EXAMINING THE IMPACT OF VETERAN-CENTRIC SUPPORT ON ACADEMIC

SUCCESS, RETENTION, AND DEGREE COMPLETION OF STUDENTS

UTILIZING POST-9/11 GI BILL AT A PUBLIC UNIVERSITY

by

Dipal Nish Parekh, B.Sc., M.Sc.

DISSERTATION

Presented to the Faculty of

The University of Houston-Clear Lake

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements

For the Degree

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

in Education Leadership

THE UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON-CLEAR LAKE

DECEMBER, 2023

EXAMINING THE IMPACT OF VETERAN-CENTRIC SUPPORT ON ACADEMIC

SUCCESS, RETENTION, AND DEGREE COMPLETION OF STUDENTS

UTILIZING POST-9/11 GI BILL AT A PUBLIC UNIVERSITY

by

Dipal Nish Parekh, B.Sc., M.Sc.

APPROVED BY

_____
Paul A. Wagner, Ph.D., Chair

_____
Kent Divoll, Ed.D., Committee Member

_____
Jennifer Grace, Ph.D., Committee Member

_____
Marilyn Dement, Ed.D., Committee Member

RECEIVED/APPROVED BY THE COLLEGE OF EDUCATION:

_____
Terry Shepherd, Ed.D., Associate Dean

_____
Joan Y. Pedro, Ph.D., Dean

Dedication

Namaste! The *light* in me bows to the *light* in you.

First and foremost, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to the Almighty Creator of the Universe for the eternal grace and blessings without which this milestone in my life would not have been possible.

I am dedicating this dissertation to my family for their unconditional love and unwavering support. My husband, my best friend Nish has been a constant source of strength and encouragement throughout this journey. My creators, my parents Ramaben and Pradipkumar have always believed in me and motivated me to pursue my dreams. Thank you, mommy-papa, for making all those sacrifices, giving up your own dreams to make this day possible for me and allowing me to be the first person in our family to attain a doctorate degree. My brother, my mentor Ravi has been the greatest source of inspiration in my life. My parents-in-law, Neelaben and Pankajbhai have supported my decision for advanced education and are always cheering for my accomplishments.

I am immensely grateful to the military veterans and members of the armed forces for their selfless and valiant service to our country. I thank you and your families from the bottom of my heart.

Through selfless service, you will always be fruitful and find the fulfillment of your desires. ~ Bhagavad Gita

Our connection is no coincidence. ~ Dipal Nish Parekh

Acknowledgements

My dissertation committee members and great mentors, THANK YOU so much for the guidance throughout my academic journey. I am deeply indebted to you for your help and support. Dr. Paul Wagner, I am truly honored to have you as my dissertation chair. I greatly appreciate your patience, encouragement, and invaluable insights. Your guidance has helped me to grow as a scholar and as a person. Also, THANK YOU for your service to our nation.

Dr. Kent Divoll, I am incredibly grateful for your guidance and support throughout this process. Thank you for helping me to develop my research questions and methodology. Dr. Jennifer Grace, you are an inspiration. I am really fortunate to have you as a mentor. Thank you for your encouragement and for helping me to stay motivated. THANK YOU for your service and sacrifice as a dependent of veteran. Dr. Marilyn Dement, I do not know where to even start. I am astounded by your kindness and untiring support. Thank you so much for helping me to discover my strengths and to reach my full potential in this process. I am very grateful for the insights, staying on the calls until I understand the concepts, quick feedback, and everything else.

Dr. Michelle Peters, a thank you is not enough. I appreciate you being a supportive mentor and for always believing in me. Also, THANK YOU for your service. You made a significant difference in my academic journey. Dr. Antonio Corrales, you are an amazing person. Thank you for recruiting me to the great program, motivating me to continue with the program, and emailing those words of encouragement. Your energy and passion for education are contagious.

Dr. Amy Orange, thank you for being an inspiration and helping me understand the magnitude of qualitative research. I also want to acknowledge my accountability partners, Dr. Nithy Sevanthinathan, Dr. Jana Sever, and Dr. Sheila Pope. Thank you for

those periodic buddy-checks and motivational messages. I am grateful to you for the gift of your time. I am glad to have you all in my life.

Dr. Nancy Schlossberg, thank you for taking the time to speak with me and explain your transition theory and