theory methodology assumes that the theory will be built up from the data, and that the data are grounded in the lived experiences of the participants. This methodological approach enabled the researcher to add to the existing body of knowledge related to the topic while contributing to a greater theoretical understanding of the phenomena associated with the identity of student veterans with combat experience making the transition to college.

Research Question

The primary research question for this study was developed to explore the experiences of student veterans who have been in combat and are transitioning from the military to college. The primary research question for this study was:

- How do combat veterans perceive their own identity and what influence does this have on their experience as college students?

Hecht's (1993) Communication Theory of Identity (CTI) and Gee's (2000) conceptual model: Four Ways to View Identity served as guides for the ongoing development of the interview protocols, and their relevance is further outlined in the research results within Chapter 4.

Hecht (1993) outlined the initial conceptualization of the Communication Theory of Identity (CTI), and this theory was used as a guiding framework for this study. According to the CTI, identity is inherently a communicative process in which messages and values are exchanged (Orbe, 2004), and is located within four distinct “frames”: (1) within individuals, (2) within relationships, (3) within groups, and (4) communicated between relational partners and group members. These frames should be thought of as permeating all discussions of identity and as not static or linear in nature (Hecht et al., 2003). Frames should be studied simultaneously to demonstrate ways in which the different frames of identity may be complementing or competing with each other at any given time.

Gee’s conceptual model on identity is built upon four perspectives on what it means to be a “certain kind of person”: Nature-identity, Institution-identity, Discourse-identity, and Affinity-identity. The conceptual frame assumes that each of these perspectives are not separate from each other, but interrelate in complex and important ways (Gee, 2000, p. 101).

Hecht’s (1993) theoretical frame and Gee’s (2000) conceptual frame work well together and provided the researcher with the necessary theoretical scaffold for the qualitative nature of this study. These frames complement each other in that both frames recognize that an individual’s personal (Hecht, 1993) or nature (Gee, 2000) identity is informed by social context and that a person’s negotiation of identity or construction of identity is significantly influenced by relationships with others. The two theories present contravening elements to the other in that Hecht (1993) introduces frames of identity that focus on how identity emerges from an individual based on relationships, whereas Gee

(2000) describes four ways to view individual identity as shaped by social-contextual interactions with other individuals, group affiliation, or shared experiences. The utilization of both frames allowed the researcher to consider the relevance of each to participant responses while allowing for opportunity to critically reflect upon the distinct differences in each lens of inquiry.

Researcher Subjectivity Statement

Qualitative research is inherently biased (Creswell, 2007; Strauss & Corbin, 1998), and therefore it is necessary for the researcher to acknowledge any bias before undertaking a qualitative study. Maxwell (2005) warned that the researcher might endanger the study design or its components because of his/her close relationship to the study.

The researcher interest in this topic developed through both a professional and personal lens of inquiry. Professionally, the researcher has been connected to this topic, in some way, for seven years. In the role of Dean for Enrollment at Greenfield Community College (GCC), the researcher is responsible for the oversight and day-to-day operations of Admissions, Testing, Academic Advising, Registration, Financial Aid, Student Development and Academic Support Services. Throughout the work with each of these areas, the researcher has had opportunity to meet with student veterans, assist them with academic advising, and witness first-hand some of the barriers they encounter when enrolling at the institution and beginning classes. In the fall of 2012, 175 students at GCC self-identified as veterans, representing approximately 7 percent of the total population of full and part-time students enrolled in credit courses.

The researcher has witnessed the multiple challenges facing veterans as they transition to college, as discussed by Ford et al. (2009), and attempt to integrate into the environment of the institution both inside and outside the classroom. Prior to this study, the researcher was in conversation with a student veteran who had abruptly left the classroom in the middle of a lecture and slammed the door behind him, raising concern with the instructor. The instructor contacted the researcher in his role as Dean of Enrollment, hoping for guidance about how to handle the situation when the student returned to the classroom the following week.

After many attempts, the researcher finally was able to meet with the student who had, as a result of the prior incident, stopped attending his class altogether. He was a United States Marine and served multiple tours of combat duty before being discharged from the military and arriving at GCC. The student spoke openly about his severe PTSD and how it impacted his daily life as well as presented challenges to him as a student at the college. This is one example of interactions with student veterans that compelled the researcher to learn more about this unique student population and contribute to the body of research in an effort to inform future practice in higher education for student combat veterans.

The researcher also has a personal interest in this topic. A close friend to the researcher was at one time a student at Greenfield Community College and a combat veteran. This student enabled the researcher to see first-hand the struggles veterans face through a private lens. This friend had been on five tours of combat duty and was deployed for a sixth tour of combat duty in June 2012. Over the last five years, the researcher's friend has shared intimate details of his depressive symptoms, anxiety, and

sleeplessness triggered upon leaving the service and each time attempting to readjust to civilian life. In conversations with the researcher, this friend described how the residual physical and emotional scarring from combat has presented him with obstacles to his education not faced by the average student. Consequently, he has struggled with his classes, resulting in delayed progress towards his educational goals. At one time during a conversation with the researcher, this friend said something that resonated and provided early inspiration for this research study. He said, “In many ways it is easier to be ‘over there.’ When you are there, you only have to focus on two things: living or dying. Everything here is so much more complicated” (personal communication, July, 2008). The experiences of this friend told to the researcher were very personal and wrought with raw emotion. The relationship between the researcher and this person add a unique dimension to this topic and shape the context by which the researcher conducted the study.

With access to information that most researchers would not be able to obtain under the best of circumstances during a semi-structured interview, the researcher was able to build a research design and analysis informed in part by both professional and personal experiences.

In order to limit potential bias, this study deployed validation processes such as a methodologist’s review of data collection and analysis processes, and peer debriefing (Maxwell, 2005). The researcher worked closely with the dissertation committee chair throughout the study and sought methodological guidance as needed to assure congruence with the goals of the study and research methods. Three individuals were identified for peer debriefing, all doctoral students. One is familiar with grounded theory

methods and another is engaged in a qualitative case study. The third is currently conducting his own research on veterans at a large research university in Massachusetts. Themes were evaluated through peer debriefing to gain deeper insight into the researcher's understanding of the data as it unfolded throughout the study.

Research Site Selection

The two sites for this study were purposefully selected from the 15 community colleges in the Massachusetts State Community College System. The sites are referred to as WMCC 1 and WMCC 2. According to recent data from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 58% of G.I. Bill benefits utilized in Massachusetts were for public colleges and universities and 38% of the Post-9/11 benefits were used to attend community colleges (U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs, 2011). The two research sites were chosen due to their close proximity to one another, similarities in enrollments, and the rural nature of each campus. The selection of these two campuses promoted typicality of the setting, heterogeneity of the sample and illustrative comparisons of participants at each site (Maxwell, 2005).

The two site campuses are located approximately one hour away from the researcher's home institution, making travel demands for the research minimal. Each of the colleges is a public two-year institution located in rural western Massachusetts, sharing similar demographics in their student populations. Enrollments at WMCC 1 are approximately 3,000 full/part-time students with veterans representing approximately 2% (72 veterans) of the student population. WMCC 2 enrolls approximately 4,000 full/part-time students with veterans representing approximately 5% (200 veterans) of the student population.

Maxwell (2005) states, “The relationships that you create with participants in your study (and also with others, sometimes called ‘gatekeepers,’ who can facilitate or interfere with your study) are an essential part of your methods” (p. 82). With this in mind, the researcher established important points of contact at each institution at the beginning of the study and discussed with them in depth the research proposal, methods, and research question. The researcher solicited feedback and guidance for selecting the sample and working with participants. Establishing open communication up front and allowing for transparency of the research built trust early with representatives at each site and contributed to a successful research study overall.

The researcher has a professional working relationship with key staff at both sites as well as a communication line to the President, Institutional Research Board, and the Veterans Services Representative of each campus. These relationships helped to maintain the momentum of the study and assisted with navigating institutional policies and procedures during the stages of design and implementation. Both campuses have active student veteran organizations and WMCC 2 now offers veteran housing. The faculty and staff at both institutions expressed a keen interest and concern for their student veteran populations, and are actively engaged in learning about this unique population of students enrolling at the institution each term.

Participant Selection and Summary

The population for this study consisted of student combat veterans enrolled at one of the two site institutions during the 2011-2012 academic year. Combat veteran is defined in this study as any veteran deployed to a combat zone that identifies as a combat veteran during an initial screening of participants. Since the research question explored

how identity influences experience in college, student veterans who identified as having served in combat, regardless of their front-line experiences, is an important distinction that adds depth and richness to the study. A listing of student veterans registered for benefits was obtained for initial recruitment of participants. Purposeful sampling and a snowball sampling approach were used to identify eligible participants at each institution. From the population of students at both institutions a sample of 19 combat veterans was selected. Although Strauss and Corbin (1998) do not recommend an ideal number of participants, Creswell (2007) suggests participant size to be 20 to 30 individuals in a grounded theory study in order to develop a well-saturated theory.

Considering Maxwell's (2005) purposeful selection, participants were chosen to achieve the following goals: to achieve representativeness of the individuals, to adequately capture the heterogeneity in the population, to deliberately examine cases critical to the theory being developed, and to establish comparisons to help explain differences between individuals or settings. Creswell (2007) also said using purposeful sampling the inquirer selects individuals for the study because they can purposefully inform an understanding of the research problem and central phenomenon in the study. Purposeful sampling provided a legitimate population for data collection and analysis. Snowball sampling, a variation of purposeful selection was employed as necessary to bolster the sampling technique, allowing for the identification of other participants who might benefit the study (Creswell, 2007).

The method of theoretical sampling is unique to grounded theory research and thought to be a critical method responsible for the making the process emergent (Birks & Mills, 2011). According to Glaser and Strauss (1967), theoretical sampling is "...the

process of data collection for generating theory whereby the analyst jointly collects, codes, and analyzes the data and decides what data to collect next and where to find the data, in order to develop the theory as it emerges” (p. 45). The tenets of theoretical sampling were utilized in the selection of the initial participants. Then, after the transcript data had been analyzed and coded, it was determined that the population selected was sufficient and the researcher had achieved a perceived saturation of the data.

Several avenues of recruitment were utilized to enlist participants in the study: (a) an email from the researcher directly to the student veterans group at each site through the appropriate representative, (b) informational flyers about the study and an invitation to participate were distributed at the appropriate locations on each campus, and (c) participants were asked to recommend other potential participants using snowball sampling techniques. Additionally, it was later reported that several of the participants chose to be part of the study after discussion and encouragement from the Student Veterans’ Representative and advisor to the student veterans group at each site. These two personnel proved critical to the participant identification and selection.

Participants selected for interviews fit into the following criteria based on the primary research question: (a) participants self-identify as combat veterans, (b) are enrolled at one of the selected research sites during the 2011-2012 academic year, and (c) identify as having been on at least one combat deployment prior to enrollment at the institution.

Seventeen of the participants self-identified as male, two participants self-identified as female and all nineteen of the participants self-identified as white/Caucasian.

Participants ranged in age from 22 to 49 years old. The mean age of participants was 31 years old.

All of the participants were undergraduate students attending community college at one of the two research sites. Of the nineteen participants, five had a first semester enrollment of fall 2011, eight first enrolled in fall 2010, one in the fall 2009 and two in the fall 2008. Three participants experienced a break in attendance due to a combat deployment and were re-enrolled in the fall 2011 semester.

Participants represented four branches of the United States military: Army, Navy, Air Force, and Marines. Specifically, ten of the participants were members of the Army, one was a member of the Navy, four were members of the Air Force and four were members of the Marines. One the participants had been previously enlisted in the United States Marine Corps, but most recently the Army. Seventeen of the participants had completed their enlistment while two participants had less than one year of service remaining at the time of their interview.

To ensure confidentiality participants were asked at the start of interviews to choose a pseudonym that will be used when referring to them throughout this document and in any future publications. Allowing each participant to choose his/her own pseudonym provided for proper anonymity, ownership of the study, and the opportunity to develop a deeper meaning for the participants and the researcher. Once participants were identified they were asked to review and sign the informed consent before taking part in the study.

Participant pseudonyms and profile information are listed in Table 1 below.

Table 1

Participant Profiles

Participant	Age/Gender	Military Branch/#Combat Tours	Semester Enrolled
John	23/Male	Army/1	Spring '08/Fall '11
Michael	29/Male	Marines/1	Spring '09/Fall '11
Miles	28/Male	Army/1	Spring 2011
Blacksheep	28/Female	Air Force/1	Fall 2010
Frenchy	23/Male	Army/1	Fall 2011
Steve	27/Male	Marines/2	Fall 2011
Marie Autumn	28/Female	Army/1	Fall 2010
Vinstigator	37/Male	Air Force/multiple	Fall 2010
Hobo	25/Male	Air Force/1	Fall 2010
Bobby	30/Male	Army/1	Fall 2011
Joe	29/Male	Army/1	Fall 2010
Master Sergeant	49/Male	Army/1	Fall '96/Fall '11
Peter	43/Male	Army/1	Fall 2009
Jason	33/Male	Marines/1, Army/1	Fall 2010
JP	39/Male	Navy/1	Fall 2010
Andrew	24/Male	Air Force/multiple	Fall 2008
Sandy	41/Male	Marines/1	Fall 2011
Nate	27/Male	Army/3	Fall 2010
Adam	22/Male	Army/1	Fall 2008

Interviews

Participant interviews served as the primary means of data collection for the study. Birks and Mills (2011) said, “the value of interviewing in grounded theory research is evidenced by the extensive number of studies that rely on it as the principle mechanism for the generation of data” (p. 74). Seidman (2006) said the root of in-depth interviewing is an interest in understanding the lived experiences of other people and the meaning they make from that experience. In an attempt to support the validity of the data, the researcher applied various communication methods to establish both trust and rapport with the study participants early in the study. Since semi-structured interviews

were utilized for data collection, establishing trust and rapport with participants ahead of time helped to promote more authentic, subjective responses.

In order to encourage authentic responses from participants, two semi-structured interviews were conducted to generate data necessary to help answer the research question and uncover an emergent theory. Multiple interviews contribute to the depth and richness of the data and ensure data are saturated (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Charmaz (2006) said returning to earlier participants for subsequent interviews enable the researcher to follow up on leads that arise at the research progresses and data begins to emerge. Since the grounded theory interview is dependent upon the ability of the researcher to travel a path through the interview with the participant (Birks & Mills, 2011), a semi-structured format allowing for flexibility in the interview protocols was preferred. “The greater level of structure imposed, the less able the interviewer was to take the optimal route” (p.75).

Both interview protocols were formulated using Hecht’s Communication Theory of Identity (CTI) (1993) and Gee’s conceptual model of identity (2000), and derived to answer the research question and explore gaps in the existing literature. Participants were informed of the possibility for a third interview, offering the researcher an opportunity to ask follow-up questions of participants and explore thoughts and concepts from the emergent data based on the first two interviews, and allow the participants to add any final thoughts about their individual experience to their interview transcript. The researcher did not opt for a third interview with participants given the richness of the data collected during the first and second semi-structured interviews at both research sites and the belief saturation of the data was present.

Each interview was conducted in person and audio-recorded for ease of transcription and to allow the researcher to actively listen to the participants' answers enabling appropriate follow-up questions. Following recommendations by Seidman (2006), each interview was designed to be no more than 75 minutes in length and the time between each interview was no more than two weeks, allowing the participants time to process the experience of the first interview without losing the connection to the researcher or the study itself. Electronic copies of the interview audio files and transcripts are stored on a password-protected external hard-drive in the researcher's home office.

The researcher interviewed nine participants at the first research site and ten participants at the second site using semi-structured interview protocols and a two-part interview series. The first interview protocols were designed to last approximately one hour and meant to establish context for the study and a trust and rapport with the participants. The second interview occurred within one week of the first and included a semi-structured interview protocol written to encourage subjective responses and reduce the risk of manipulating the answers of the participants.

After the first round of interviews no questions were altered, however the ordering of the questions was modified to provide a more appropriate transition from the first interview to the second-round interview based upon participant response to the first set of protocols. The duration of each individual first and second round interview ranged in length from 45 minutes to approximately 75 minutes for each participant. Interview protocols were as follows:

Semi-structured Interview I:

- To preserve your anonymity, I will assign you a pseudonym instead of your given name. What would you like that pseudonym to be? Tell me why you chose that particular name.
- Why did you choose to be a part of this study?
- Have you been interviewed about your combat experience previously? If yes, tell me what that interview experience was like for you?
- Tell me about your military experience. Why did you choose to join? What branch?
- Do you continue to be enlisted in the military now, and if so, what details can you share with me?
- How many combat tours did you take part in during your time in the service? What can you tell me about where and when you served in combat?
- Tell me what the experience of combat was like for you.
- What questions do you have about the study that I haven't answered?

Semi-structured Interview II:

- What questions about this study do you have for me before we get started?
- Is there anything you would like to add that is important for me to know about your experience as a college student after being in the military?
- Do you think your experiences of being in combat have influenced your experiences in college? If so, how?
- Do you prefer to spend time with other veterans on campus? Why/why not?

- Has there been a time since you enrolled at (college name) when someone on campus said something about the military that offended you or you disagreed with? Tell me about this experience.
- Do you identify yourself as a veteran when interacting with other students, faculty or staff on campus? Why/Why not?
- A person's core identity is unique. That being said, how would you complete this sentence, "When I think about my own personal identity, I consider myself to be..." (If necessary, for clarity, I may offer my own personal example such as: *"When I think about my own personal identity, I consider myself to be a son, a brother, and a friend. I am a deeply reflective person, paying close attention to how I move through the world and how my movements intersect with and influence others in my life."*)

Tell me why you chose this identity. Was it difficult for you to determine? Why?

- Is there anything you considered sharing during the interview but did not?
- Do you have any questions for me?

Interviews were conducted in a designated location at each of the research sites. By design, the location was in a private office space in proximity to the student veterans' organization office and student support services, affording each of the participants a comfortable and secure space for the interview and the researcher access to the student support services as needed throughout the duration of the interviews. Digital recordings for each round of interviews were reviewed by the researcher for clarity and sound quality and then transcribed by Verbalink, a reputable transcription service recommended

by The George Washington University. Upon receipt of the completed transcripts from Verbalink, each was reviewed for content and accuracy and then placed in a secure location in the researcher's home office.

Fieldwork/Data Triangulation

In addition to participant interviews, the researcher employed fieldwork throughout the study in an effort to provide the appropriate data triangulation. Fieldwork included observations during student veteran organization meetings and college-sponsored events and informal conversations with student veterans, faculty, and staff at each site. Notes from the fieldwork were captured at each site, typed into an appropriate form and updated or modified as needed throughout the research. Creswell (2007) said the utilization of multiple data sources, also known as data triangulation, allows the researcher to develop further context and justification for emergent themes in the data. As such, information contained in the field notes was used to make connections to the emergent themes throughout the data analysis phase.

Memos

Memos are considered the mortar that holds together the building blocks of data that comprise a grounded theory study approach. They are a detailed record of thoughts, feelings, insights, and ideas in relation to the research topic and fundamental to the development of a grounded theory (Birks & Mills, 2011). As such, memos were actively written throughout the study to capture emerging concepts and ideas. After each interview a memo was written by the researcher capturing the main point/events that the participant shared, a summary of the personal reflections, methodological occurrence and substantive theoretical ideas that emerged. Charmaz (2006) contends that memos are a

valuable technique for initiating and maintaining productivity during the study. Content of each memo was reviewed periodically after the interviews were complete and then extensively during the data analysis phase. Memos for this study were created in both written and electronic forms, stored on the researcher's password protected hard-drive.

Additional Participants

Although the researcher had reserved the right to add additional participants to the study as needed, careful consideration of information used for data triangulation, peer review and researcher memos suggested that a sufficient saturation of existing data existed after first and second round interviews of the original nineteen participants. Therefore, no additional participants were solicited for the research.

Data Analysis

Upon further consideration, the researcher chose not utilize qualitative data analysis software. The researcher's methods of organization throughout the analysis provided for sufficient data immersion and a deep connection to the data, rendering the need for computer-based methods of organization unnecessary. The researcher utilized various methods of organization of the data including site differentiation, manual categorization and labeling of initial codes, subsequent groupings and resulting themes using paper files, folders, and poster board. These methods allowed the researcher to maintain a constant familiarity and closeness to the data, providing for greater depth of the analysis.

The researcher listened to each audio file in its entirety multiple times, comparing the audio against the professionally transcribed interviews for clarity, consistency in data analysis, and theoretical sensitivity. Theoretical sensitivity refers to the researcher's

knowledge of the study topic and his/her ability to become familiar with the data and glean subtleties based on sensitivity to the data being collected (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Analysis of the data consisted of the three levels of coding recommended by Strauss and Corbin (1998): (a) open (emic) coding, (b) axial coding, and (c) selective (etic) coding. These are the main elements of data analysis for grounded theory study and guide the research by first “fracturing” the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) into simple concepts or patterns, then begin assembling the data into common categories, conducting comparisons between categories, and identifying conceptual possibilities (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Initial coding occurred as a reflexive activity, with ongoing researcher reflection about the analytical decisions being made early in the analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

Open coding as defined is the process of “opening up the text” to expose various thoughts, ideas, and meanings contained therein (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This was an important first step the analysis, allowing the researcher the opportunity to begin to identify codes, develop concepts or labeled phenomenon – an abstract representation of an event, object, or action/interaction that the researcher identifies as significant in the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Axial coding was employed following the initial broader process of open coding as defined by Strauss and Corbin (1998). Axial coding may occur at the same time as open coding or it may follow the open coding process. There is no hierarchy to the first two levels of coding in grounded theory, as subcategories in the data may begin to emerge during the open coding process, allowing both levels of coding to happen simultaneously (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). However, axial coding is distinct from that of

open coding in that it is the relationship “between” categories that is of most interest to the researcher during the process, not the data that makes up each of the categories through open coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The term is called axial because “coding occurs around the axis of a category, linking categories at the level of properties and dimensions” (p.123).

A careful review of the data was conducted using what Strauss and Corbin (1998) define as microanalysis, a combination of both open and axial coding necessary at the beginning of the study to generate the initial categories and to begin to suggest relationships that exist between the categories. At the completion of the microanalysis phase of data review, a third level of coding, also known as selective coding, was conducted.

Selective coding is the process of integrating and refining the categories of data generated in the open and axial coding processes. It is at this point that the key categories are integrated to form a larger theoretical scheme, and the research findings will begin to take the form of a theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The first step in the integration is deciding upon a core or central category that will ultimately represent the main theme in the research. The central category holds analytical power, pulling together other categories to form an explanatory whole (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This study employed the criteria for choosing a central category (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 147):

- 1) The category must be central, with all other categories relating to it,
- 2) The category appears frequently in the data,
- 3) The explanation that evolves by relating the categories is logical and consistent,
- 4) The name or phrase used to describe the central category is sufficiently abstract for future research in other areas,
- 5) As the concept is refined analytically through integration with other concepts, the theory grows in depth and explanatory power, and
- 6) The central concept is able to explain variation as well as the main point made by the data.

Data collection and analysis employed a constant comparative analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) approach and continued until it was determined that theoretical saturation had been reached and a grounded theory was fully integrated (Birks & Mills, 2011). Strauss and Corbin (1990) define theoretical saturation as occurring when there are no new codes in subsequent rounds of data collection that pertain to a particular category, and that the category is “conceptually well developed to the point where any sub-categories and their dimensions are clearly articulated and integrated” (Birks & Mills, 2011, p. 99).

Representation of Findings

The findings presented in Chapter 4 are in a predominantly narrative form with rich description, using direct quotations from participants to provide the proper inflection and overview of how the various themes were determined and how those themes were used to construct meaning. Participant quotations, in both long and short forms, are introduced throughout Chapter 4 to provide both a rationale for the categories and thematic linkages and appropriate context to the data collected.

Using levels of generality, moving from general to particular, the narrative was constructed to help the reader understand how the study was conceptualized and significance was determined (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). Alternative forms of representation such as a taxonomic approach were utilized to illustrate the various open, axial, and selective codes and how those codes were grouped into families of data that support the emerging themes from the participants. Most importantly, the representation

aims to authentically convey the lived experience of the participants through their own words.

Validity and Reliability

In an effort to maintain awareness of the researcher role throughout the study, and to avoid preconceptions or emotions from unduly affecting the research process, peer debriefing was employed throughout the study (Creswell, 2007). Lincoln and Guba (1985) describe the primary objective of peer debriefing is to gain different perspectives about the findings and the data from educated, yet uninvolved, peers and checking analyses of the data. Three peers were charged with debriefing the information being gathered in addition to researcher interpretations of the emergent data. Feedback from the peer review was incorporated into the ongoing data analysis and informed the four themes identified by the researcher.

Ethical Issues and Considerations

Appropriate IRB approvals from The George Washington University and participating institutions were obtained in advance of the commencement of the study and data collection procedures. Included in the IRB approval documents was an informed consent document tailored to the study and appropriate for human subject research.

Participants were informed of all aspects of the study prior to their participation and, via the informed consent document, a complete description of data collection procedures, researcher's role, participant's role, and plans for reporting/disseminating the findings were presented to each participant before they agreed to participate. Participants were also informed that they had a right to withdraw from the study at any time should they choose to do so.

Anonymity of participants was maintained throughout the study, given the sensitive and personal information disclosed during the interview process and discussions with the researcher. Although complete anonymity can never be absolutely guaranteed, participant profile sheets were coded with participant-selected pseudonyms and any identifying documents and audio recordings were stored in a secure location throughout the study. Access to these documents was limited to the researcher and the dissertation director.

The interview environment was carefully selected to ensure the comfort of the participants as they progress through the interviews. Since the topic of the study and the content of interviews was potentially sensitive to the participants, support services and referral resources at each research site and the surrounding community were identified and known to the researcher and participants before, during, or after the interview. A list of resources was also given to each participant at the time they signed the informed consent to participate in the study so they were aware of the resources available to them.

Although significant ethical or political issues were not expected to emerge during the study, the researcher was prepared for the possibility of occurrences when the participants may experience heightened emotions based on the content of the interview and their reflections upon answering the questions. The researcher worked closely with staff at the colleges selected to ensure that the proper supportive referrals were made if a participant was struggling emotionally as a result of the interview protocols.

Chapter Summary

This chapter explained and justified the choice of research methodology and methods, presented the research question, and introduced the research design.

Presentation of the research design included selection of research sites and participants, methods of data collection and analysis, researcher subjectivity, study validity and ethical considerations. Chapter 4 will provide a brief overview of the data analysis and then transition to a comprehensive review of findings.

CHAPTER 4

“The violence of combat assaults psyches, confuses ethics and tests souls.”

– Karl Marlantes, Vietnam Veteran & Author (2011)

DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

The backgrounds of the 19 participants in this research study were varied and richly diverse. All of the participants were undergraduate students attending community college at one of the two research sites. Of the nineteen participants, five had a first-semester enrollment of fall 2011, eight first enrolled in fall 2010, one in the fall 2009 and two in the fall 2008. Three participants experienced a break in attendance due to a combat deployment and were re-enrolled in the fall 2011 semester.

Participants represented four branches of the United States military: Army, Navy, Air Force and Marines. Specifically, ten of the participants were members of the Army, one was a member of the Navy, four were members of the Air Force and four were members of the Marines. One the participants had been previously enlisted in the United States Marine Corps, but most recently the Army. Seventeen of the participants had completed their enlistment while two participants had less than one year of service remaining at the time of their interview.

When asked to discuss their motivations for joining the military, eleven of the participants indicated a history of military service in their families and a desire to follow in the footsteps of past family members. Ten of the participants spoke of joining the military as an opportunity to better themselves, while six felt strongly that their enlistment in the military was rooted in an “inner-calling” or sense of pride, and to be part of something larger than themselves.

Interestingly, only two of the participants identified financial assistance for college as a determining factor in their decision to enlist. Both specifically mentioned not having the resources to attend college based on their family background and viewed their enlistment in the military as a means of social mobility through education.

All of the participants self-identified as having been on at least one combat deployment before enrolling at the research site. The length of deployments ranged from four months to fifteen months. Sixteen of the participants had been on one combat deployment and three of the participants had been on multiple deployments. Seventeen of the participants had been deployed to either Afghanistan for Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) or Iraq for Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF). One participant served a combat deployment during the Persian Gulf War in 1991. One participant self-identified his deployment orders as classified, so detailed information provided to the researcher was limited. Three participants reported less than one year had elapsed since their last deployment prior to matriculation at the institution, while the remainder reported a year or more since their most recent deployment.

Eleven participants discussed being active in the student veterans' organization at one of the two research sites, with two of the participants being elected officers in the organization. Several participants consider themselves affiliated with the student veteran's organization or aware of its existence, but indicated they were unable to be active in the organization due to other work, school, or family commitments that prevented their regular participation.

When asked to discuss their motivations for participation in this research, the two recurring themes among all of the participants were: a) to educate faculty, students, and

staff regarding the unique experiences and challenges facing student veterans, and b) to provide support to other student veterans in higher education by lending a voice to their experiences post-combat and enrolling in college.

Review of Research Question

The primary research question was developed to explore the experiences of student veterans who have been in combat, how they perceive their own personal identity and how this perception may influence their experience transitioning from the military to a college environment. The primary research question for this study was:

- How do combat veterans perceive their own identity and what influence does this have on their experience as college students?

The research question was written to intentionally investigate not only the concept of transition but to consider the broader experience of being in college for the participants.

Data Analysis

Analysis of the qualitative data consisted of the three levels of coding as recommended by Strauss and Corbin (1998): (a) open (emic) coding, (b) axial coding, and (c) selective (etic) coding. These are the main elements of data analysis for grounded theory study and guided the research by first “fracturing” the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) in to simple concepts or patterns, then assembling the data into common categories, conducting comparisons between categories, and identifying conceptual possibilities (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Open and axial coding consisted of the researcher first listening to each of the participant two-part interviews while simultaneously reviewing the interview transcripts and generating an open codebook by participant. This process included a review of

approximately forty hours of audio files, 700 pages of interview transcripts and 40 pages of researcher memos. This method significantly benefited the research as it allowed for more extensive data immersion and afforded the researcher the opportunity to identify subtle nuances and inflection in the data that may not have been possible with a review of the transcripts alone. Following the construction of an open code book by participant, the researcher reviewed each and conducted a scan for common categories, made comparisons between them and then identified the four conceptual themes to be discussed later in this chapter.

Initial Categories and Codes

The first round coding of the interview transcripts rendered the initial open codes by participant and then organized by each research site. Continued review, reflection, and analysis of the emergent codes resulted in the identification of seven initial categories of data and associated common codes among all 19 participants at both research sites. These seven preliminary categories and associated codes are listed in Appendix B. These categories and associated codes were then reviewed by the researcher in the context of the research question and protocols for distinctive overlapping commonalities, parallel themes, and then grouped into the resulting themes to be discussed at length in the next section.

Themes

The move from a life in the military to that of a civilian is a complicated endeavor fraught with many complex and undefined decisions. For the nineteen participants in this study, transition from the military after one or more combat tours of duty and subsequently enrolling in college has made their transition from the military equally

complex. The interplay among their lived experiences in the military before college, those navigating the enrollment process and throughout their time at the institution have been richly diverse, informed by each of their own unique backgrounds, core identity, and self-perception. Participants described the process of transition and adaptation to both civilian life and life on a college campus as fluid and ongoing with no definitive end to that transition.

After careful analysis and consideration of the qualitative data collected during interviews, researcher fieldwork and reflective memos, and feedback from peer review, four themes representing the collective experiences and perceptions of the participants emerged: Perception of self, perception of others, inferred perception of self, and connections to other veterans. Each of these themes appears to have influenced the experience for participants as college students on multiple levels.

A discussion of each theme will follow, including researcher commentary based on the results of the first and second round interviews, with findings presented in predominantly narrative form with rich description, using direct quotations from participants to provide the proper inflection. An overview of how the various themes were determined, how those themes were used to construct meaning, and how the themes appear to influence the participants' experiences in college will be part of the discussion throughout.

The discussion will begin with the first theme of how participants perceive themselves after having been enlisted in the military and experienced combat, including individual perceptions of their own core identity. Next, the theme of how participants view others and the perceived correlation between self-perception and the perception of

others will be discussed. The next theme reviewed will be the inferred perceptions combat veterans have of themselves based on civilian interactions after their deployment and separation from the military. The prevalence of this theme in the data collected cannot be overstated. This perception appears to have a profound impact on the participants' sense of self and a reciprocal impact on how they perceive other non-veterans in addition to themselves. Finally, a discussion of the fourth theme will provide an overview of the connections to other combat veterans that each of the participants carry with them as they move through the world; a feeling that is not necessarily linear and transcends both war and time itself.

After discussion of the four themes, a conceptual identity model for combat veterans will be introduced, followed by a discussion of the intersections with the theoretical and conceptual frameworks used to guide this study and a chapter summary.

Perception of Self

Given that the research question for this study was written to explore how combat veterans perceive their own identity, an important theme found to emerge through data analysis relates to each participant's perception of self and the collective similarities of their responses. This section will provide an overview of how participants view their core identity, their struggle with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and the feeling of being a changed person since combat. This overview will be followed by a discussion of how the participant perceptions of self are influenced not only by their combat deployments, but also the military training and experiences leading up to the deployment.

Seventeen of the participants in this study felt strongly that being a combat veteran was a significant part of their core identity and an important aspect of who they

are as individuals in the process of making meaning in their everyday lives. When asked to complete this sentence, “When I think about my own personal identity, I consider myself to be...” the seventeen participants who included veteran in their response either spoke directly about their veteran status or made mention of it specifically during follow-up questioning. Regardless of how the response was generated, it was evident to the researcher that being a veteran had profoundly influenced the participant’s own sense of self. Put simply, Miles said in his answer, “First and foremost, I am a veteran.”

Several other participants specifically mentioned being a veteran as part of who they are in their answers. Andrew said, “I mean how does it leave you? Once a Marine, always a Marine. Once an airman, always an airman. Once a firefighter, always a firefighter. Once a cop, always a cop. It’s who you are; it’s who you become.” Master Sergeant added, “I’m very proud and was honored to serve. It’s extremely a very intricate part of who I am today - how I see the world, how I carry myself, what I represent, what I did for this country. Proud of my accomplishments. I would do it over again, ten-fold.” Similarly, Jason said, “Ten years of service. That’s like, what else would I really know? Take the service out of my life...You know? Then where am I? Or, yeah, just, you know, it’s a part of you. It’s who you are.” Vinstigator talked at length about his veteran status and the importance of it to him. He said. “Yes, definitely. I mean, you spend 13 years of your life doing something, it’s gonna stick with you. That’s part of who I am.”

It appeared during the interviews that for some participants despite identifying veteran as a part of their core identity their answers suggest a negotiation of identity

between veteran, student and civilian may be occurring as they navigate the return to civilian life and attending college. In his response, Nate said:

I'm definitely a vet first. I'm a paratrooper; I'm an infantryman. I don't see myself as a college student sometimes. I don't live the life of a college kid I think, so I don't really see that. I see myself more as like an old soldier or something like that.

In a related response, Peter said:

I'm a veteran who's a citizen too. Oh yeah, which way I'm going in, where I'm going to park...it just never stops. I do it everywhere I go. Maybe that's the problem. Maybe that's why I don't feel right. I need to let that go, be the civilian instead of the soldier. I tried.

When asked if he thought he could ever fully let go of the soldier inside, Peter continued, "No. Even though I want to get out. Like if you said I could get out if I signed the paper, I would sign it. But you know what, I'd still be that soldier." John talked about multiple dimensions to his identity when he said, "I see myself as a soldier, a family man, a woodsman, a student, but I try to be the best role model." Although being a veteran was central to his answer when asked to describe his core identity, Michael said, "A proud veteran. A proud EMT. A proud nurse. Somebody who is always trying to look for that next step in life. Not a conqueror, but in the sense of personal conquests." Blacksheep spoke of a constant awareness of the veteran part of her identity when she said:

It's a lot to deal with, and sometimes it's just easier to push it under the rug and forget about it. So compartmentalize it, put it away, that's my old life and I'm new here, and I don't ever have to think about that again. But even if you're not thinking about it, you're thinking about it. It's always in the back of your mind; you always know it's there...

Miles had an awareness of veteran in his core identity but also spoke of days he feels lost since returning from combat. He said, "...I don't know if other people do it, but I

definitely lose touch with the inner human every now and then and definitely, definitely lose touch with my inner being, my own self.”

Two participants spoke of being a veteran as a clear part of who they were as individuals, but did not want it to overshadow other parts of their identity. Sandy said:

It’s never gonna go away. And I don’t want it to go away totally. I just don’t want to live it. It is a part of me and it’ll always be a part of me but I don’t want it to define me or who I am ‘cause that’s not who I am.

When asked about her core identity, veteran was first to come to mind for Marie Autumn, but she also talked about how it may be hidden for her. She said:

Well, definitely a vet. That’s like, even if it’s something that I don’t admit out loud to other people, it’s definitely something that I’ll feel it when I’m walking, or just something. It’ll just be – I’ll just take like little things that I heard in the military – pay attention to detail. Those little things are things I live by now, so I totally think of myself as that. ...It was only a small part of my life but it really affected me so much, like the way I view the world, the way I act. It changed me.

Two other participants saw their veteran status as a small, perhaps fading, part of their identity despite the impact it has had on their sense of self. When asked if he thought being a veteran was part of his core identity, Adam said:

You know it should because three years of my life, it’s a small chunk, but it will probably have the greatest affect on me than anything else I would do in my life, excluding some terrible thing or some tragic accident. But yeah, I mean it had a big impact, but I try to just kind of go back into the business as usual kind of thing because like I said, the day I came back I went Christmas shopping, I did this, I did that with my family and then I started...then I applied for unemployment, then I got in touch with the veteran reps for the VA medical claims and whatnot and then I started going through the process to apply to school, going through everything that I could find as soon as possible because that’s what I wanted it to be. I wanted to just come home and just roll right back into the whole business as usual thing because I didn’t want to sit and have all this empty time with nothing but my thoughts. Not that thinking is bad, but unfocused is probably not good, not for me. So I tried to keep things moving.

Joe talked about the struggle of letting the combat veteran part of him go and trying to find himself again. He said:

I consider myself to be a ghost. Mm, just kind of moving from one place to the next, yeah. Not really travel but drift. And it seems like no matter where you go you're just haunting someone else if that makes any sense. And so, you know, and then when you drift away to another place you just leave behind just a story for other people just to talk about. I wanna be my own person for a change and have my own opinions and thoughts and feelings without really any influence by anybody else. I have my stuff I agree with and my stuff that I don't. I mean, I'm just me. I mean, I'm not pretending to be anything else but me. I gotta live with myself for a long time so I might as well try to get used to who I am. And the only way I'm going to do that is that if I find myself and that's basically my whole journey in a nutshell of what I've been trying to do from right off the git-go is find who the hell am I.

Interestingly, the two participants who did not consider veteran to be a significant part of their core identity also lacked a feeling of connection to other veterans, specifically those they had served with in combat. Both spoke of the common connection most veterans seem to share, a theme to be discussed later, but acknowledged this was not something they felt after having been in the military. When asked about his core identity, Joe said:

Now, there's two sides of me. There's one part of it that hates the civilians. Then there's a second part to which makes me hate the veterans for it because you do have the ones as I said that glorify way too much. And I've known some that put themselves on such a high pedestal...

Unlike most of the participants, Adam did not have a sense of camaraderie when he was in the military. When asked about his training and combat experiences he said:

For me, there was no camaraderie. I – honestly, I hate every single one that I was with, still, today. And if they – if I saw on the news – or if I got, like, a call that said, “Everyone you ever knew in Afghanistan just died in a car crash,” I'd just be like, “All right. How does that affect me?” It was a tolerate-hate relationship, with them. And it wasn't a love-hate thing. Like, yes, I would – if I had to, I would jump on a grenade to save them. I would do my job – not for them. I

would do it for me, because if I didn't do that, how would I feel about myself? – kind of a thing.

Connected to perception of self and core identity, more than half of the participants in the study self-identified as struggling with some level of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) after combat. Some were more articulate than others with respect to the impact that living with PTSD has had on them personally and some talked at length about having more day-to-day symptoms than other participants. Regardless of whether participants self-identified as having PTSD, all of them spoke of how their experiences in combat influence how they now see themselves and how they move through their everyday lives. Collectively, the participants talked about how their veteran identity and combat deployments have also influenced their experiences as college students.

Participants discussed everyday occurrences on campus such as activity in and out of the classroom, classroom seating orientation, crowds of students crossing campus between classes and everyday noises that triggered the combat veteran inside. These triggers frequently caused them to be distracted from their work. Speaking of how deeply the combat veteran is rooted in her sense of self Blacksheep said, “There’s no bunker in my house, but it’s just ingrained into your DNA, so, I mean, little things like that, maybe something as simple as explaining to the student, ‘Please don’t bang on the desk.’” Andrew added, “I’m very aware of my surroundings and I think I will be till the day I die just because of what’s been drilled into me. I can go into a crowd and pick out different behaviors from people and identify who needs to be watched or not watched.”

When asked if he thought this hypervigilance was distracting and influenced his experiences on campus Andrew said:

It does. I mean you think about it, you're trying to listen to what the instructor is doing and your mind is somewhere else. You can't do two things at once. Well, you can, but it's hard. I get anxious and worried in big crowds, and it's tough 'cause some of the classes you're in with a lot of people, and I get annoyed very easily, and I'm in school with people fresh out of high school.

JP, who self-identified as struggling with severe PTSD, talked about his experiences of being constantly aware of his surroundings while on campus. When asked what it means to be on guard while on campus he said:

Oh, always on the lookout for a situation where you can almost see something like that happening. So, hence sitting in the back of the class, that way you can see everything instead of having somebody behind you that's gonna slam their book bag down and make you damn near piss yourself. Stuff like that or the crowds talking. You tend to skew away from 'em 'cause you don't wanna hear it – whatever they have to say, usually. Just being very mindful 'cause being irritable and snapping comes hand in hand. You can seriously just snap and bad things will happen. So, you have to very much so be ready to turn right around and walk away or breathe my breathing techniques.

When asked about how this impacts his experiences in class, JP talked about how significant it was for him by saying, “During class you're in 2,000 different places. You're still trying to listen to what he says or her – the teacher, professor or whatever. You're still trying to listen to what they're saying and comprehend it but you're also making sure that nobody around you is gonna do anything goofy.”

John, one of the youngest participants who enrolled in college less than six months after returning from a combat deployment to Afghanistan, talked about how it felt to be on a college campus and said:

You're still kinda looking over your shoulder. I experienced that a lot in my first semester when the classes were getting out and there's a lot of – there's a big crowd. A lot of construction at the school at the moment, so a lot of big bangs

and pops, and that can – kinda sets you off. You know a difference between a metal clank and a gunshot, though, but it's still that loud pop and still whip your head around quicker than the average – most people won't even hear it.

The majority of participants spoke about classroom orientation being very important and how important it was to find the right seat in a class each day. In fact, many said the wrong seat in a class could alter the entire experience for them. Nate said:

I don't care who he is or if he's deployed or not, everybody sits watching the door. If they can – away from the window. I don't like sitting up against the window, but I don't like sitting in the middle of the room either because then I can't get out. There's people everywhere. But the classrooms where the classroom to toward the doors back here, I hate that. That drives me nuts. I can't sit in the front row, I have to sit on the far side. Oh, I couldn't do it.

Adam added:

I try to sit as far up front as possible, up front and to the corner, but it's kind of annoying because there's doors in each side of the classroom. There's the main door off of the hallway that the other classrooms are connected and then there's a whole side of the wall that's windows, so it's not like I can pick someplace where I can get a view of everything.

Andrew described the feeling he had if he wasn't able to get the seat he wanted in class and how his experience was then altered. He said:

It's tough, because in a classroom, you can't always get that option. You sit where the last seat's open or whatever, and just focusing, it's hard for me to focus on one thing to begin with, 'cause my mind's always going. When I'm in the front of a classroom with my back to everyone, I feel like something can happen and I'm not prepared, and that's not an easy feeling. And a lot of it has to do with my training, and it's frustrating, because you can't – once your mind is trained that way, it's hard to break it, and not everyone understands that. I get anxious, and it's – I'm not focused at all.

In addition to participants' description of the importance of where they were sitting in the classroom, two of them spoke of how activity just outside the door of the classroom can also present challenges and distractions. Peter said: "It's hard to keep your mind focused. When somebody's walking in the hall you pull away so now you're

drawing attention away from whatever the lecture is. You're out in the hall in your mind because you hear something and then it takes you a minute to come back into the room."

Nate added to this, describing his frustration with people outside of a Sociology class:

I remember one class I came in late to Sociology and I sat down and there was a lot of movement outside. I mean every minute and like people are walking and I was like fuck and I can't pay attention and I'm doing work and I'm looking up and then I'd be doing something and then someone would walk by and I'd look up and I'm doing something. Clear, obvious distraction.

Connected to the hypervigilance participants expressed as part of their everyday experiences on campus, they spoke of how easily it could be for them to be triggered and then how difficult it might be to recover, thus altering their experience for the day or potentially longer. JP said, "If you're triggered, you're triggered. And it's not anything – it can be a smell, a taste, whatever. It can be triggered by any – a noise a classroom over can sound something familiar." When asked if he would be able to focus on his work after being triggered, he continued:

When you're all charged and – no, not really. All you're thinking about is, "I want to get the hell outta here." I want to go to the privacy and that's secluded, my own home and just relax 'cause you can't – once you're off – that's off the deep end for me is when you're already having a bad day and somebody does something crazy around you. And you're like, "Argh." You're ruined. "I have to go home. I can't do it." Yeah, I have to go home or I'm gonna snap. It's gonna get – one way or the other, it's gonna be bad.

Miles talked about how he felt "wound up" after being triggered and what that could mean for his experience on campus that day. He said:

There's times where I get very wound up, like you're just sitting there and you can feel people...it's weird. People just like, there's one guy that keeps walking around the classroom and it's not like he's nervous or jittery, but it just makes me nervous just because he's up, he's down, he's in his bag, he's doing...that starts getting me all kind of mind wandering and then when that happens it's time to reset because I don't want to get stuck in that mood.

Miles also discussed how powerful an in-class assignment could be, how it would subsequently trigger his PTSD and how that alters the experience for him. He said:

And a week after I came home, one of my friends got killed by a rocket and two other friends who were in the same truck were wounded, you know, and that – I read that to the class and when I wrote the paper no problem, you know, it didn't bother me. I reread it and read it and it didn't bother me, and then I read it to the class and it just – and I just went cold, like it just, real, real deep, like, I started shaking and whatnot. It sucks because it happened in front of everybody and people noticed a difference. That kind of makes me feel weird now, not self-conscious...well I guess a little self-conscious about it, but on the other hand it was just kind of like...because people just don't get it. They don't get what happens, like really what happens and they don't understand what it's like.

Despite the diversity of military service participants brought to this study, each of them spoke directly of the feeling of being a changed person after their experiences in combat and that they see themselves differently than before the combat deployment(s).

When asked if he feels different after being in combat, Miles said:

Oh absolutely. I mean before combat, after combat, even from coming home from Iraq in 2007 to now. It's crazy it's been five years but it still feels like yesterday I got off that plane. You come home with like this trance, you have a trance-like state and it just – one day you just snap out of it, kind of, some people don't at all, but some people do, and when you realize that you're home or you realize that holy shit I'm different. When you leave combat you're not that same person that you left in basic training and you sure as shit isn't the same person you left at home.

Joe said:

While you're over there, for some, they encounter situations that are just above and beyond, just – and, really, that you can't even describe. You couldn't make it up if even you tried. It's so sadistic, heinous and what, in all actuality, people do to each other. And you come back, basically, with that memory. I'm not the same person anymore. It's just I was exposed to a reality that you just can't go back. And it does get very lonely, somewhat depressed. But, at the same time, what are you gonna do?

In a powerful statement, Jason spoke of being profoundly changed on a cellular level due to his experiences. He said, “Yeah, that's – I mean, I've grown up because of it. That's

who you are. It's in my cells. Yeah, you know, it becomes a part of you. And just in life, not just with school. In life in general, you just got a certain glare to yourself, you know?" Sandy continued by saying:

...I'm completely different from when I was back then before I went in. Partly because of the military experience and going through the things that I had to go through even when I wasn't in combat. In my situation and other vets' situation when you're in combat that holds true, that every day could be your last. So that feeling invaded by body and stuck with me.

Connected to the feeling of being a changed person since combat, participants also spoke of how this change impacted their perception on their world. When asked if he felt different post-combat Steve said, "I have to live with it. So bringing that perspective to current day, I see – I see the United States differently, I see the world differently, I see people differently." Hobo said:

It definitely changed my perception, like the way I see other cultures. Everything, so like I said before...I like to understand how I'm – what I'm saying how people are interpreting what I'm saying....So the military gave me some valuable experience for day-to-day life. How to speak to people.

Nate added:

When I first came back I was still trying to get – I didn't realize how much my outlook on the world had really changed. I had no idea. I felt like the same person, but –Everything was different. Just the way you look at things – anything. I mean you just – I can't even put it into words.

Many of the participants described a dualistic impact of being in combat when discussing both the positive and negative influences the experiences had on their self-perception and view of the world. At 23 years old, John is one of the youngest participants and as he reflected upon his combat experience he said:

Um, uh, but it was, um – it was good. It helped me – um, I matured a lot, and-and I saw the value of education where I went to a country where they-they don't, um, have really schools. I've, um, matured. I-I look more towards, uh – I enjoy my

learning. I enjoy, uh, experiencing different things. Being so close to death –has enlightened me about how much there is to live and live for.

When asked if he felt like a changed person after combat Adam responded:

Yeah, almost definitely, yeah. Yeah, I mean, like a lotta small things, here and there – and not particularly easy to – nothing you could just point at – kind of a deal. Like, tastes and things – not picky at all in foods anymore. I'll eat anything, now. I have a much more friendly relationship with water and going to the gym – kind of thing. Not all negative things, you know?

Master Sergeant felt his experiences were more positive than negative and that they touched his soul. He said:

I would say in the sense of more positive than the negative, besides the negative comes out of the mental suffering that happened and the condition I'm in. I wish that never happened but as in the positives, it made me a better person as in to think things clearly through before acting. The experience that you do when you're in that environment is I came back and the first thing that crossed my mind is I'm going to value life differently. And it wasn't a thought per se, it was more just a— it's the way you felt. It was like in your soul that this is the ultimate change.

When asked if he considered himself a different person after his combat experiences, Joe added:

I believe I am, for the good and the bad. For the good, just appreciation. I'm not taking anything for granted.... bad would have to be basically my tolerance level just – again, nonexistent, short fuse, bad temper. I have a tendency to push people away. I have a very sensitive antenna that goes up, shows just trust issues that I have.

For some of the participants, connected to this perception of feeling different or changed after their combat experiences was a sense of needing to protect this part of themselves from other non-veterans. Jason said:

That's, changed me. I guess you don't want that, that's for the soldiers to see and hear and know, go through. That's what we get paid to do, that's what the country called us for. So I guess lettin' that out, lettin' that cat outta the bag, to the general public, you kind of protect it, you know? 'Cause those are your feelings, too. That's who you've become. Your memory, your past. So you protect that.

John talked about feeling alienated and said:

Sometimes you feel alienated from the public. It's not so much – it's more a like wolf in sheep's clothing, and you have all this knowledge. You have all this training, and you have this power to – and you were able to play God, and that's a very powerful emotion, a very powerful experience. And now you're back here, and you gotta play nice, and there's rules that you gotta follow...

Michael talked about how others would have difficulty understanding his experience when he said, "I think somebody that hasn't really experienced that awful feeling of being shot at, having stuff blowing up around – I don't think they get it – that, ya know, you don't wanna forget it, but you don't wanna talk about it. And if you're gonna talk about it, it's gonna be on your terms."

Blacksheep said, "But as a veteran – as a combat veteran, especially, you have different experiences, not so nice experiences, and there's prejudice and there's stigma, and there's a lot of just getting through it."

Connected to the feeling of being different, all of the participants expressed having a greater appreciation for their families, friends, modern conveniences and other cultures after their combat deployment and considered this to be a renewed sense of self. In his first interview, Andrew said, "You see things differently. I don't take life for granted anymore." Hobo added, "So, you appreciate things, ya know, a lot more – just weird stuff, ya know? Just, ya know, bein' able to sleep in a really nice bed, ya know?"

Marie Autumn said:

Yeah, it's - I don't, I don't know how but it just - maybe it was just being there and being like, "Oh, wow." And then coming back here and being like, "Wow, look how much we have." And how many people just don't care about it or don't appreciate it enough.

Joe spoke of his broader understanding of the world and how this influenced his renewed sense of appreciation for things when he said, “For somebody like me, who actually went to part of the world that not a whole lot of people get to see. I mean the actual true thing of it, not from CNN or any of that stuff. But like – and I don't know, you come back and you just get a huge appreciation.”

Bobby talked about how combat brings you closer to those you love when he said:

...To everybody, all your friends. Makes you appreciate your family more and all that stuff. Makes you think, “I could be doing something better at home to improve my life...” It set me in the right direction, positive direction, I think. I'm here. I'm in school, trying to make myself better, so...

Blacksheep said, “It's like it's – you take so much for granted...you don't realize how good you have it here until you go somewhere else and you see it, and you see it from a completely different point of view.” Adam described this acquired appreciation when saying, “Small things that you never know you've – that you never know you had until you lost them. That old adage. That's true. That's true with shit. So it's just one of those things you learn. You learn through life experience and you figure it out.” Jason added, “But yeah, so I have a more appreciation towards everything. How we've developed here. And compared to what's goin' on over there. I like the smell of the honeysuckle on the air....You know, you don't get that in the rest of the world.”

Participants pointed to their military training as a determining factor in their changed sense of self. During our discussions, they spoke of feeling more mature, more professional due to both their training and combat experiences. Frenchy said:

I think so because you have more discipline. ...kids were always complaining about wearing their hats during class. “Oh, why can't we, we paid to go here.” It's like, “I paid to go here it too. I paid to get an education. Follow the rules and what's it matter? What's it matter if you can't wear your hat in school. That's the rules follow the rules. Have some discipline. Don't ruin for everybody else.”

John added:

...There's the military discipline that's, hey, you're here in class...And I found myself, that kinda like snaps me out. I use that – I kinda yell at myself in a military discipline style to snap back and to concentrate on my class...It's just I'm-I'm trained and I'm-I'm expected to do more and to act professional regardless of the situation, so I try to maintain that and just let it roll off.

Michael spoke of military structure and discipline by saying:

I mean, you're taught from day one to stand tall. Lift your chin up. Just the basic. And when I say "marching" I just mean that's pretty much it. You're taught appropriately how to march, and then everything falls into place. Yeah, you definitely when you get out you lose that structure. And if you're not a sound person, or of sound mind, I think it can definitely wear on you and can be detrimental.

Sandy said, "I think it's just to teach you discipline and know that even if you're pushed down to your lowest low that you have the camaraderie around you that's gonna bring you back up."

Hobo added, "People in the military like it when things are spelled out for 'em, ya know? It makes it easier when there's a – when there's a structure. I like – and that's, ya know, rightback to basic training."

Despite the feeling that the military had instilled a greater sense of professionalism and discipline into their lives, participants also believe that their military training and combat experiences greatly impacted the sense of who they were as individuals, and many are struggling to reclaim a sense of self. JP passionately described what he has experienced when saying:

They break you down; make you a team. And if you can deal with the harassment and the badmouthing and the hazing and the working you out till you puke, you can do it. Yeah, it's just a mind game. You definitely have to find yourself again, oh yeah. And the soul searching in the world is not gonna help unless you have somebody to show you who you are. You've been – I don't know how else to

explain it. You have to have somebody help you 'cause if you've been in combat, you definitely have some issues, to say the least. So yeah, so you have to have somebody show a mirror to you and say, "This is what you look like now," and then you're like, "Oh, that's not me." And you have to build up to being you again. So yeah, it's a learning process.

Marie Autumn continued:

And like the Army made me feel like I didn't know who I was anymore. Like I - like 'cause they told me what to do, what to do, what to wear. And, you know, so it's like I couldn't make my own decisions. I kind of felt like I was a blank slate almost. That - I felt like that right after basic training. And when I first got to Fort Hood I kind of felt like, "I don't know who I am."..And then when I got back from Iraq and stuff I felt like that again and it was just really weird, like, "Who am I?"

Jason talked about the emphasis on building a team at the loss of self when he said, "What they're (military) doing is just breaking you down so you, you know - and then what they're gonna do is build you right back up to what they want you to be. Your sense of self is not at any point at all. It's a sense of we and us is most important. That's almost the heart of it."

Participants further elaborated on the military training and ultimate goal of building a cohesive team by describing the methods of training to be a form of 'brainwashing'. Also described as 'mind games,' these methods were seen as a contributing factor to the loss of self throughout the military enlistment and combat.

Steve, a Marine having served two tours of duty, said:

So, as far as brainwashing is, the military brainwashes their - they have to train their military personnel by means of brainwashing, by breaking the person down to the most quintessential being. Like, you're just a - you're just a human. You don't think. You just do. That's it. You just sit there. And then once they break you down to that, to pretty much where you can't function, then they build you back up slowly.

Nate, who has been on three tours of duty, added:

It just – it's just one thing after another. Just changing the way you're thinking without actually knowing. You really don't realize it at all that they're slowing just kind of brainwashing you in one direction and making you react a certain way to certain things. You don't realize it until long after.

Adam, the youngest of the participants, said, “Really, the only actual serious, say, torture you're going through – it's all – is in your head. And that's what they play – is mind games. They're trained to treat you in a certain way and tell you certain things in such a way that you believe them.” Michael added, “Well, the basic training and the – the infantry training, it definitely – ya know, it – it takes you from being a civilian and putting into that military mindset where, ya know, you take orders, you do what you're told.” Andrew continued, “It's a huge head game. They break you down and build you up, and that part I wasn't ready for either.”

It appears that the military methods of training intended to build uniformity, discipline and team mentality may contribute to a soldier's loss of individuality but are also highly effective in instilling a sense of connection and loyalty to other soldiers. This connection will be discussed in a later section of this chapter focusing on the theme of connections to other veterans.

All of the participants acknowledge that their experiences in the military serving on combat deployments have influenced how they see themselves and how they make meaning in their everyday lives. All but two participants also see combat veteran as a significantly influential part of their core identity, and many continue to struggle with personal identity negotiation from soldier to civilian to student. Veteran as part of core identity is ever-present for most of the participants, shaping who they are, how they see the world and interact with others. Veteran identity has not only contributed to how

combat veterans view themselves, but how they perceive other non-veterans, altering their experiences as a result.

Perception of Others

How combat veterans perceive others, in particular their younger peers in college, appears to be deeply rooted in how they see themselves as veterans and individuals since their combat deployment(s). When discussing their experiences as college students, participants overwhelmingly felt a sense of frustration and distraction when interacting with their younger peers, in particular on campus and in the classroom.

Given that as combat veterans the participants view themselves as more mature and more disciplined, and considering their greater appreciation for the world around them after combat, there appear to be three related trigger points for their low tolerance of younger peers that impact their experience as college students. There is a collective perception of participants that younger students are immature and less experienced, appear less disciplined and have a perceived lack of appreciation for the college education afforded to them. Responding to questions about the college environment since enrolling, JP said:

And civilian life is totally different, and them being a student at that is way different. 'Cause say – you know people coming back from war have seen and done a lot more than say the average 17, 18-year old, 19-year old that comes in here and thinks they know all about life. And that pisses you off 'cause you're like, “Look man, you have no idea.”

Andrew added:

It's hard for me to talk to someone that's fresh out of high school and relate to them, because they're fresh out of high school. They haven't lived life yet. I haven't lived life fully yet, but I lived the military life, and someone fresh out of high school has no clue what that is. They don't know what teamwork is and what it means to be a family and be a brotherhood, even though you're not family.

Nate described how his experiences impacted his perception of age not necessarily in a linear sense when he said:

Kids – I can deal with them a little bit more. Kids, I mean like the 17, 18, 19 year old kids who come in. When I was 22 I was considered an old guy in the military. I was 23, I'm an old man. So when I came out of that, I felt 30, I felt 35 when I got out, so when I say kid, you might look at me and say oh, you're in the same age bracket. No, not even close. I can deal with them better.

When asked what was difficult about being in class with students who were younger,

Nate continued:

Ignorance. Just the sheer ignorance of the things that come out of their mouth especially about things that they have absolutely no idea what the hell they're talking about when the war would come up or their thoughts on events or their thoughts on some of the stuff coming – and you're like where the hell are you getting this from? And I would become extremely vocal.

When negotiating his veteran identity in the classroom, Steve said:

Well, as a veteran being a student, it's hard for, ah – it's hard for me to, ah, concentrate on the class because of all the little bickering and all the stuff that's going on with the other students. Cause I'm 26 and these kids are the high – just got out of the high school. So, me, I'm more mature, so I want to go somewhere where other people who are more mature are, rather than sit in a – in a lounge where people are just being childish and just not being professional...and, like, goes right back to the fact where, like, my experiences over there, like some days I just feel like snapping, so just walk out of the – walk out of the classroom.

When asked about how his experience is different than spending time with other veterans,

Steve continued, “So, I mean, they already know – I'd say military etiquette or professionalism – professional etiquette, so I'd rather deal with that than have to deal with the lower maturity level of students who, once again, I perceive as not knowing much about the military life.”

In his answer, Jason spoke of an innocence he perceives surrounds him on campus

when he said, “Well, you look – say if I look around the classroom, I see all these young faces. I mean, I really, truly feel I have more miles backwards than they have frontwards just because of experience, just overall general life. Kinda see an innocence in everyone around you.”

Marie Autumn had a similar perception of seeing younger students around her who she didn't feel she could relate to because of a different world-view. She said, “Um, I don't - I think, well, there's - I've just noticed people - like a lot of people are younger than me. There's not a lot of - like tons of people who are older than me. Um, but I just - I don't know, they see things differently than I do.” Miles alluded to the presence of a veteran in the classroom and how this can be unrecognized by students who may lack a broader understanding of the world when he said, “You know, like, people don't realize that, you know, you're sitting in the classroom with someone who's been elsewhere and, you know, been through parts of life that you can't even identify with...”

Joe spoke aggressively about being in college classes with younger students. He said:

I – well, number one, being 28 years and in with just a bunch of fucking kids. Number one, I hate teenagers and it makes me understand fully well of why – back in the grandparent days – they sent them off to boarding schools and stuff like that 'cause nobody wanted to deal with them. The students that – it's just it was one of those type of things where just I didn't feel welcome. I just didn't. It was that feeling.

Participants spoke regularly of their perception that other students, younger students in particular, lacked the discipline each of them saw as an integral part of the college experience. Vinstigator said:

I say kids, these young adults text messaging or having a side bar conversation while the professor is speaking which is of course you know the decorum of ethics and etiquette in the classroom. When they're talking you don't talk. And it frustrates me as a military guy. They need discipline in the room. Yeah. I've

even looked at a kid and said, “How are you on your cell phone? You’re failing this class. I know that you’re failing this class. I sit beside you every day and you’re on your cell phone texting somebody right now while the professor’s talking.” I’m like, “What’s wrong with you?” You know? “What’s wrong with you?”...And, as a matter of fact, for the next few minutes it was difficult for me to focus on the classroom because I’m sitting here going, “I can’t believe this kid.”

Adam also spoke of the younger students as ‘kids’ and said:

I don't have a problem with the non-veteran students; it's just like – those kids that just sleep in class all the time and kids that just text in class all the time, and then the professor says something to them, and they're just like, “Yeah, okay” and then just keep doing it. And there was a few times I was so close to saying something and doing something about it.

When asked about how being around younger students differs from spending time with other veterans Adam continued:

...It’s just a way higher maturity level and we can goof off and say stupid stuff and do dumb stuff but I’d like to think it’s on a different caliber because the other students or the...not all non-veteran students. I’m making friends with non-veteran students. That’s not been a problem but just like - the straight out of high school types, I just can’t really...we’ve got nothing in common.

Blacksheep added, “I really cannot tolerate people who don’t have any self-discipline. I really can’t tolerate kids who, you know, 19-20 years old who just don’t understand, ‘You’re in the classroom to learn.’”

Among participants, there was also a common perception that younger, less mature and disciplined students lacked a greater appreciation for the education afforded to them. Master Sergeant said, “But I watch these kids sometimes just play around, sleep in class, goof off, you know, just be laxidative with their studies. And retake the same course and course because they take it as a joke or they don’t take it seriously.”

Blacksheep added:

It really takes away from the educational experience for me. I'm here because I want to be here. I'm here because – and I look at them, and I'm like “I earned the right to be here. I fought to be here. And you don't even want to be here, and it's so clear you don't want to be here. Just leave. If you're not going to pay attention, and you're not going to respect the teacher and respect your fellow classmates, leave, because I don't want to deal with you.”

She continued, describing the right she feels she has earned to be in the classroom, and said, “I'm sitting in a classroom with 19- and 20-year-olds who can't figure out to turn their cell phone off for 10 minutes, so it's like where's – do-don't you understand that this is a privilege? You have a privilege. You're in school, and it's a privilege. - you are here as a privilege. Don't squander it. Don't sit there and waste my time. I paid with blood, sweat and tears for my time here.”

Bobby added:

But, it just goes to show what I was saying about people nowadays, the kids coming up, they don't give a shit. You got people in there on their Facebook while the teacher's lecturing. A lot of the teachers – well, here they do, but a lot of the times the teachers don't even see it, but when they do, they don't even say anything. It's like, “All right, you wanna fail, you fail.” Now, how does that benefit the student, you know?

Frenchy spoke about discipline and appreciation of education when he said, “Yeah. And I have gotten the discipline and I have got the perspective of I'm paying to go to school. I'm trying to get my ordinary reason education here and advance myself because I know I can sit there and follow the rules and listen to the teacher and some people just can't do it.”

During our discussions of how it felt to interact with younger students in class and on campus, JP spoke strongly about conversation he had with an 18 year-old student during his first semester on campus. He said, “This was actually an 18 year-old student

that watched way too much CNN and thought that that was war.” He elaborated about one particular experience in the classroom:

I have no patience for stupid people, I guess would be a good way of putting it. And yeah, sometimes in sociology, people start talking about how – that our soldiers are killing people anonymously and just – I’m sitting there going, “You have no idea. Maybe you should walk a mile in somebody else’s shoes before you open your mouth” - and your mind's going and you're not hearing anything that's going on in the class. I'm in six different places but class.

Adam spoke of a “rage” he felt during a similar experience in one of his classes. He said:

I just completely lose what the teacher is saying and all I’m focusing on is not doing and not saying anything because they’ll do some shit and I’ll just be like, “Are you fucking kidding me?” The whole time, are you fucking kidding me? Yeah, well the moral of the story is that I completely don’t even know what happened. I just kind of curtailed myself in my own rage.

When asked about how distracting these types of feelings can be for him while in school,

Adam added:

Oh, like you wouldn't believe. It drives me nuts. But I gotta calm myself down, and I'm just like, “Okay, it's not my class; the teacher's job – he's gonna deal with that.” It takes a lot of concentration on my part to keep my attention on the teacher. But I have to keep telling myself that it’s not my class and the teacher’s going to do however the teacher’s going to do.

JP’s comments underscore how the experiences of a combat veteran can influence perception of others and introduces the next theme of the inferred perception veterans have of themselves based on their interactions with non-veteran civilians in and out of the classroom.

Inferred Perception of Self

The third theme to emerge in the data analysis was an inherent and inferred perception of self based on the interactions participants had with non-veteran civilians in and out of the classroom and an inferred perception of self based on their experiences in

the military. The inferred perception related to interactions with non-veteran civilians fell into two distinct categories: an inferred perception of being a ‘killer’ or a perception of emotional/mental instability. Participants also described moments of feeling targeted or labeled due to the stigma or misconception of combat veterans that presents when inappropriate questions or interactions with other non-veterans occur.

Every participant acknowledged being asked what JP called the “worst question ever”: “Have you ever killed anyone?” It is an understatement to say this is a loaded question after speaking with the participants. The question itself, posed in different interactions has prompted various reactions from participants in the moment such as anger, frustration, and avoidance to name a few. JP explained how it feels to be asked this question:

Yeah, I hate that question, 'cause it's – no one wants to relive what they went through. They have a hard enough time already, trust me. 'Cause PTSD, you trigger and you see it. You feel it; you smell it. It's rough. Yeah, it's there. So we don't need to come to school and have somebody ask us a question like that, and now I'm apt to go back to whatever we were doing at the time, and it's not fun.

Bobby expressed similar frustration with the question and said:

I don't know, normal stuff like “What did you do over there? How many people did you kill?” which that one pisses me off every time. “What kind of guns did you shoot?” It just gets old, same questions over and over...I do the whole military thing for my own gratification. I don't need to tell people my life story. I just keep it to myself. It will end up turning into more questions and I hate answering questions.

Sandy said in his description, “Yeah, I think so. It's just yeah, they think that that's you go in the military and that's what you do. You go and kill people. That's not always, you know, we'd rather not.” Marie Autumn said simply, “I don't even need a recognition or anything, I just don't think people should hate vets. They just need to be like – they

did something good and thank you, that's all." Michael talked about the personal nature of being asked the question and a feeling of being labeled in the moment the question was asked. He said:

I mean, that just – so, the perception there that we were just killers was definitely – it was somethin' that – that hit home. I was like, "This isn't somethin' I wanna talk about. We're in a combat role, but we're also humanitarian," which people don't realize. They think Marines just rush in and that they're – they're killers, but it's – it's not, ya know. We have hearts. We're humans. ...They – I think they think we're just – we're robots – we're programmed.

Steve spoke of a fear of being labeled and expressed an awareness of labels associated with combat veterans. He said:

So, students perceive us all different ways. Like, I've been told that oh, you're probably a baby killer and this and that. I've been told all kinds of stuff. I've been – I've already been judged. There's people that judge you automatically when they find out that you're in the military. So what do we do? We just take ourselves out of the equation.

Similarly to Michael, Nate talked about the misconception people have of combat veterans in the context of the inappropriate questions people will ask of him, and said, "Especially when it's so derogatory towards some of the things I've done. Have I killed people? Yeah, you're damn right I have. But yeah, you didn't learn about the school I built – helped build. The soccer field we made for the kids."

Frenchy added, "People are like, 'Oh, baby killers,' and the funeral protests and stuff, and they're – they're just ignorant people that don't know 'cause they haven't had the experience, and they haven't lived life except here and what they have now." When asked why he thinks people ask that question, Frenchy continued, "Just human nature to ask and wonder. So you really can't get too mad, but it's just an ignorant question to ask. It's just something that you shouldn't ask. Just a little too personal."

Like Frenchy, most participants acknowledged that the question of whether they had killed someone in combat was far too personal and something they would rather not answer nor talk about. Some related this to a feeling of not wanting to relive their experiences while others felt it was a deeply private part of themselves and not appropriate for conversation in the context of being in college. Adam said:

Well I try not to talk about the Army period with non-veterans because like lots of times they won't understand or if I mention something of things that I've seen or things that I've done, and I mean like bad things that I've seen and done, first I don't want to talk about it period, but if I talk about it or if I were to with non-veterans, they either just will flat-out not understand or they will completely take it out of context kind of a thing. I don't want people to be just like, "Oh my God, he's a fucking killer." Not that that will really affect my life, but that will just make things more awkward.

Blacksheep added:

It gets uncomfortable because people almost expect you to say, "Oh, yeah, I've killed 30 Iraqis."...It's kind of one of those where it's like, that's not something you want to talk about. You wouldn't go up to a policeman in uniform and say, "How many people have you shot?" So why would you do it to a veteran who is in plain clothes? Why would you do it to your classmate? They don't understand.

John talked about being asked the question in front of a class and described how he felt the question disrupted the learning environment in the moment. He said, "The worst one is, uh, 'So, did you kill anyone?' And, uh, I had – one of the – in my math class last semester, I had a girl. She's like, 'Was there alotta killing over there?' Teacher was astonished and didn't know what to do." When asked to describe how questions like that influence his experience in the classroom and on campus, John continued:

Uh, uh, the only way I can describe it is like if you put yourself in a –the – a dog's position and you're walking around with a human, and you just – you just know you're different. You know you're – like you're almost like a different species - Um, you feel abstract, um, kinda like everyone's looking at you, um. So, it's-it's different.

John's description of the events in his class supports the concept of an inferred perception of self that may feel forced upon a combat veteran in the moment or perhaps long after the interaction has occurred. Joe spoke specifically about the continued feeling of being a target even as a civilian. He said:

Yeah. I mean, I've, you know, whether it's students in the class or even the instructors, you know, I'm always on the defense as far as that where I don't know, just people push their little views on you and it's like that mentality just like where you feel like a target again. ...And it's kind of amazing how that works too. It's just deployment you're like a target, like to be shot at or blown up. Here you're a target to be ridiculed.

Blacksheep spoke about how her answer to what she perceived as an inappropriate and personal question may cause someone to look at her differently. She said:

Um, uh, just people don't understand is really the biggest issue. They don't know how to approach someone, or the questions like, "Did you shoot someone?" You don't – I don't answer that. I didn't, but I still don't want to answer that, because if you say "no," "Oh, well, then you didn't see anything," but if you say "yes," well, then you're a bad person.

Jason talked about the filters he has up in class or on campus in an effort to not have to discuss his experiences as a combat veteran in an effort to avoid uncomfortable situations. He said:

Or, you know, even, I don't wanna upset anybody. So that, you do put a wall up. I'm just gonna say, mind my own business, learn what I can. Keep a smile on my face. I immediately gotta be appropriate. I can't—you know. You don't want to have anyone to have a bad day on your behalf. I guess, you just—cautious. I'm cautious.

When you're sittin' there in that class, and you wanna say somethin', but, well, they'll look at me, and you get kind of, a little claustrophobic. 'Cause everyone, who, turns to look. I guess maybe I do have a little problem with that. Like all eyes are on me, kind of feels weird.

Peter spoke of being asked to write about his combat experiences for a class, the challenges this experience brought up for him and fear of how he might be judged by non-veterans. He said:

Yeah and then again it's like I don't know if I want to put that out there again. It's just a lot of personal stuff. It's a lot of stuff to write about, yeah. So that's where I'm at in English class and I don't know. I'd rather talk to other vets about it. They understand it better when you start talking about that and if you don't have anybody in there or say somebody has a different opinion on the war, then it's controversy.

Agreeing that this feeling influences his experiences on campus, Jason stated that he will selectively identify as a combat veteran and is more likely to keep this part of his identity hidden. He said:

Yeah, I guess I could be labeled. I didn't wanna, like I try not to let anyone know I'm in the military when I'm at school, 'cause I don't want any special favoritisms, or any labels, either way. It's not fair. You put up your filters, also put you into a state of bein' a hermit. You know, quiet.

Bobby expressed similar feelings when speaking about his experiences on campus when he said, "I don't really tell people that I'm in the military. I'd rather just fly under the radar, do my thing." When asked if he had his own filters up so as not to have to discuss his past experiences, Bobby added, "I don't think anybody wants to relive what they've done, and I sure as hell know most people don't wanna talk about it."

Participant responses also suggest an inferred perception of self as emotionally and/or mentally unstable due to their combat experiences. Interestingly, this appears to stem from conscious and unconscious messages from not only non-veteran civilians but from the military itself.

When Joe spoke of his return from combat he said, "It seems like when you come back everybody just wants to see how crazy you really are." Frenchy talked about the

perception he thinks people may have of him, but also his sense of self in the context of what he went through. He said, “You can say I’m messed up in the head. You can say any of ‘em are, but, eh, it’s normal for what we went through. I don’t wanna be seen as the crazy, angry, you gotta watch out for him. Um, ‘cause I’m so happy to be home and-and, uh, to have so much.” When asked how he believes civilians perceive combat veterans Frenchy said, “Somebody freaked out and paranoid, jumpy that kind of stuff, shell shocked be testy type.” JP spoke about his chronic PTSD and how it affects his experience in college by saying:

And we’d like to prove that we’re not at – it takes a lot of will power for me to – or not will power, but just it hurts me to honestly say that I have a mental issue. Whereas, that wasn’t the case forever, you know, and it hurts. It takes away – you feel like it takes away from who you are. It takes a part of you. So, when you have to hey by the way, I’m kind of mental.

JP continued by describing his fear of how people may perceive him as a combat veteran the worry of being treated differently than others. He added, “...People walk around on eggshells and you’re like no, please don’t. You know? If I’m upsetting you, fucking you tell me. You know? Or if I’m doing something wrong, let me know. If I’m late, give me the same grade you would anybody else.” Michael further illustrated JP’s point when he said, “I don’t know I just – I felt like I wanted to distance myself and not really – you know, I didn’t want to give my opinion and make people – oh, he’s just a crazy war vet. That’s how I felt at sometimes, you know, not knowing at the time what was going on.” Michael shared a story during his interview about a class where the topic of war was brought up and a debate ensued among the students in the room. Describing how it was to go to that class for the remainder of the semester, Michael said:

I think it definitely did because after that I was kind of like hesitant; didn't really want to go to that class. I mean, I passed it with good grades and ended up with an A. But I definitely, like if the topic was kind off the beaten path I didn't really get involved with it as much. I was kind of distant from some of the conversations we would have.

Steve talked about how he believes people perceive him as a Marine, including some of his classmates when he said:

There is a huge misperception of who veterans are. And then, ah, some kids in my class – like – 'cause I had to write papers about just ran – ah, my life or something like that – they found out I was in the military and like – and they were joking around. But they were like, “Oh, this guy's a Marine. He's gonna whoop your ass.” Or, “I don't want to be your friend,” or something like that. So, like – and knowing my family, like, they – my family won't even talk to me 'cause they don't – like, they think I'm dangerous. So it's like perception of military, in general, is that you are pretty much crazy from the day you joined, you're just crazy.

Although not every participant spoke directly about the perception of being “crazy” due to the fact they were a combat veteran, each of them did speak about being seen differently due to their veteran status; an inferred perception of combat veterans as thoughtless killers lacking emotion and rational decision making based on the inappropriate questions and behaviors of their non-veteran peers. In a powerful statement, John talked about the fear he had of reading his English paper about combat aloud in class to others who are not veterans. “It was part of the dehumanization part. Um, they might look at me like a monster.”

Interestingly it appears that the military itself may also play a role in the inferred perception by the participants of PTSD based on how they as combat veterans were treated for hidden injuries such as PTSD and TBI in the field and after deployment. When asked about how the military perceived soldiers with PTSD, the answers varied, but the internalized message of it being seen as a weakness was clear. After an injury in

the field and related emotional distress Michael said of his experiences with the military, “I signed up for four years, and it was kind of just like, ‘Okay. You’re broken. Go home.’” Miles continued by describing his experience after deciding to leave his unit due to post traumatic stress-related issues he was experiencing:

I got completely blacklisted, you know, like from my unit. Like, they just treated me like I was a piece of shit that no longer could function, you know, and I get it, it’s the Army, never stops going, it’s always moving forward and you’re either onboard or you’re not.

Steve talked about his experience after being medivaced out of Iraq with a shoulder injury and the emotional distress that followed when he said:

And the squadron I went to – the day I got back was pretty much like, “Oh, you got medivaced out. You’re just a coward.” I’m like, “Okay, whatever.” So I’ve already got that stereotype, and then I got nominated for the Bronze Star while – from my command over there. And then they took it away once they found out I was having mental issues. They were like, “Oh, you don’t deserve it.”

Nate described how the military views injuries, in particular hidden injuries by saying:

Going to a hospital, that’s bad. I don’t care how hurt you are, unless you’re not walking, going to the hospital is bad. Doctors are bad ‘cause you’re not at work. It sticks with you. So naturally I don’t want to talk to a psychiatrist. I don’t like them ‘cause they’re bad. That’s how I was trained. Even if – let’s say I wanted to get help. What they’re gonna do is they’re gonna take me out of my unit. They’re gonna take me away from my guys, take away my responsibility and keep me away from weapons because I’m a mental danger...Now you’re the crazy kid. So that’s the stigma. That’s why no one gets help.

Nate continued by illustrating how this inferred perception plays out for him on campus when considering the process of registering with Disability Services. He said:

“I will not – I will not register that anywhere else (other than the VA). Absolutely not. If they were like sign this thing on campus, no. I’m perfectly capable of taking care of myself. I don’t want it known. But if I come up to a teacher and be like look, yesterday was a bad day, I was losing my mind, it wasn’t good for me to drive, let alone be in class, help me out. That’s all I ask. I don’t want to register disabled, I don’t want to – no, just understand.”

Sandy sees this inferred perception stemming back to his training. He said. “I think it’s a – like a personal soldier, like you’re training. You’re supposed to be able to handle anything that comes with you and you’re supposed to overcome and adapt to that. It was the big line that was for Marines anyway is that you overcome and adapt in any situation.” JP strongly stated the lack of attention and concern the military has for issues surrounding PTSD. When asked if soldiers are encouraged to talk openly about PTSD he said:

No. Hell no. Their debriefing was, “Anybody have PTSD, a catch phrase?” And you're like, “What? What's that?” And they're like, “Oh, okay. No, negative. All right, carry on.” So yeah, they don't care. You're somebody to fill some boots.

Michael talked about how the perception of PTSD by the military may prevent military members from disclosing any emotional issues or registering with Disability Services on campus. He said:

There's people at – there's people in the school that refuse to – 'cause they're reservists. They won't talk with – they – they didn't want to seek help because they are in the reserves – so they could – they want to deploy again because they think that's what they want to do, and which is fine because that's what they do in the military, but – and you're having personal issues and stuff like that. And you hold it back, you tend to bottle it up.

Two participants spoke of an inferred perception of their intelligence based on their military status. Nate said:

I get perceived as dumb, a lot. That is not uncommon. I didn’t realize how, “Oh you joined the military. Oh you must have been dumb. No one’s ever said it, but you just can feel it. “Oh we’ll just give him this to do.” I’m tired; I’m actually a lot smarter than you. I didn’t join the military because I was retarded; I joined because I wanted to do it. Yeah, that definitely came up. That’s a big one.

In a related comment, Jason talked about the perception he believes others have of people in the military. He said:

I want to be unique as I can, but some sort of intelligence. You know, most military guys, don't get me wrong, but they kind of come off, meatheads, you know. Get told what to do, and they follow orders, that's all they need to do. And it has its own label right there.

Despite only two participants mentioning this perception of being less intelligent it is important to note as yet another inferred perception that some combat veterans feel in their interactions with others.

This inferred perception of self is an important observation in the research and appears to be correlated to the experience of the participants as college students based on participant responses. Equally important to the delicate balance of core identity and perception of self appears to be the strong connection participants feel towards other combat veterans in and out of the classroom.

Connections to Other Veterans

All veterans, but in particular combat veterans, share a common bond that appears to transcend rank, branch, war, and maybe even time itself. Andrew illustrated this when he said, "Being in the military, it's different. It changes your thinking, the way you live, so it's, to me, we're all the same. I mean, that's – it's the brotherhood. I mean, I don't care what branch you're in, it's brotherhood."

Blacksheep spoke of a band of brothers, a brethren, that looks out for each other no matter what when she said:

We are taught to rely on our fellow military members and our fellow brethren to get us through the situation and rely on the training that we have collectively. We're all trained to go through the same things, and we're all trained to deal with it the same way, but when you don't have that, you're like an arm without a body. I mean, you need the rest of the body to function properly.

She added, “We all had the same training and the same discipline to step up and give your life for your fellow soldier, no matter what.” Bobby talked the unconditional support fellow combat veterans offer each other and are trained to provide. He discussed the difference he feels being in civilian life versus in the “theatre” of war when he said, “Keeps you on your toes, sense of brotherhood with all the – having your friends’ back and all that, knowing that they’ll have your back and then knowing that you’ll have their back at any time when anything goes down. That’s a good feeling.” Marie Autumn said, “I mean, even if we haven’t even gone – even if they haven’t deployed or deployed to the same place as me, it’s like there’s somebody who just knows what you’ve gone through. And you don’t have to explain little details. And they don’t ask uncomfortable questions.”

Like Marie Autumn, other participants spoke directly about the comfort level they feel around other veterans and how deep this bond goes. Jason said:

When you’re around other vets, it kind of, it’s that camaraderie still. I haven’t even served a single day with these guys, and – It’s a comfortable zone, you know? He’s had it, and I’ve had it, and some of that stuff sticks to guys – And they only feel comfortable around other guys that have at the same dirt.

Vinstigator talked about how this bond not only translates into a level of comfort but a lonely feeling of not having another veteran to connect with when you return to civilian life:

You rely on that guy next to you to do whatever it is. He's willing to sacrifice himself just to save you just as you're willing to sacrifice yourself to save him. And that brotherhood – when you come into – when you leave that, it feels very lonely. It can feel very lonely. And you don't have someone who's really looking out for your back. Who's really trying to help you out. You kind of come out here, and you feel like you're alone sometimes.

Miles spoke about his comfort level with other veterans, including those from other wars, when he said:

And that feeling is – you know, and you can – it just kinda just makes everything like better, you know. Like, you don't really – I don't know, you just understand each other, you know what it's like, you know. And even meeting Vietnam veterans, it's the same thing, like you're immediately – like, you understand it, you get it. Like, it's not – I don't – it's hard to explain, like you just kinda – 'cause it just kinda happens, you know, and you'll do anything for them, you know, just, whether it's – if it's help with school or help with money or help with, you know, getting a ride to an appointment, anything. It's just you'll jump to help them people before you'll help other people, and that, I guess is just how it – like, the easiest way to explain it, I guess.

When asked if he prefers to spend time with other veterans when on campus Adam said, “Yes, because they understand...well we all understand where we're all coming from kind of thing and it's great because a lot of our morals are kind of on the same level, kind of sort of you know?” Peter added to this saying, “Yeah, and I wrestle with a lot of crap all the time and really there's nobody I can talk to about it. It sucks unless I'm talking to another vet.” Master Sergeant said:

Yes, I lean to veterans. The Veterans Center here is a great asset. It's like a safe haven...It's a place where we can kinda get away from the traditional students that really don't understand us and really don't have the same intellect when it comes to casual conversations and understand where we come from and our mindsets.

Hobo said during his interview, “So yeah meeting other vets was key probably in the whole beginning of the college experience. It was definitely pretty cool.” When asked how he went about meeting other veterans on campus, Hobo said:

So you kind of just find each other. And I think it's everyone, well vets anyway we definitely when we do find each other, we're pretty – there's some camaraderie pretty quick. Just like in the service. You learn how to make friends with other vets pretty quick.

When asked if he seeks out other veterans on campus and why, Andrew said:

I do, for comfort reasons. It's easier to relate. They know what you've gone through or not gone through, and you know the same about them, so it's easier for us to relate. We were able to joke around, and it's stuff that we understand, but the person next to us has no clue what we're joking around about and doesn't understand our mentality. Do you know what I mean?

Miles talked about what veterans wear help them find each other. He said, "At school, I'll put a combat action badge on my backpack or I'll wear my combat boots or I'll wear an Army shirt and you'll see other people do it. That's how you find each other." He continued to talk about the importance of finding each other and the unique bond between combat veterans. He said:

I think it's good that we find each other - the combat veterans. Because like, I don't know, I don't want to sound like too different, but like there is a combat veteran and then there's a non-combat veteran, and the combat veterans, you know, it's a lot better to find each other. Yeah, and that's what's important, is just knowing that there is someone there that you can call outside of school, like, in any day life, and you have that common experience.

Vinstigator noted how he seeks out other veterans and how it helps to compensate for the lonely feeling he had alluded to earlier in his interview. He said:

And, just paying attention lately, you start to see how people seek each other out. When I see other guys who I know are veterans on campus, it's an instant, "Hey, how you doing? How's it going?" Like, the conversation comes right back to the last time you spoke to them. And, it's a unique bond that you have there that just doesn't - it's hard to explain to people or to anyone. It's really hard to quantify it with words.

Participants talked about how this bond creates a heightened sense of awareness for other veterans and their well-being in class and on campus. John spoke of what he can see in other veterans, what they may see in him and how they are able to take care of each other in the moment. He said:

Um, sometimes they can see. They-they-they've been back long enough, they're - or they know what you're going through, so they can see when you're having a

hard time. They'll snatch you up, take you to the side. I think this is an important way to help – a lot of the things are – that we deal with, we can notice in other veterans, so we know the guy's about to flip out, we can grab him, pull him off to the side, be like, "Hey, what's wrong? You wanna talk about it?" have those experiences where we can open up to each other easier than just a civilian.

Master Sergeant talked about the unspoken connection and said, "I think when you come into a classroom, when you don't have a veteran in the room, there's no connection."

Similarly, when asked about the unspoken nature of this connection, Blacksheep said, "But when there is another veteran in the class, and you do know it, you kind of rely on each other for a little bit." She added, "If I know you're a veteran, and you know I'm a veteran, we'll kind of keep an eye on each other, even if we don't ever talk to each other, you still keep an eye out for each other. You always look out for them even if you kind of stay three steps away."

When asked why he preferred reading a paper he had written about his combat experiences to another combat veteran versus a non-veteran, Frenchy said, "Because they know a little bit more about it. And they might have gone through something similar. Just that brotherhood there. Them knowing what's it's like." Steve had a similar response when he said:

I would rather – I'd rather another veteran – I mean, 'cause I know that other veterans, I know that they've been through and I read theirs as well. But I'd rather read theirs because, I don't know, there's a time when you're reading papers and you're reading stories about other veterans and you pretty much – instead of like, a regular person reading it and just being like oh, okay that's interesting. And they haven't lived through anything like that or they can't really grasp like the nature of the writing, so when I have somebody else that's a veteran read my papers, they know what I'm talking about.

Nate talked about his connection to another combat veteran in his class and underscored the feeling of looking out for each other despite their different branches of service. He

said:

I connect with him because he's an infantry man too even though he was a Marine, but we get along a lot and before class, studying for a test or something, I'll find him in the library and we'll sit together and shoot the shit. But it's definitely a connection there automatically and we will defend each other, definitely.

Steve talked about the importance of spending time with other veterans in relation to his overall experiences as a college student when he said:

Going to classes and dealing with other veterans is easier for me to have a college experience – I have a better college experience being able to talk with other veterans rather than sitting down and having a conversation with just a regular student. Mainly because I don't have to sit there and act like – think oh am I being judged, what's this person think about me. Like, the veterans already know.

Steve continued and talked about classroom orientation as well as the perception that veterans look out for each other while in class. He said:

I sit right in front of the other veteran. We both sit on the wall close to the door where we can both see out the window. So we both had the same – pretty much had the same issue – similar issues but at the same time we're completely different. So, I chit chat with him and it's – I think it's easier. It's kind like the buddy system. You go to class with another veteran. You have someone else there that can pretty much – they see you getting angry or if they see you getting all weirded out they are like, hey. He's like [*knocking on desk*] go take a break, go to the bathroom real quick or something...It's that – even though he's in the Army, we look out for each other no matter what.

Following up on the idea of a connection in the classroom, when asked how it was to have another combat veteran in class with him and did he feel a connection, Miles said:

And that bond, and, uh, that's – that's where it helps me, you know, because you network and you know that you're not the only person that's pissed off sitting in the classroom ticking like a time bomb, you know, or just the only ball of stress, and that kinda helps get through it too. 'Cause if you look at one of your peers – and it was the same way in basic, it was like, you know, the guy next to me can – can do it, so really why can't I, and that kinda helps you get through school. You know, and just checking in and holding each other accountable.

Connections to other veterans appear to be woven into the fabric of the participants' lived experiences during and after their time in the military. Seventeen of them spoke of the camaraderie and brotherhood that exists between all veterans, regardless of rank, branch or conflict, based on their training, service in the military and shared experiences of combat. This brethren or connection runs deep and appears to not only provide these combat veterans with a significant validation of self but membership in a uniquely defined collective of individuals much larger than themselves, which helps them to create meaning in the past and present and as they look their futures.

Chapter Summary

Chapter 4 of this study provided a review of the research question, participant profiles, an overview of the data analysis methods utilized to construct meaning and a presentation of the researcher's findings. Four themes were generated and introduced through data analysis: Perception of Self, Inferred Perception of Self, Perception of Others, and Connections to other Veterans. The four themes were presented with input from the researcher with findings presented in predominantly narrative form using rich description and direct quotations from participants to provide the proper inflection and context for the findings. An overview of how the various themes were determined, how those themes were used to construct meaning and how the themes appear to influence the participants' experiences in college were included in the discussion. Chapter 5 will present theoretical significance, conclusions, limitations of the study, implications for further research, and recommendations for future practice.

CHAPTER FIVE

“Hope is the thing with feathers that perches in the soul - and sings the tunes without the words and never stops at all.” -Emily Dickinson

CONCLUSIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH, AND IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE PRACTICE

The purpose of this study was to gain a better understanding of the challenges student veterans who have been in combat face while transitioning from military service to college, and how their perception of their own identities and identity negotiation may affect this transition. The choice to employ blended methods of both phenomenological and grounded theory research design to this study was intended to make strides in adding to a greater theoretical understanding of veterans in higher education and to aid in filling the gap in contemporary research related to the transition of combat veterans to college and the critical needs of combat veterans during the period of their enrollment. Marshall and Rossman (2011) describe this approach as a method of forging new pathways in qualitative research, building bridges across traditions and utilizing multidisciplinary, hybrid forms of qualitative inquiry.

Chapter Five is the final chapter of this study and draws conclusions from the research findings related to the themes introduced in Chapter Four. First, a theoretical discussion will be presented, demonstrating the significance of the guiding theoretical frames for this study and how they build upon prior contemporary research. Then, a Combat Veteran Conceptual Identity Model as conceptualized by the researcher will be introduced. Next, conclusions from the study will be presented followed by an interpretive discussion of the intersections of the themes with the guiding theoretical

frames. Finally, sections devoted to researcher reflexivity, study limitations, recommendations for further study and implications for future practice in higher education will be presented, followed by a chapter summary.

Theoretical Significance

This section provides a brief discussion of the common theoretical frameworks that have been utilized by contemporary researchers Ackerman et al. (2008), Rumann and Hamrick (2010), Livingston et al. (2011), and DiRamio and Jarvis (2011) to better understand the experiences of student veterans and the complexity of their transition to college. This discussion will provide the proper context for the conclusions presented and demonstrate how this research builds upon prior scholarly inquiry and adds significance to the evolving theoretical understanding of student veterans in higher education.

Student veterans have had a relationship with higher education for more than 60 years, yet the body of contemporary research related to student veterans, in particular combat veterans, awaits further discovery and inquiry. This study provides another lens by which to view student veterans in higher education, building upon prior research, and provides a greater theoretical understanding of this population of students in the interest of better meeting their needs in the future through policy and practice.

Scholarly theory in social research is inherently fluid and relies upon studies such as this to encourage discovery as it relates to social phenomena, and research questions and methods that build upon prior scholarly inquiry. According to Anyon (2009), “Theory helps us to understand, expand our understanding of, and critically judge what counts as relevant knowledge, appropriate units of analysis, research questions, methods,

data, and analysis and explanation” (p.8). This research provides the opportunity to reflect upon previous contemporary scholarly inquiry, reconsider the applicability of prior theoretical correlations to the student population, and introduce alternative ways of conceptualizing the lived experiences of combat veterans in higher education.

Ackerman et al. (2008) first introduced Schlossberg’s Theory of Adult Transitions (1984) as a theoretical lens to gain insight into the potential short- and long-term effects of a student veteran’s transition from the military to the college classroom, continuing a renewed conversation about the needs of contemporary student veterans in higher education. Schlossberg (1984) built her original theory on the prior research of other scholars, including Erikson (1959) and Chickering (1969), out of what she saw as a need for a framework that would “facilitate an understanding of adults in transition and lead them to the help they needed to cope with the ordinary and extraordinary process of living” (Chickering & Reisser, 1993, p. 108). Schlossberg et al. (1995) defined transition as “any event or non-event that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles” (p. 27). Evans, Forney, and Florence (2010) suggested that the work of Schlossberg and her colleagues was both comprehensive in scope and conceptually sound (p. 122).

Ackerman et al. (2008) applied emergent themes from their qualitative analysis to the “Moving In, Moving Through, Moving Out” model for adult transitions presented by Schlossberg et al. (1989). The model was not adapted for student veterans, but rather applied to the research as a guiding theoretical frame with the assumption that being called to active duty with the prospect of combat qualifies as a major transition, disrupting existing routines and relationships (Ackerman et al., 2008). In their findings,

the authors noted that emergent themes from the qualitative analysis “fit neatly into the ‘Moving In, Moving Through, and Moving Out’ model” (Ackerman et al., 2008, p.80) and consequently made recommendations for future practice based on the emergent themes.

Although this was an important study and marked the re-emergence of attention to student veterans and contemporary exploration, it is difficult to imagine the lived experience of participants fitting “neatly” into a particular theory despite how comprehensive the theoretical framework presented. For example, the Moving In, Moving Through, and Moving Out Model by Schlossberg et al. (1989) suggests that when moving across these three phases individuals evaluate each transition, determine negative or positive effects, and conduct an inventory of resources to manage change over time. The researcher argues that such movements as part of an overall transition for combat veterans are unlikely to be linear or to contain distinct beginning or end points for each phase of that transition. Rather, the movement is likely to be more fluid and not necessarily concrete for the individual experiencing transition. Therefore, this calls into question the likelihood of any individual fitting “neatly” into a pre-defined category of transition given the complexity of the individual’s own personal experience and the unpredictability of contributing factors to that transition.

Additionally, Ackerman et al. (2008) did not consider participant identity or identity frameworks as part of the overall design despite the complexity of identity and its impact on transition. Goodman, Schlossberg, and Anderson (2006) noted, “personal and environmental contexts factor prominently into transitional experiences and often prompt identity re-examinations among individuals undergoing or completing transitions” (p.

435). Ackerman and DiRamio (2009) said there is a compelling need to conduct research that will provide campuses with the information to promote academic achievement of veterans who are students. This work took a first step in the research of student veterans upon which future, equally important, scholarly work would be built.

Rumann and Hamrick (2010) built upon the earlier work of Ackerman et al. (2008), by incorporating the 4 S System of Factors (situation, self, support, and strategies) as developed by Goodman et al. (2006) into the theoretical framework and analysis. Although the authors chose to study student veterans and their experiences enrolling in college through a lens of adult transitions using the work of Goodman et al. (2006) similar to Ackerman et al. (2008), they also incorporated the multiple dimensions of identity model (Abes et al., 2007; Jones & McEwen, 2000) into their theoretical and analytical framework.

The researchers found the Goodman et al. (2006) adult transition model as a useful method of understanding student veterans' transitions from active duty to college. In their discussion of findings, Rumann and Hamerick (2010) suggested student veterans may indeed be actively processing their military experiences while simultaneously negotiating their own personal identity as part of their experience while in college. In their recommendations for further study, Rumann and Hamerick (2010) said, "Studies overtly focused on student veterans' sense-making related to multiple dimensions of identity could reveal a great deal about how student veterans construct and achieve more complex senses of self that incorporate their experiences of the social identities of service-member and veteran (p. 454)."

Despite having only six participants, the introduction of the multiple dimensions of identity model (Abes et al., 2007; Jones & McEwen, 2000) into the body of scholarly research by Rumann and Hamerick (2010) was an important crossroad in the contemporary research and a significant “next step” towards a greater understanding of this population.

Following in the footsteps of Rumann and Hamerick (2010), Livingston et al. (2011) aimed to investigate and describe student veterans’ navigation of college re-enrollment and build upon the base of growing knowledge on their academic and social experiences. Once again, Schlossberg’s (1984) theory related to the uncertain and vulnerable nature of transitions was used for theoretical validity. There was no theoretical frame associated with identity utilized for this study.

The emergent themes and analysis presented in the results of this study provided the first transition model tailored specifically to student veterans, The Student Veteran Academic and Social Transition Model (SVASTM), and was developed to explain an emergent-grounded theory that explained student veterans’ re-enrollment management, initial academic challenges, and the social transitions that may be the most problematic (Livingston et al., 2011). In their analysis and discussion, Livingston et al. (2011) suggest how the four cornerstones: (1) Military Influence, (2) Invisibility, (3) Support, and (4) Campus Culture may play a part in the re-enrollment and social transition of student veterans to college. The usefulness of Schlossberg’s (1984) adult transition theory in helping to understand the experience of transition for student veterans was underscored in the Livingston et. al (2011) study, and their Student Veteran Academic

and Social Transition Model was an important contribution to the research of student veterans in higher education.

Despite the study representing an important step in the ongoing development of a greater theoretical understanding of this population of students, the results suggested a notable gap in the research related to how student veterans navigate identity re-negotiation upon their transition and how the perception of their own identity may influence their experience in college; a gap first noted by Rumann and Hamrick (2010). Livingston et. al (2011) described in their findings the apparent invisibility of student veterans and their avoidance of self-disclosure in college, in essence “camouflaging” themselves from others (pp. 326-27).

DiRamio and Jarvis (2011) aimed to provide up-to-date, useful information about student veterans attending college by blending the theoretical, practical, and empirical. Frameworks and theories from the college student development literature were introduced throughout the monograph and an adaptation of the Schlossberg 4S Model (1984) to student veterans was presented. While the scholarly work of Rumann and Hamrick (2010) foreshadowed an unexplored area of research linking identity negotiation to student veterans and their lived experiences as they transition from the military to college, DiRamio and Jarvis (2011) expanded upon this idea by devoting a chapter of their work to a discussion of identity: veteran, civilian, and student. Theories of identity development were applied as a means of understanding the emergent population of student veterans on campus, yet the authors noted that little empirical evidence exists to support the ideas presented (p. 65). As part of the next wave of contemporary research related to student veterans in college, this research aimed to provide the next important

building block of empirical evidence related to identity and introduces the Combat Veteran Conceptual Identity Model (Figure 1) as a means to focus the theoretical understanding of this population of students in higher education by considering their experiences through a lens of identity. Future testing of the model will allow for improved understanding of the relationships presented in the components of the model and focus the theoretical conversation related to this population of students.

Combat Veteran Conceptual Identity Model

Each of the themes that emerged from the data analysis – Perception of Self, Perception of Others, Inferred Perception of Self, and Connections to Other Veterans – appear to be actively present for most and connected to a participant’s core identity. Environmental factors, interpersonal dynamics and the participants’ own evolving sense of self influence what appears to be their ongoing negotiation of identity as soldiers, students, and civilians. This negotiation and the intersection of each of the themes with core identity is illustrated in the researcher’s *Combat Veteran Conceptual Identity Model* (Figure 1).

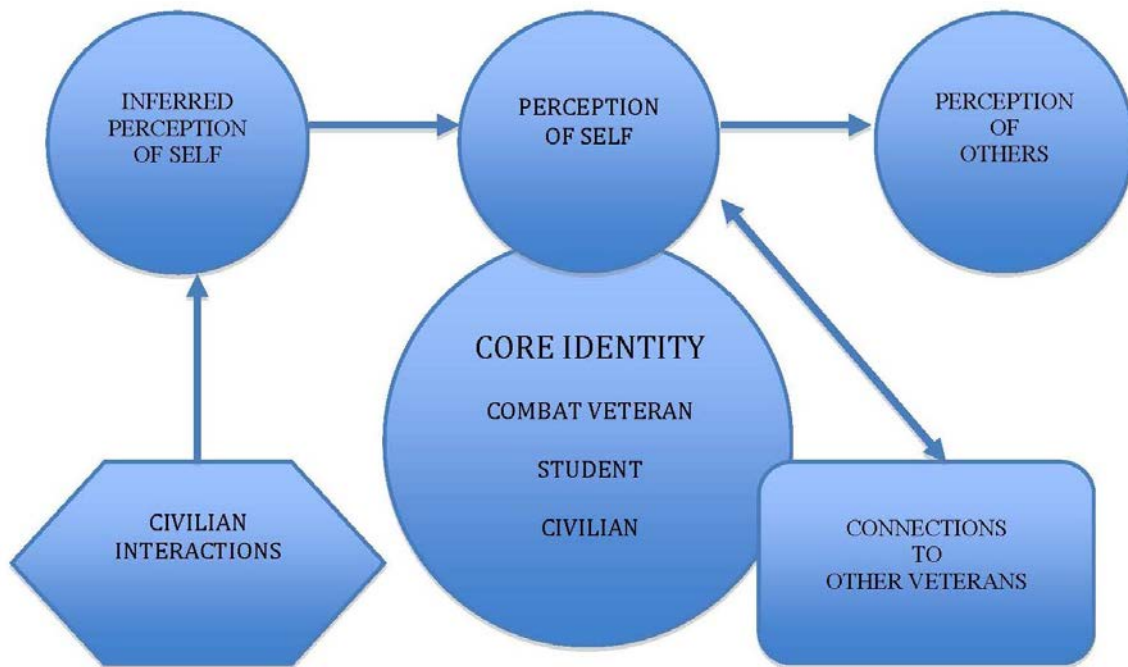


Figure 1. Combat Veteran Conceptual Identity Model

The *Combat Veteran Conceptual Identity Model* includes core identity, four components representing the themes from data analysis, and a representative component of combat veteran interactions with civilians.

This conceptual model explains the ongoing negotiation of identity that combat veterans are experiencing while enrolled in college after their combat deployment and discharge from the military. Unlike the results discussed by Ackerman et al. (2008), the negotiation of soldier to civilian to student does not appear to be linear in nature and is much more fluid, dependent upon the everyday interactions and environment that makes up the participants' lived experiences. This research is distinct from the work of

Ackerman et al. (2008) in that there was no “neat fit” of the participant responses to an existing transition or identity model. Therefore, the Combat Veteran Conceptual Identity Model represents an alternative way of understanding how participants perceive their own identity, how that identity is influenced by external factors and relationships, ultimately shaping their lived experiences.

The Inferred Perception of Self and Civilian Interaction components illustrate what appears to be a strongly correlated dynamic tension between a combat veteran’s inferred sense of self and their sense of self connected directly to their core identity. Despite their own sense of self, the inferred sense impacts their lived experience as college students, resulting in discomfort or anxiety on campus and selective identity to avoid what they perceive could be differential treatment.

The Perception of Others component of the model illustrates how core identity and sense of self inform their perception of others. Combat veterans see themselves as more mature and more disciplined than their younger peers, and consequently they believe they have a greater appreciation for their education and the world around them. This perception translates into an inherent frustration in the classroom and on campus that ultimately leads to persistent distractions and intrusive thoughts, influencing their overall experience as college students.

The Connections to Other Veterans component explains the brotherhood that combat veterans feel with other veterans and the significant influence this connection has on their perceived sense of self and ongoing identity negotiation as college students. The presence of other veterans on campus and in the classroom creates a cohesive learning

environment by providing the support, encouragement and a comfort level that combat veterans recall from their experiences in the military and during combat deployments.

Overall, the Combat Veteran Conceptual Identity Model illustrates the complexity of identity for combat veterans and the resulting influence on their experiences as college students. The model further underscores the challenges facing combat veterans in college long after their apparent transition from the military to civilian and then to college student. The process of enrolling at an institution of higher education is but the first step in a more deeply complicated experience for these students as they move through college.

Conclusions

By intentional design this research focused on combat veterans in higher education, a distinct subset of the larger population of veterans entering colleges across the country. The Hecht (1993) Communication Theory of Identity was significantly useful when applied to the student combat veterans in this study. Hecht (1993) provided the necessary scaffold to structure the interview protocols in a way that allowed the researcher to develop a deeper understanding of how combat veterans reveal or enact their own personal identity to others. When viewed in conjunction with the conceptual lens of Gee's (2000) model, the researcher was able to develop the core components of the Combat Veteran Conceptual Identity Model and consider the relationships between those components and the importance of how they interrelate with each other. The works of both Hecht (1993) and Gee (2000) were well suited to the study of combat veterans, how they perceive their own identities, and how this perception impacts their overall experience in college. Both frameworks provided an important opportunity to explore the complexities of multiple identity negotiation for combat veterans both inside and

outside the college classroom and the impetus for the introduction of the Combat Veteran Conceptual Identity Model for consideration and further study.

Many participants described their experiences in combat passionately, while for others the discussion was less emotive. Descriptors of the experience conveyed by participants were many and not limited to the following: “Combat was life changing, scary, like a bad dream, mentally abusive, rogue, chaotic, indescribable and an ultimate test of will.” These experiences, no matter how they are described, have had a profound influence on the participants, the perception of their own personal identity and the overall experience of being in college.

This section will discuss the four themes introduced by the researcher in Chapter Four and conclusions for each based on the research findings, followed by a discussion of the intersections of the Combat Veteran Conceptual Identity Model (CVCIM) with the guiding conceptual and theoretical frames of this study. The CVCIM is built upon the four themes: Perception of Self, Perception of Others, Inferred Perception of Self, and Connections to Other Veterans.

Perception of Self

Lighthall (2012) describes student veterans as “A highly diverse group; a rainbow of colors, shapes, religions, sexual orientations and political views and it will benefit everyone if you open yourself to the enriching experience of listening closely to what they reveal about themselves and their lives” (p. 83). The lived experiences of the participants in this study were equally diverse and the details of what they revealed during the interviews were rich and enlightening to the researcher. Each of the nineteen participants see themselves as veterans and acknowledge that their experiences in combat

have profoundly shaped who they are as individuals today. Seventeen of them also consider their veteran status as an active part of their core identity, something that is part of who they are and how they see the world around them. Additionally, they do not see this part of their core identity as an attribute that will diminish over time. For some, their veteran identity has grown stronger over time and the negotiation between soldier, citizen, and college student is ongoing.

Participants consider their military training and combat experiences part of the fabric of who they are and that these experiences have altered their sense of self both positively and negatively. Positively, they consider themselves to be more mature and more disciplined, and hold a much greater appreciation for the world around them based on their experiences. Negatively, many participants are struggling with symptoms associated with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and the residual effects of having been in combat; for some multiple tours of duty to a combat zone. Whether they self-identified as having a PTSD diagnosis or not, all of the participants spoke of a heightened sense of awareness when on campus including discomfort in crowds or open areas such as school parking lots, sensitivity to sounds or smells, deliberative classroom orientation and difficulty conveying their combat experiences to non-veteran peers or as part of a class assignment. When triggered, participants spoke of an accelerated startle response resulting in a need for withdrawal from a classroom or conversation (flight response), or becoming extremely agitated and engaged in a confrontational experience with another student or faculty member (fight response).

Participants struggle with the paradox of wanting to be treated the same as other students while acknowledging that their military training and subsequent combat

experiences have influenced who they are and that they consider themselves different than students who have not been through the same experiences. Lighthall (2012) said, “Even when student veterans are psychologically struggling or physically wounded, they see themselves as powerful warriors” (p. 83). Participants spoke of their resistance to speaking with disability services or registering for classroom accommodations due to the fact they would then see themselves as weak or different than others on campus.

It was clear throughout the data collection and analysis that the participants’ experiences in the military, and in particular their experiences in a combat zone, influence how they perceive themselves as soldiers, citizens, and students. This perception continually informs their everyday lives and how they perceive others around them.

Perception of Others

How participants perceive others, in particular their younger peers in college, is deeply rooted in how they see themselves as veterans and individuals since their combat deployment(s). When discussing their experiences as college students, participants overwhelmingly felt a sense of frustration or distraction when interacting with their younger peers, in particular on campus and in the classroom. As described by Lighthall (2012), student veterans are typically older and more experienced, which helps them to keep things in perspective, not sweat the small stuff, and scorn the frequent self-absorption of their peers. Given that the participants perceive themselves as more mature, more disciplined, and more experienced, it appears common for them to perceive their younger peers as immature, less disciplined, and lacking appreciation for their education and the world around them.

Participants' perception of others often translates into frustration or distraction on campus and in the classroom, an inability to concentrate or self-isolation from others. These resulting factors seem to be most pervasive in the classroom environment. Participants spoke of what could be described as a disdain for their younger peers when they witnessed them not paying attention to the instructor or being disruptive by using their cell phones in class. This perception ultimately led to verbal confrontations between the student veteran and a younger peer or a frustration so intense that it prevented them from concentrating on the lecture or assignment in the moment, thus detracting from the course content and their overall student experience.

Participants also perceived their peers as less appreciative of their college education and taking the experience of being in college for granted by their apparent immaturity and poor behavior in the classroom. They drew a parallel between their military service and combat experiences to the educational benefits they are utilizing for college as something they have "earned" by their commitment to serve the country and putting themselves in harm's way during combat. This belief of having earned the right to be in college and in the classroom with others, was an additional trigger point for some, who perceived their younger peers as less appreciative of the educational experience afforded to them, thus generating internal frustration and a distraction from the course content.

Inferred Perception of Self

Participant responses suggested an inferred perception of self based on their interactions with non-veteran civilians in and out of the classroom and an inferred perception of self based on their experiences in the military. The inferred perception

related to interactions with non-veteran civilians fell into two distinct categories: an inferred perception of being a “killer” or a perception of emotional/mental instability. Participants also described moments of feeling targeted or labeled due to the stigma or misconception of combat veterans that presents when inappropriate questions or interactions with other non-veterans occur.

All nineteen participants spoke of being asked the question, “Have you ever killed anyone?” by a non-veteran civilian when his or her identity as a combat veteran was disclosed. The question was described collectively as inappropriate, lacking a greater perspective on war itself, deeply personal, and one of the worst questions someone could ask of a combat veteran upon their return to civilian life. Still, each of the participants acknowledged that people readily ask this question of them without any awareness of the sensitivity of the question or how it may be interpreted.

Lighthall (2012) said this type of question “wounds the hearts of men and women who are already overburdened with sorrow” (p. 87). Discussions with participants support this assertion and reactions to perceived inappropriate questions or comments about the war varied by participant. Some of them felt anger and others deep frustration having been asked about their experiences in such a way. Participants also spoke of the stigma or perception of combat veterans as mentally or emotionally unstable and the perceived unpredictable nature of their actions in or out of the classroom.

Participants described how this inferred perception of others would cause them to selectively identify their combat veteran status in class or when conducting an assignment and isolate themselves from other non-veterans as often as possible. Many talked of retreating to their veterans’ office or lounge at the college, describing these areas as a

more comfortable space or safe haven for them while on campus. The military stigma associated with emotional distress or hidden injury such as PTSD also appear to contribute to the inferred perception of self and influence the infrequency by which combat veterans will reach out for help or register with disability services for accommodations in the classroom.

This inferred perception of self is an important observation in the research and appears to be correlated to an altered experience for the participants as college students. Equally important to the delicate balance of core identity and perception of self appears to be the strong connection participants feel towards other combat veterans in and out of the classroom.

Connections to Other Veterans

The connection combat veterans feel to other veterans appears to be a significant factor in their experience in college as well as their own lived experiences during and after their time in the military. Seventeen of them spoke of the camaraderie and brotherhood that exists between all veterans, regardless of rank, branch or conflict, based on their training, service in the military and shared experiences of combat. This brethren or connection runs deep and appears to not only provide these combat veterans with a significant validation of self but membership in a uniquely defined collective of individuals much larger than themselves. Discharge from the military and separation from their platoon or unit was perceived by many members as a traumatic experience in and of itself, removing them from a collective or unique social system as described by Lighthall (2012).

The feeling of connection to other veterans results in a greater comfort level on campus and in the classroom for participants when they are around other veterans. Each spoke of seeking out veterans when first arriving on campus, looking for verbal and non-verbal clues of veteran-identity, such as how other veterans carry themselves, what they look like, wear or how they speak to others. This is an important step towards a feeling of community on campus for these combat veterans.

Knowing other veterans appears to positively contribute to the participants' greater sense of comfort while in college and promotes the conditions necessary for academic success. Participants acknowledged an appreciation for having other veterans in the classroom and reported an ease of completing in-class assignments when paired with another veteran. Equally important, participants described "looking out for each other" in classes and paying attention to the needs of other veterans on campus. Several participants suggested that they look out for their fellow veterans in the classroom just as they would have in combat, underscoring the deep connection felt among veterans regardless of whether they had served together or belonged to the same branch of the military.

Combat Veteran Conceptual Identity Model

Jones and McEwen (2000) developed a conceptual framework offering an overview of relationships among college students' socially constructed identities and a conceptual lens that recognizes each dimension of identity can not be looked at in isolation from the others. Building upon the works of Reynolds and Pope (1991), Deaux (1993), and Jones (1997), this model of multiple dimensions of identity describes the construction of identity and the influences of social context on the negotiation of identity

(Abes et al., 2007). At the center of the model is the core sense of self, representing one's own core personal identity, surrounded by contextual identities formed by influences such as family background, socio-cultural context, and life experiences.

The Combat Veteran Conceptual Identity Model builds on the work of Jones and McEwen (2000), offering a conceptual framework that represents a combat veteran's core sense of self, but introduces added contextual factors that influence their experiences as college students. As part of the foundation for this study, it was previously mentioned that although Jones and McEwen (2000) took the first step of incorporating meaning making into their model, the study did not specifically address how the students' perceptions of their own identity might impact their overall experience in college. Additionally, in discussions of external influences, the study did not discuss student veterans and how the identity of a combat veteran or their past experiences in the military may influence identity negotiation and their experience in the college environment. The Combat Veteran Conceptual Identity Model is built upon an assumption that a combat veteran's past military experiences, connection to other veterans and contextual interactions influence their sense of self and the dynamic tension between core identity and the inferred sense of self that is ever-present in their meaning-making continuum.

Guiding Theoretical Frames – Intersections

Gee's Four Ways to View Identity – Conceptual Frame

The conceptual identity framework developed by Gee (2000), Four Ways to View Identity, was deliberately chosen to help guide the study due to the researcher's belief that the four views of identity introduced in Gee's work were likely to be operating within the research population. Gee (2000) said, "When any human being acts and

interacts in a given context, others recognize that person as acting and interacting as a ‘certain kind of person’ or even as different kinds at once” (p. 99). Gee’s conceptual model on identity is built upon four perspectives on what it means to be a “certain kind of person”: Nature-identity, Institution-identity, Discourse-identity, and Affinity-identity.

Gee suggests that the perspectives of his conceptual model are not separate from each other, but interrelate in complex and important ways (Gee, 2000, p. 101). The Combat Veteran Conceptual Identity Model presented was built upon a similar assumption that the various components – Core Identity, Perception of Self, Inferred Perception of Self, Perception of Others, Connections to Other Veterans and Interactions with Civilians – are equally complex and interrelated. The model assumes that at any given time components of the model are active, with the intensity of the activity dependent upon a dynamic context of events, interactions or environment.

In Gee’s model, the source, or “power” of the Nature perspective (N-identities) is a force over which there is no control (for example, gender), such as nature, unfolding through a natural process of development rather than from societal factors. Participants in this study spoke of feeling profoundly different after their experiences in combat, some discussing how their daily struggle with PTSD has altered the very core of who they are as individuals. Given this, it could be argued that the long-term emotional and physical impact of combat is a force by which a combat veteran has no control and therefore becomes part of their Nature Identity; their unique core not to be equally shared by others.

For Institution perspective (I-identities) the source of power is not nature, but an institution, with the power working as “authorization” or levels of laws, rules or

traditions. For veterans, the Institution (I-identity) appears to be the military, with combat veteran participants drawing on their experiences both in the military and in combat as they negotiate their core identity and make meaning in their lives. Their institution identity informs their sense of maturity and discipline, creating a stronger sense of appreciation for the world around them and influencing their perception of others, including their younger peers.

The Discourse perspective (D-identities) power rests with the discourse or dialogue of other people as it relates to the “subject.” Therefore, the source of this power is neither nature nor institution, but those rational individuals that treat, talk about, and interact with the “subject,” not because they are bound by institutional rules, laws, or norms, but through a process of “recognition” – individuals recognize the subject in a certain way, which in turn helps him/her to construct a discourse or dialogue based identity. This Discourse perspective (D-identity) is represented as the Civilian Interaction component of the Combat Veteran Conceptual Identity Model, with the source of power coming from the interactions between non-veterans and, in the case of this proposed model, the combat veteran as the “subject.” This dialogue is informed by the civilians’ perception of combat veterans, a perception defined by societal norms and media exposure, and creates a dynamic tension between the perception of self that is linked to core identity and an inferred perception of self by others.

Finally, for Affinity perspective (A-identities), the power that determines it is a set of distinct practices. In this case, the source of this power is not nature, an institution, or even other people’s discourse, but rather an “affinity group.” An affinity group may be made up of people disbursed across a large space, such as across the country, however

they share allegiance to, access to, and participation in specific practices that provide each of the group's members with requisite experiences. In the case of combat veterans, the affinity group is clearly that of being a veteran of the United States Military, regardless of branch of service or conflict. This affinity group is made up of combat veterans disbursed across the country, each sharing their own unique experiences of combat with allegiance to and participation in distinct practices associated with the military environment. As shown in the Combat Veteran Conceptual Identity Model, association with this affinity group, sharing a connection to other veterans, appears to have a significant influence on a combat veteran's experience.

Taylor (1994) said that one cannot have an identity without some sort of interpretive system that provides a foundation for recognition of that identity. Results from data analysis in this research suggest relationships to Gee's model (2000) providing a conceptual framework to help better understand how student combat veterans perceive their own identity and how this view impacts their overall experience in college. This conceptual understanding will help to inform future institutional practice in support of all student-veterans, including those of the contemporary conflicts of OEF and OIF.

Hecht Communication Theory of Identity – Guiding Frame

Hecht (1993) outlined the initial conceptualization of the Communication Theory of Identity (CTI), used as a guiding framework for this study. According to the CTI, identity is inherently a communicative process in which messages and values are exchanged (Orbe, 2004), and is located within four distinct "frames": (1) within individuals, (2) within relationships, (3) within groups, and (4) communicated between relational partners and group members. These frames should be thought of as permeating

all discussions of identity, are not static or linear in nature (Hecht et al., 2003). Frames should be studied simultaneously to demonstrate ways in which the different frames of identity may be complementing or competing with each other at any given time.

The first frame of identity is the personal frame, whereby identity is the result of a person's self-cognitions, self-concept, and sense of well being (Golden et al., 2002), similar to the N-identity introduced by Gee (2000) and the Core Identity component represented in the Combat Veteran Conceptual Identity Model suggested by the researcher. Included in the participants' self-concept would be the ongoing identity negotiation between soldier, civilian and student while in college. Just as Hecht suggested in his model, this negotiation is not linear in nature, nor is it static. In fact, this negotiation is significantly influenced by the other components of the model as illustrated in participant interviews.

The second frame involves the enactment of identity to others, focusing on the messages a person sends to express his/her own identity. Individuals may send direct or indirect messages to reveal their identity (Hecht & Faulkner, 2000). In the case of this research, it appears that a combat veteran's enactment of identity to others may be correlated to their perception of others based on their experiences in the military and those from combat deployment(s). The direct and indirect messages sent from combat veterans as college students to their civilian peers are represented in the frustration and intrusive thoughts (indirect) participants described during their interviews or the intense interpersonal (direct) interactions with peers in the classroom or on campus.

Similar to Gee's (2000) D-identity, the third frame of the CTI is a relationship frame, focusing on how identity emerges through our own interactions with others, such

as through discourse in the Gee (2000) conceptual model. The “relationship” frame as introduced by Hecht (1993) aligns with the Inferred Perception of Self component of the Combat Veteran Conceptual Identity Model. For combat veterans, their interaction and dialogue with civilians is the genesis for an inferred sense of self that is often in conflict with the individual’s own sense of self and core identity, causing the dynamic tension of identity described earlier. Interactions with civilians are a fact of life for veterans and the ways that these interactions cause the various components of the conceptual model to complement and compete with each other should be considered, as Hecht (1993) said.

The fourth and final frame in the Hecht model is a “communal” frame, occurring in the context of a larger community or group, where identity is held in the collective or public memory of a group that, in turn, bonds the group together (Hecht et al., 2003). Possessing a group identity that represents a shared identity of all of its members mirrors Gee’s (2000) A-identity or affinity identity, where the group has requisite experiences or shared norms. For combat veterans, their group identity with other veterans is rooted in their military training and shared experiences of combat. This connection within identity creates a bond that transcends the various military branches or conflicts, and profoundly influences a combat veteran’s experiences as a college student through ongoing support and identity validation.

The Hecht (1993) framework in conjunction with the conceptual lens of Gee’s (2000) model were well suited to the study of combat veterans, how they perceive their own identities, and how this perception impacts their overall experience in college. Both of these frames informed the Combat Veteran Conceptual Identity Model introduced by

the researcher and provided useful frameworks to explore the complexities of multiple identity negotiation for combat veterans both inside and outside the college classroom.

Researcher Reflexivity

Throughout this study the researcher devoted the time necessary to properly reflect upon the motivations, decisions, and actions that guided the work as well as how the researcher's personal experiences and feelings may have affected the researcher role or outcome of the study. In a qualitative study, it is the privilege and responsibility of the researcher to carry the voices of participants out into the world in a way that respects their individuality while attempting to make meaning of their collective lived experiences. Based on this premise the researcher engaged in active memoing throughout the study, including writing personal, theoretical, and methodological memos after each interview with participants. Personal memos were written to describe how the researcher felt during each interview, personal reactions to participant responses and any potential researcher bias that may have presented as a result of the interview experience.

It was important to the researcher to create a rapport with participants beyond the researcher-participant relationship in an effort to build trust and to have a broader understanding of the participants as individuals rather than just subjects in the study. To help build this rapport, the researcher worked closely with the veterans' services representative at each site, attended veterans group meetings and events and met with participants on occasion throughout the study to provide progress updates. As a result, meaningful relationships with the participants were established at each site providing for a measurable degree of comfort for the researcher and the participants during the interview process. Participants appeared to be more relaxed during the second round

interviews and more open with their responses to questions. This is assumed to be due in part to the growing trust of the participants with the process, the researcher, and the increased comfort level of the researcher with the researcher role during interviews.

The original inspiration and motivation for this work was a personal friendship the researcher had with a member of the United States Armed Forces. Conversations between this person and the researcher were profound and the researcher often reflected upon their interactions throughout the study. It was important to the researcher to be conscious of bias and take steps to insure that the conversations with participants and the data analysis were not affected by this friendship in any way. The researcher noted a defining moment in the study when it was realized that the work had become much larger than any one person. This occurred over the Veteran's Day holiday in 2011 when the researcher had an opportunity to honor the nation's veterans during a ceremony at Arlington National Cemetery. It was during this ceremony that the researcher witnessed veterans from modern-day conflicts paying homage to the fallen and providing gestures of respect to veterans of past wars in United States history. It was at this moment the researcher understood this study was no longer bound by a single friendship, but represented the thousands of combat veterans of U.S. conflicts.

Throughout the interviews the researcher noted the intensity of working with combat veterans and the visible fluctuations in their emotions as they described the experiences of combat and the impact this had on their everyday lives. The level of intensity varied by participant, with some actively struggling with their PTSD, while others appeared relatively composed until they began recalling past military experiences. Overall, the researcher was able to manage the interview environment and ensure that the

proper safeguards were in place to respond to participant needs as appropriate. However, the physical and emotional toll on the researcher was noted at the end of each round of interviews. As a result, the researcher deployed methods of self-care in an effort to manage the personal burden of bearing witness to the profound experiences that the participants were willing to share at critical junctures during the interviews.

Although there were no apparent long-term affects of the interviews on the researcher or on the participants, the recorded feelings of the researcher through personal journaling suggested elements of secondary trauma might have been present during the research. According to a study by Toson, McTighe, Bauwens, and Naturale (2011) regarding social workers treating survivors and families of the 9/11 attacks, findings suggested the comparability between PTSD and secondary trauma, underscoring the importance of taking into account the risk of dual exposure to trauma. Additionally, a history of multiple traumatic events has been linked to “compassion fatigue” (Creamer & Liddle, 2005). The researcher recommends these observations be taken into consideration by future researchers working with combat veterans and that attention be paid to the possible linkage of researcher compassion fatigue to the shared experiences of combat veterans in qualitative research.

The lasting impressions left with the researcher at the end of the study were overwhelmingly positive. The participants were a group of extraordinary individuals with deeply rich personal experiences that they were willing to share throughout the research in the interest of helping future veterans through informed practice in higher education. This researcher feels profoundly changed for having had the opportunity and

privilege to work with them and appreciates the lasting relationships that have been developed at both research sites as a result.

Limitations

There are several limitations to this study that should be noted by the researcher for proper clarity and integrity of the research. These limitations include methodological approach, participant demographics and sampling strategy, site attributes and researcher identity.

Data from this study are not generalizable to the larger population because of the qualitative nature of the research and inquiry. Given that this study explored the lived experiences of participants and how they perceived their own identity, it would not be reasonable to assume that the experiences of participants in this study were representative of student veterans at other institutions and there was no intent by the researcher for the results to be applied elsewhere.

Participant demographics represent another notable limitation of this study. Participants were predominantly male with only two self-identifying as female at the beginning of the interviews. All of the participants identified as White/non-Hispanic, with no apparent representation of minority or underrepresented student populations. Additionally, not all branches of the United States Military were represented and those that were represented were not done so equally based on the participants' self-identified branch of service. Several participants self-identified as having a diagnosis of PTSD, while others remained silent on this issue. This distinction of participants may have influenced the data collected if not all participants are actively struggling with the symptoms associated with this diagnosis. The number of combat tours for participants

varied from as few as one combat tour of less than one year, to multiple deployments to different conflicts in excess of one year. It would not be possible to compare the impact of combat on the participants equally nor would it be reasonable to assume that the number of combat tours or length of a deployment is directly correlated to a participant's perception of identity or lived experience.

For this study, both convenience and snowball sampling procedures were utilized, including several referrals from the veterans' services representative at each site. Only one of the participants identified the researcher email sent to all veterans as the means by which he learned about the study and chose to participate. The remaining eighteen participants appear to have been referred by another veteran or the veterans' services representative. This potentially impacted the diversity of the participants and the voluntary nature of participation may have indirectly influenced the study by excluding those student veterans who were less comfortable discussing their experience of being in college after combat.

The study was conducted at two research sites, both small rural community colleges in northwest Massachusetts. The size, location and nature of these institutions may have also influenced the participants' experiences at the site and the data collected as a result. Both research sites have an active student veteran organization, however only one currently has a dedicated space for student veterans. This could be seen as a limitation and may have influenced participant experiences and responses during the interviews.

The researcher's identity as a non-veteran may also constitute a limitation of the study. Given that the participants acknowledged a greater comfort level interacting and

communicating with other veterans during the study, the researcher's status as a non-veteran may have indirectly influenced the depth and breadth of the data being collected. Additionally, the researcher began this study with an inherent bias stemming from a close relationship with students, family, and friends who have served in the military. These relationships could have influenced the data due to the researcher's personal view of the military or current conflicts of Operation Iraqi Freedom or Operation Enduring Freedom. Finally, despite the positive rapport built with participants during the study, the researcher's non-veteran status likely influenced the ability of the researcher to fully grasp the participants' military and combat experiences, potentially limiting the richness of the data collected.

Recommendations for Further Study

The primary focus of this study was to better understand how combat veterans perceive their own identity and how this perception influences their experience in college. The research design, method, and data analysis achieved this stated purpose yet also identified additional topics worthy of future exploration. This section provides researcher recommendations for further study related to student veterans in higher education including institution type, female veterans, hidden disabilities, identity conceptualization, and adult transition.

Contemporary research related to student veterans has been primarily focused on students attending public four-year institutions or community colleges with little emphasis on veteran enrollment at private four-year degree granting institutions. Given the sweeping changes in G.I. Bill benefits in this decade, including the Yellow Ribbon Program (Redden, 2009) that offers additional benefits to veterans attending private or

out-of-state institutions, research attention to the experiences of veterans at private institutions would be worthwhile. According to The American Council on Education (McBain et al., 2012), private not-for-profit colleges and universities are less likely than public four-year and public two-year institutions to have programs specifically designed for military veterans. If the Yellow Ribbon Program (Redden, 2009) incentivizes attendance at private colleges and universities for student veterans and enrollments continue to increase, it would behoove these institutions to better understand the current experiences of veterans on campus in an effort to inform better programs and practice in the future.

DiRamio and Jarvis (2011) suggested that student veterans could thrive at commuter institutions such as community colleges versus residential campuses since commuter campuses are more likely to have a larger non-traditional aged population of students making it easier for student veterans to interact with their peers. Further research related to the existent social systems for student veterans at commuter colleges versus a residential college or university might provide valuable insight into the enrollment experience of student veterans and the impact this may have on their persistence, retention, and overall success as a result.

The voices of the two female participants in this study are valuable as they represent the paucity of female participants in contemporary student veteran research to date despite the increasing number of women veterans entering the doors of higher education. The face of our military continues to change with an increasing number of women in the military due to the continuation of an all-volunteer force and socio-cultural shifts in our perspective of women in combat (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011). Women in the

military continue to serve in a male-dominated environment and investigation of how gender roles influence their experience while serving and then after they have transitioned to civilian life would be worth exploring. Further study of female veterans would also shed light on this increasing population of students on college campuses across the country and would certainly benefit by encouraging more diverse sample populations by not only gender, but also race and ethnicity.

The United States continues to bring home countless veterans from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan with those estimated to enroll in higher education at more than 2 million in upcoming years (American Council on Education, 2012). The difference in these two wars and prior conflicts is the increased survivability rate due to improvements in body armor and advanced medical procedures in the theatre (Spurlock, 2011). Therefore, the population of students of the 2 million returning service members estimated to have either Post Traumatic Stress Disorder or Traumatic Brain Injury is approximately 40 percent (Grossman, P. D., 2009) and could be more given the hidden nature of these injuries.

Additionally, according to the Veteran's Administration, 18 veterans take their own lives everyday, representing 6,750 deaths per year by suicide, far surpassing the total number of deaths in Iraq and Afghanistan combined (Wood, 2012). Left unaddressed or untreated, students with invisible psychological injury will undoubtedly begin their college journey at a disadvantage, greatly affecting their opportunities for academic success (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011). Further empirical studies devoted to the specific needs and experiences of student veterans afflicted with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder

or Traumatic Brain Injuries will be critical to better serving this population of students in higher education for years to come.

To the best knowledge of the researcher, this was the first empirical study in the contemporary body of research to focus specifically on the identity of student veterans, their own perception of identity, and how this perception may influence their experiences in college. These experiences included each student combat veteran's military experience, transition to college and their continued enrollment at each institution. Past research has focused on the notion of "transition" to college and relied heavily on the work of Schlossberg's (1984) theory of adult transition for study design and conceptualization of findings. The findings of this study suggest student veterans may be straddling multiple roles upon entering college and future research related to the implications of identity development for students with military experience could be useful (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011).

Further study of student veterans through the lens of identity, using existing theories of identity development and considering the Combat Veteran Conceptual Identity Model presented in Chapter 4, would be beneficial to building a greater theoretical understanding of this population of students. Josselson (1996) said, "Identity links the past, the present and the social world into a narrative that makes sense. It embodies both change and continuity" (p. 29). The strong sense of veteran status being part of core identity and the significant connections to other veterans expressed by participants would suggest that individual identity may become secondary to the identity of the larger group, potentially influencing social integration as a combat veteran transitions from the military to civilian life and college.

Further research about veterans would benefit from testing of the Combat Veteran Conceptual Identity Model presented in this study with subsequent groups of student veteran participants. The model suggests a dynamically fluid influence on identity as demonstrated by the personal perception of self and inferred perception of self informed by interactions with non-veteran civilians and the deep connection they feel to other veterans. Based on the interviews in this study, it appeared interactions with non-veteran civilians created an inferred perception of self that negatively impacted their experience in college, while the connection to other veterans seemed to generate a more positive internal response and overall experience. Future testing of the model could explore what positive attributes associated with an inferred sense of self might also be linked to civilian interactions or how connections to other veterans might potentially inhibit or detract from a positive perception of self. Investigating the inverse relationships that may exist between components of the model will provide for a deeper understanding of personal identity for student veterans and help to inform better overall practice associated with this unique sub-population of students.

Additionally, for combat veterans, group identity appears to be as powerful as individual identity in defining the personal narrative of self. If, in fact, veteran identity remains an integral part of self beyond the military as inferred by the researcher, further research related to the intersection of veteran identity and existing theoretical frameworks developed to explore personal identity is warranted. Such research will allow for a better understanding of the perceived relationships between the identity of combat veterans and external factors such as interpersonal engagement with others and their socio-political context.

Future study should also investigate the paradox introduced by participants in this study; the paradox of recognizing they are different, but struggling with the feeling of wanting to be treated like “everyone else.” Could this feeling be predicated on a social construction of personal or group identity for veterans? How might external influence, societal norms or group expectations impact personal identity for student veterans in college? Application of theoretical frames related to identity, race, or gender could shed light on this emergent paradox. The Combat Veteran Conceptual Identity Model presented in this research could be useful in further exploration of this paradox by investigating the suggested correlations between civilian interactions and the inferred perception of self. It is possible that the prominence of an inferred perception of self may influence how a combat veteran defines what it means to them personally to be like “everyone else.” Said differently, does the inferred perception of self not only shape the self-narrative, but also define the lens by which they see other non-veterans? The proposed conceptual model hypothesizes distinct relationships between categories. Future scholarly research will allow for further exploration of the significance of those relationships.

Another area warranting further study relates to the concept of transition for student veterans. Contemporary studies have investigated the nature of transition for student veterans and made recommendations for the proper supports necessary to ease this transition for members of the military to civilian life and for some, to the college environment. Prior studies have suggested that the experience of transition for veterans can be defined by distinct benchmarks, ultimately leading to their re-integration to civilian life. Bridges (2004) suggests that “change is situational but transition is

psychological; an inner re-orientation and self-redefinition to properly incorporate change into one's life" (p. xii). Participants in this study described their transition experience as fluid, ever changing and unique to the individual. Future studies should investigate how personal identity may influence one's own transition and how self-concept may interface with points along a continuum, defining a transition that is deeply personal to the individual, a transition with no distinct beginning or end, but a transition that may last a lifetime.

Finally, as mentioned at the beginning of this section, the inherent nature of this qualitative study does not allow for the results to be generalizable to the larger population of student veterans in higher education. Therefore, future quantitative research in addition to the qualitative scholarly inquiry related to student veterans would complement the growing body of contemporary research devoted to this population.

Specifically, longitudinal studies focused on the overall persistence and success of student veterans, including graduation rates and employment data, would help to provide a better picture of how student veterans are doing at institutions of higher learning throughout the country. Additionally, further quantitative inquiry is necessary to provide an ongoing assessment of campus-based support services dedicated to student veterans including measurable outcomes and benchmarked statistics for adequate comparison of outcomes. This commitment to increasing the body of both qualitative and quantitative research related to student veterans will help to provide a deeper understanding of the unique needs and challenges this population of students presents upon enrolling in college.

Implications for Future Practice

The results of this study provide notable implications for future practice in higher education and underscore the distinct experiences of student veterans and the challenges they face in college as a result of those experiences. The needs of student veterans are great and the practical implications of this work are many. However, considering the four themes presented in Chapter Four of this study, the most significant implications for practice that were identified include: 1) Increasing sensitivity to student veterans on campus by providing professional development opportunities for faculty and staff and targeted programming for non-veteran students, 2) Development of an enrollment and advising plan for new student veterans, 3) Identifying a dedicated space for veterans, staffed by peer “navigators” and academic advisors, and 4) Establishing curriculum and alternative methods of instruction, including on-line and hybrid options, that promote deeper learning, foster connections to other veterans and increase pedagogical opportunities for student self-authorship.

The combat veterans in this study spoke of the profound nature of their experiences and how those experiences inform who they are as individuals in their everyday lives. For faculty, staff, and students on a college campus who are not veterans it will be difficult for them to relate to or often understand the lived experiences of student veterans and how those experiences influence their behaviors and interactions with others while on campus and in the classroom. Increased professional development for faculty and staff devoted to better understanding student veterans and the unique needs they present is critical to the persistence and academic success of this distinct student population. According to a survey of The American Council on Education (McBain et al., 2012) related to student veterans, only 47 percent of responding

institutions provide training opportunities for faculty and staff as a means of better serving this population of students.

Participants in this study spoke of a need for faculty to understand why they may behave in a particular way while in class or why they may have unexpected absences or interruptions to their school day, ultimately needing accommodations that are not necessarily easily defined or identified by the Office of Disability Services. Due to the significant and unpredictable symptoms and behaviors associated with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, student veterans require a greater flexibility of faculty to work with them to successfully meet course requirements. Professional development for faculty that educates and removes pre-existing stigmas of veterans will provide them with a greater understanding of this population, thus giving them the ability to better meet needs as they arise.

Similarly, professional development for staff is equally important given the day-to-day interactions student veterans have with the various student services offices on campus, such as academic advising, registration, and financial aid. Depending upon what office is identified as the certifying office for Veterans Administration benefits, that particular office will see a great number of student veterans throughout their time at the institution. It will be critical for the staff of this office in particular to not only understand the intricacies of veterans' benefits, but to have increased sensitivity to the unique challenges faced by student veterans based on their past experiences in the military and combat.

Participants in this study often perceive their younger peers as immature and less disciplined than themselves and spoke of being triggered in the classroom by behaviors

of non-veteran peers perceived as disrespectful, ultimately impacting their ability to fully participate in class. Additionally, they spoke of the inappropriate questions often asked of them by non-veterans such as “have you ever killed anyone?” leading to a distracting and potentially detrimental inferred sense of self based on these interactions with others. This important discovery in the research suggests that student affairs practitioners should also consider incorporating student programming into the co-curricular schedule that includes an opportunity for non-veteran students to learn more about their veteran peers.

At the researcher’s home institution, a program called “In Our Own Voices” is provided each semester to students, faculty, and staff allowing a panel of students representing a unique subculture on campus to share their lives, their experiences, and insight with the larger community. This program has had an anecdotal impact on campus and provided non-veteran students with a different lens by which to view their student veteran peers. The researcher recommends this programmatic practice be replicated and assessed at other institutions in an effort to promote sensitivity towards the student veteran community, contributing to a broader and more diverse way of thinking for all students.

Participants in this study spoke of challenges associated with leaving the structured environment of the military and transitioning to the unstructured nature of civilian life and college. Often they struggled with “connecting the dots” related to their admission, transfer of their military experiences to college credit, course registration, and application of their military benefits to pay tuition and related expenses. Results of this study suggest that institutions should consider creating a structured “enrollment plan” for student veterans that provides them with step-by-step instructions to streamline their

orientation to the college, credit evaluation, and subsequent enrollment or re-enrollment at the institution if they have had a interruption in attendance due to a military deployment.

Student veterans are actively seeking an educational environment that gives them the tools they need to be successful (McBain et al., 2012). Creating a detailed enrollment plan that guides student veterans through the enrollment process and connects them to dedicated academic advisors trained to work with them and deploy specific intrusive advising and early intervention methods will increase their persistence and opportunity for academic success. Improving the design of administrative, financial aid, and receivable systems as part of an overall improved enrollment plan will account for periodic delays in VA benefits and help to promote the proper transition assistance and academic supports necessary for increased retention of student veterans who might otherwise leave the institution without asking for assistance or accommodations for delayed payments.

Establishing a comprehensive enrollment plan for student veterans will require increased communication between various administrative offices on campus and more cross-collaborative efforts of the staff regardless of overall organizational structure at the institution. Procedural lines must be blurred and policy and practice written in a manner that encourages such collaboration in the interest of support to student veterans. Additionally, greater awareness of counseling and support services available to student veterans will encourage more frequent use of these services and enable students to access them on their own terms, providing for more positive and beneficial physical and mental health support.

Participants spoke overwhelmingly about the need for and importance of a dedicated space for student veterans on campus. For participants at one research site, this space has been realized, while dedicated space at the second research site had yet to be identified at the time of this study. For those with a defined space, the researcher observed increased levels of social interaction and unspoken support between veterans and their allies while on campus. It also provided an opportunity for the veterans' services representative to check in with the group and provide organized updates to them throughout the semester. The researcher observed vibrant conversations among veterans within this space about the college, the military, and the Veterans' Administration in addition to rich conversations about their own daily lives.

The anticipated use of the space was multi-faceted. Many of the participants spoke of the space as a safe haven or comfort zone, a place they could "retreat" to if they were feeling overwhelmed or triggered by events of the day. Others spoke of this space as a quiet area to study, share information and experiences with other veterans, or just be "themselves." Several spoke of being able to say whatever they wanted or behave in way that felt comfortable because only other veterans would understand. Regardless of the intended use, the results of this study underscore the importance of having a dedicated space for student veterans to spend time with one another and honor the spoken and unspoken connections they share based on their military experiences.

Administrators in higher education should not only carefully consider the establishment of a dedicated space for student veterans on their campuses, but also be deliberate in the staffing of such areas. The research of this study would suggest that personnel in the area should be comprised of veteran peers and a staff person trained in

the unique needs of student veterans who are able to bridge the communication between Student Affairs and Academic Affairs to inform blended practice and promote ongoing professional development on campus. It is suggested that student peers who are also veterans be considered for the role of a “navigator” or guide to other student veterans, capable of assisting them with the development of their enrollment plan as described earlier. This plan could be tailored to each veteran’s specific set of needs, academic goals and menu of veterans’ benefits available to them based on an initial intake with the peer navigator. Additionally, the student peer could be trained to provide comprehensive academic advising and tutoring support or referral as needed for veterans on campus who are connected to the space. The connection that student veterans feel towards other veterans on campus runs deep. This connection should be nurtured and encouraged by administrators in higher education through the establishment of dedicated space and programming such as veteran peer enrollment counseling, support services referral, tutoring and co-curricular activities, that promote academic success and retention for veterans.

Finally, the researcher recommends that institutions of higher education consider establishing alternative methods of instruction, including on-line and hybrid models, and curriculum-based learning communities that promote connections to other veterans on campus and pedagogical opportunities for student self-authorship. Given the recent proliferation of on-line options into the landscape of post-secondary education and attention to degree completion, it would be prudent for institutions of higher education to consider the appropriateness of on-line instruction for veterans and how this option may serve them in their efforts to obtain a degree.

Since the researcher has concluded that participants' perception of others often translates into frustration or distraction in the classroom, an inability to concentrate or self-isolation from others, on-line degree completion options for veterans would allow for an alternative classroom experience, potentially decreasing the anxiety and learning challenges associated with a traditional classroom environment. Properly developed on-line methods of curriculum delivery for veterans could provide for a less distracting, productive learning environment and account for the competing priorities of work, family, medical care and education that many veterans face after their discharge from military service.

The researcher cautions student and academic affairs practitioners, however, to consider the unique needs of veterans discussed in this study as they further develop a spectrum of on-line options for these students. For example, since it appears that the combat experiences of participants in this study caused self-isolation for some, a fully on-line approach alone may not be in the best interest of student veterans. Alternatively, higher education practitioners may want to consider offering a hybrid model, bringing together both on-line and traditional 'brick and mortar' methods of instruction into a single course for veterans. The brick and mortar instruction could take place in the classroom, the student veterans' center or perhaps in the local community. This would allow for a learning environment that provides convenience and comfort to the student veteran while also promoting a continued connection to the college community, reducing the likelihood of these students to self-isolate and avoid reaching out for the proper academic or peer support necessary for them to persist to degree completion.

Learning communities encourage integration of learning and the opportunity for students to work closely with each other and the faculty to link common courses and involve students in discussions regarding topics that matter beyond the classroom (Kuh, 2008). A learning community could include one or more linked courses comprised of student veterans who take the block of courses as a defined cohort, offering an innovative approach to learning by providing them the opportunity to share common experiences, link common coursework, and develop strategies for success. Creating a learning community cohort that includes an equal number of veterans and non-veterans might also promote better integration of student veterans on campus by allowing them to share their experiences and backgrounds with other students surrounded by veteran peers, offering them support throughout the learning process.

Administrators and faculty should consider pedagogical opportunities for student veterans to make meaning of past experiences through their own writing, reflection or other methods of self-expression. Participants in this study discussed the healing power of writing about their experiences through essays or poetry, journaling and photography. Colleges and universities such as the George Washington University, the University of Arizona, and the University of California, Berkeley have begun offering courses specifically for student veterans and see the benefits of allowing them to attend academic courses together given their distinctive life experiences (Carr, 2010; DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011). Courses such as writing and public speaking allow students the opportunity to progress in their studies while also working through the experiences of their past in the military and combat in a safe and supportive environment. Colleges and universities should be encouraged to continue experimenting with curriculum, specifically in the

Humanities, that give student veterans a voice through their own creative expression. According to Simon (2013), “The military is looking to writing and other art forms, like painting and music, to help rewire the brain after trauma” (p. 3). Integrating drawing or photography courses together with writing and public speaking would allow for greater opportunity for student self-authorship and meaning making connected to their past experiences in the military and combat.

Chapter Summary

Chapter Five was the final chapter of this study and was written to draw conclusions from the research findings related to the themes introduced in Chapter Four. It is perhaps the most integral chapter, offering insight into the data and implications for future research and practice. In this chapter, a theoretical discussion was presented, demonstrating the significance of the guiding theoretical frames for this study and how they build upon prior contemporary research. Conclusions from the study were presented followed by an interpretive discussion of the intersections of the themes with the guiding theoretical frames. The final sections of this chapter were devoted to researcher reflexivity, study limitations, recommendations for further study, and implications for future practice in higher education.

The researcher was privileged to bear witness to the rich and deeply personal experiences of the participants and cannot overstate the significance of this study for student veterans or the work that will follow in the steps of this research.

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APPENDIX A

Interview Protocol

Semi-structured Interview I:

- To preserve your anonymity, I will assign you a pseudonym instead of your given name. What would you like that pseudonym to be? Tell me why you chose that particular name.
- Why did you choose to be a part of this study?
- Have you been interviewed about your combat experience previously? If yes, tell me what that interview experience was like for you?
- Tell me about your military experience. Why did you choose to join? What branch?
- Do you continue to be enlisted in the military now, and if so, what details can you share with me?
- How many combat tours did you take part in during your time in the service? What can you tell me about where and when you served in combat?
- Tell me what the experience of combat was like for you.
- What questions do you have about the study that I haven't answered?

Semi-structured Interview II:

- What questions about this study do you have for me before we get started?
- After reflecting on our last interview, tell me more about your experiences returning from combat and then enrolling at (college name).

- Do you identify yourself as a veteran when interacting with other students, faculty or staff on campus? Why/Why not?
- Do you prefer to spend time with other veterans on campus? Why/why not?
- Has there been a time since you enrolled at (college name) when someone on campus said something about the military that offended you or you disagreed with? Tell me about this experience.
- Do you think your experiences of being in combat have influenced your experiences in college? If so, how?
- A person's core identity is unique. That being said, how would you complete this sentence, "When I think about my own personal identity, I consider myself to be..." (If necessary, for clarity, I may offer my own personal example such as: *"When I think about my own personal identity, I consider myself to be a son, a brother, and a friend. I am a deeply reflective person, paying close attention to how I move through the world and how my movements intersect with and influence others in my life."*)
Tell me why you chose this identity. Was it difficult for you to determine? Why?
- Is there anything you would like to add that is important for me to know about your experience as a college student after being in the military?
- Is there anything you considered sharing during the interview but did not?
- Do you have any questions for me?

APPENDIX B

Preliminary Categories and Codes

Category	Associated Codes	Description
Perception of Self	Changed person:	Feeling of being different after combat
	Sees the world differently:	Lens to the world influenced their experience
	Greater appreciation for life:	Combat experience results in greater appreciation
	Values education:	Sacrifices were made to access their education
	Experienced:	Feeling of being more experienced than non-veterans
	Greater perspective:	Feeling of broader perspective based on experiences
	Sense of responsibility:	Towards others, their education
	Less judgmental of others:	Combat changes perception
	Sense of purpose/pride:	Military service instills pride and sense of purpose
	More compassionate:	Towards others, more sympathetic to others' needs
	Disciplined:	Military training = discipline
	Mature:	Military and combat experiences increased maturity
	Professional:	Military training = professionalism
	Survivors guilt:	For those lost or left behind after a tour of duty
	Muscle memory:	Reflexive response to intense situations
	Disappointment with self:	Due to an injury or shortened tour of duty due to physical/emotional challenges
	Disconnected to others:	Feeling of being different/changed
Filters conversation:	When non-veterans are present	
Weak:	Feeling of being weak because of an injury or PTSD	
Self-hatred:	Because of their actions or inactions when in combat	
Active PTSD:	Self-identified struggle with PTSD	
Wants to be treated the same:	Desires equal treatment from others, sees veteran status as impediment	
Feel different than other students:	Because of military/combat experiences	
Humanitarian:	See their time in combat as a humanitarian mission	

	<p>Providing valuable service to others: Misunderstood: Doing a job: Signed a contract: Trust issues: Hard to focus: Compartmentalizes: Hyper-vigilant: Emotionally numb:</p> <p>Overwhelmed:</p> <p>Isolating behavior: Self-medicating with drugs/alcohol: Self-conscious:</p> <p>Angry: Frustrated: Resentful:</p> <p>Difficult to relate: Try to blend in:</p> <p>Confrontational: Low tolerance: Easily triggered: Intrusive thoughts:</p> <p>Paranoia:</p>	<p>See above description</p> <p>Media misrepresents what war is Going to war was not a choice Going to war is part of the job Hard to trust non-veterans Easily distracted by everyday events Try to forget memories of combat To sounds, smells, others, etc. Lack of emotional connection to self or others</p> <p>Returning to civilian life/college is overwhelming Keep to themselves, avoid others Need drugs or alcohol to get through the day Hyperaware of people around them or when disclosing veteran status Towards non-veterans With non-veteran actions in school Towards non-veterans who do not appear to appreciate education To non-veterans Keep a low profile and try not to disclose veteran status When frustrated with younger peers For behavior of younger peers By environmental factors, dialogue Residual thoughts of combat make it difficult to concentrate Around others, crowds, public events</p>
Motivation to Enlist	<p>Military family: Inner calling: Sense of pride: Need for discipline/structure: Better oneself: A way out: Need for direction/goals: Money for college: Find oneself:</p> <p>Part of something larger than self:</p>	<p>Having relatives who served in the military Sense of duty to the country above self Pride in country Troubled background Low socioeconomic status/background Low socioeconomic status/background Feeling of “going no-where” in life Military was a way to access college Feeling of being “lost” in the world, no direction Feeling of a greater, collective purpose to serving in the military</p>
Core Identity	Veteran:	Veteran is part of core identity

	<p>Veteran grows larger over time: Combat shapes who you are:</p> <p>Experiences are ever present: First and foremost a veteran: Veteran is hidden:</p> <p>No sense of belonging:</p> <p>Veteran-student-civilian: Ongoing identity negotiation: Altered sense of self: Aware of how others see you: Soul is different: Combat experiences in your cells: Switch to soldier ‘in the moment’: Need to reset self: Feeling of being abstract:</p> <p>Does not self-identify as veteran:</p> <p>A part of you is left behind: Veteran is small part of identity: Veteran is not part of identity:</p>	<p>Veteran status does not diminish over time after service Feeling of being a changed person since combat Memories of combat are always present Veteran status is prominent in self Does not embrace veteran status for fear of being treated differently Difficult to relate to non-veterans, civilian environment, lack of structure All are part of self/identity Soldier is always present Trying to find self/center after combat Self-conscious of veteran status Combat has altered self</p> <p>Combat has altered self</p> <p>Identity negotiation is ongoing After being triggered People see you differently than you see yourself</p> <p>Does not want to be treated differently after disclosing veteran status Loss of self in combat</p> <p>Veteran status is not prominent Does not see veteran as part of self</p>
<p>Military/VA</p>	<p>No accommodations for PTSD: PTSD seen as a weakness: Military turns its back on you:</p> <p>Dehumanizing: Training - Civilian mindset to Military Mindset:</p> <p>Politics are first, not people: Provides structure:</p>	<p>Military does not adequately deal with prevalence of PTSD Military culture discourages disclosure of PTSD Military does not provide supports for PTSD and culture looks down on diagnosis Military training is dehumanizing</p> <p>Military training removes the sense of self and replaces with a collective mentality Military is less concerned with the people and more with the mission Military training teaches/provides</p>

	<p>Training was fun: Brainwashing: Mind games: Military breaks you down, then builds you up:</p> <p>Trained to “do” not think: Put emotions aside – push through: Removes a sense of self: Must relearn who you are post-enlistment: Removes emotion: High standards: Disciplined/Regimented: Information is fed to you, no dialogue: Uniformity – look same, act same: Military gives you things but also takes away:</p> <p>VA is a fractured system:</p> <p>VA is too bureaucratic, maze:</p> <p>No VA support – you are a nobody:</p>	<p>structure Enjoyed the experience of basic training Basic training Basic training</p> <p>Military builds you up to be what they want you to be, not who you were Collective mentality – no sense of self</p> <p>Emotions are seen as a weakness Collective mentality of training</p> <p>Loss of self in training/combat Basic Training Basic Training Basic Training</p> <p>Basic Training</p> <p>Military Culture</p> <p>Aspects of the training/experiences can be positive but the loss of self is detrimental to veterans Difficult to navigate the system and access benefits Not supportive of veterans or their service to the country</p> <p>VA is overwhelmed by the number of returning veterans needing care and assistance</p>
<p>Perception of Others (non-veterans)</p>	<p>Lack of discipline: Immature: Less professional: Lack of appreciation:</p> <p>Take education for granted:</p> <p>Ignorant: Inappropriate questions:</p> <p>Lack of perspective: Well-intentioned:</p>	<p>Younger peers are less disciplined Younger peers are immature Younger peers are less professional Behavior of younger peers suggests lack of appreciation for life Perceived lack of appreciation for education Lack of broader perspective Non-veterans ask inappropriate questions readily - have you ever killed someone? Media alters perception of war Some don’t realize how their thoughts</p>

	<p>Innocent:</p> <p>Spoiled:</p> <p>Disrespectful:</p> <p>Inappropriate:</p> <p>No morals:</p> <p>No respect:</p> <p>Generalize combat veterans:</p> <p>Media portrayal of war inaccurate:</p> <p>No human face to war:</p>	<p>or questions may impact a veteran</p> <p>Peers are young/naïve to the military or war</p> <p>Lack of appreciation for the value of education – mom and dad are paying</p> <p>Younger peers are disrespectful to instructors, others on campus</p> <p>Younger peers are less sensitive to their actions or words towards others</p> <p>Younger peers do not respect the classroom environment</p> <p>See combat veterans as unstable, make assumptions about their role in the military</p> <p>Media glorifies and misrepresents war</p> <p>Media hides the uglier sides of war</p>
<p>Inferred Perception of Self (by others)</p>	<p>Killers:</p> <p>Crazy:</p> <p>Uneducated:</p> <p>Unstable/Unpredictable:</p> <p>More mature:</p> <p>More experienced:</p> <p>More professional:</p> <p>Don't make contributions to other cultures:</p> <p>Robots trained to kill only:</p> <p>Going to war was a choice:</p> <p>Stigmatized/labeled:</p> <p>Need to prove oneself to others:</p> <p>Experiences will horrify people:</p> <p>Target:</p>	<p>Veterans killed people in combat</p> <p>Veterans are emotionally unstable</p> <p>Veterans had no other choice but to enlist – not smart enough for anything else</p> <p>Veterans are easily triggered and dangerous to be around</p> <p>Seen as more mature by others</p> <p>Seen as more experienced by others</p> <p>Seen as more professional by others</p> <p>Veterans go to combat to kill people, not to help them</p> <p>Veterans lack emotion, are not affected by their actions in combat</p> <p>Veterans chose to go to war not because it was part of their job</p> <p>When people know you are a combat veteran they label/judge you</p> <p>Feeling of needing to explain their choices to enlist, be a part of the military</p> <p>Will not discuss their veteran status or their experiences for fear of being misunderstood or affecting others</p> <p>Veteran status makes you a target for</p>

		misinformed perceptions/view of the military
Connections to Other Veterans	<p>Connection: Spoken/Unspoken: ESP:</p> <p>Reassuring:</p> <p>Comfortable:</p> <p>Seek out other veterans:</p> <p>Look out for each other:</p> <p>Brotherhood: Collective: Brethren: Shared understanding/experience:</p> <p>On the same page: Family: Part of who you are: Team:</p> <p>Unit is like an organism: Comfort level:</p> <p>Speak freely:</p> <p>Decompress:</p> <p>Camaraderie: Valued partnerships: Soldiers creed: Bond: Holding each other accountable:</p> <p>Military etiquette: Maturity:</p> <p>Shared morals:</p>	<p>Feeling of connection to other veterans Can be both spoken and unspoken Veterans are hyperaware of other veterans and their emotions Veterans are reassured to know other veterans are in the room Veterans feel more comfortable around other veterans Veterans seek out other veterans by paying attention to speech, clothing, mannerisms Veterans provide a support system for each other in/out of class Deeply felt connection to other veterans Deeply felt connection Deeply felt connection</p> <p>Only other veterans can understand their experiences Veterans understand each other Deeply felt connection to each other Military experience with other veterans Feeling towards their unit, members they served with Difficult to separate from the unit Higher level of comfort with other veterans Able to speak the way they want in front of other veterans Being around other veterans allows you to relax, decompress Deeply felt connection to other veterans With other members of their unit Deeply felt connection to all veterans Deeply felt connection to all veterans</p> <p>Shared commitment to the military and their service Shared understanding of military culture Sense of maturity among other veterans above others Shared commitment to the military and its tenets</p>

	Relationships: Peer group: Transcends war and time:	Strong relationships to other veterans See other veterans as their peers Deep connection to all veterans
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APPENDIX C

Email To Participants

January, 2012

Dear (student name):

My name is Shane Hammond and I am a doctoral student at George Washington University, studying Higher Education Administration. I am writing to invite you to participate in a research study I will be conducting at (college name) this spring.

The purpose of this study is to explore how military deployment to a combat zone impacts a college student's collegiate experience once he/she returns from service. You are being invited to participate in this study because you are a registered veteran and a student at the college. If you identify as a combat veteran who served in at least one combat tour prior to enrolling at the college, you may be eligible to participate in this important study.

During the study you will be asked to meet with me as the principal investigator for two interviews of approximately one and a half hours for each interview. During these interviews you will be asked to answer various questions concerning your experiences in college following your return from a combat deployment.

I hope you will strongly consider participation in this research study. It is hoped that the information gained from the work will benefit both (college name) and our larger society by assisting institutions of higher education throughout the country in identifying how they can better serve college students who have been deployed to a combat zone and then enroll in college.

Thank you in advance for considering this invitation. If you are interested in participating in the study or have any questions about participation, please contact me directly at (413) 775-1804 or hammonds@gcc.mass.edu. You may also contact (Veterans' Services Representative) at the college. She will be assisting me with identifying participants and scheduling interview times.

Best regards,

Shane P. Hammond, M.Ed
Dean of Enrollment, Greenfield Community College
One College Drive
Greenfield, MA 01301

Attention Student Veterans!

**Are you an enrolled student at
(college name)?**

**Did you serve in a combat deployment
prior to enrolling?**

**If you answered YES to both of these
questions, you may be eligible to
participate in an important research
study on campus this semester.**

**If you are interested in participating or
have questions about participation, please
contact Shane Hammond at 413-775-1804
or hammonds@gcc.mass.edu.**

**You may also contact (Veterans' Services
Representative) for more information.**

APPENDIX E

Informed Consent Document

Title of Study: **Millennial Combat Veterans: How Identity Shapes Experience in College**

Principle Investigator: Dr. Jason Johnson, Ph.D.

Student Investigator: Shane P. Hammond, B.S., M.Ed.

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study. This form outlines the purposes of the study and provides a description of your involvement and rights as a participant. This is a research study. Please take your time in deciding if you would like to participate. Please feel free to ask questions at any time.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study is to explore how military deployment to a combat zone impacts a college student's collegiate experience once he/she returns from service. You are being invited to participate in this study because you are a college student, identify as a combat veteran, and have served in at least one combat tour prior to enrolling in college.

DESCRIPTION OF PROCEDURES

If you agree to participate in this study, your participation will last for approximately four months. During the study you may expect the following study procedures to be followed:

1. During the study you will be asked to meet with this principal investigator for up to three interviews of approximately 30 to 90 minutes for each interview. During these interviews you will be asked to answer various questions concerning your combat experience and your experiences in college following your return from a combat deployment. You will also be asked to clarify any points that are unclear and to identify any discrepancies you see in the principal investigator's analysis of the data.
2. With your permission the interviews will be digitally recorded. Electronic copies of the transcripts will be de-identified and stored on a password-protected external hard-drive in the researcher's home office. You may skip any question that you do not wish to answer or that makes you feel uncomfortable.
3. The results of this study may be published or otherwise reported to scientific bodies, but your identity will in no way be revealed. Also, the name of the participant's school will not be published. Findings will be presented in predominantly narrative form and may include direct quotations from participants. To ensure confidentiality, participants will choose their own pseudonym and that pseudonym will be used when referring to them in public

presentations - written or otherwise.

RISKS

While participating in this study you may experience the following risks: emotional discomfort discussing your war experience and your thoughts and feelings following your return from combat.

BENEFITS

If you decide to participate in this study there may be no direct benefit to you. It is hoped that the information gained in this study will benefit larger society by assisting institutions of higher education in identifying how they can better serve college students who have been deployed and then come to college or return to college following their deployment.

COSTS AND COMPENSATION

You will not have any costs from participating in this study. You will not be compensated for participating in this study.

PARTICIPANT RIGHTS

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary and you may refuse to participate or leave the study at any time. Your academic status will not, in any way, be affected should you choose not to participate or withdraw your participation at any time. If you decide to not participate in the study or leave the study early, it will not result in any penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

CONFIDENTIALITY

Your responses to questions will be held strictly anonymous and remain confidential throughout the study. Records, including interview transcripts, identifying participants will be kept confidential to the extent permitted by applicable laws and regulations and will not be made publicly available. However, federal government regulatory agencies and the Institutional Review Board (a committee that reviews and approves human subject research studies) may inspect and/or copy your records for quality assurance and data analysis. Additionally, the principal investigator's dissertation chair will have access to your records. These records may contain private information.

To ensure confidentiality to the extent permitted by law, the following measures will be taken: This principal investigator and his dissertation chair are the only people who will have access to the data for this study. If that data is not with the principal investigator it will be secured in a locked area. Audiotapes from this study will be erased within two

years of the completion of the study. If the results are published, your identity will remain strictly confidential.

QUESTIONS OR PROBLEMS

You are encouraged to ask questions at any time during this study. For further information about the study contact:

Shane P. Hammond, M.Ed. (Student-investigator), Dean of Enrollment, Greenfield Community College, One College Drive, Greenfield, MA 01301
Voice: 413-775-1804, Email: hammonds@gcc.mass.edu

Dr. Jason Johnson, Ph.D. (Principle Investigator), Higher Education Administration, The George Washington University, Washington, DC 20016
Voice: 703-726-8338, Email: jjgw@me.com

If you have any questions about the rights of research subjects or research-related injury, please contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB) Administrator, Office of Human Research, The George Washington University & Medical Center.
Voice: 202-994-2715, Email: ohrirb@gwumc.edu
Website: www.gwumc.edu/research/human

PARTICIPANT CONSENT

By your verbal consent prior to being interviewed, you voluntarily agree to participate in this study, that the study has been explained to you, that you have been given the time to read the document and that your questions have been satisfactorily answered. You will receive a copy of the written informed consent prior to your participation in the study.

INVESTIGATOR STATEMENT

I certify that the participant has been given adequate time to read and learn about the study and all of their questions have been answered. It is my opinion that by their verbal consent the participant understands the purpose, risks, benefits and the procedures that will be followed in this study and has voluntarily agreed to participate.

(Principle Investigator)

(Date of Informed Consent)

APPENDIX F

Letter of Thank You to Participants

April, 2012

Student Veteran Study Participants
(College Name/Address)

Dear (participant name):

I hope this letter finds you doing well. The end of the semester is just around the corner!

I wanted to take a moment to extend my sincerest thanks to each of you for your interview participation in support of my dissertation work. As student researchers, we are instructed that it is our responsibility to bear witness to our participants' experiences, and then carry their voices out into the world in a way that honors those experiences while helping to inform the larger society as a result. In this case, your voices will help to inform the higher education community throughout the country about the experiences of combat veterans returning to civilian life and enrolling in college. Your willingness to participate demonstrates our shared commitment to this work and the changes that will be realized as a result.

I cannot say enough about my time at (college name) or how profoundly grateful I am to have had the opportunity to speak with each of you last month. On behalf of all future college student veterans who will benefit from this work, thank you for the gift of your time, trust and honesty throughout the process. I promise to honor your experiences by communicating them both accurately and respectfully.

I will keep you posted on my progress and provide a final copy of the dissertation to (Veterans' Service Representative) once I have successfully completed my defense at George Washington this fall. As the end of the semester approaches, you have my best wishes for continued success on your educational journey.

Sincerely,

Shane P. Hammond
Dean of Enrollment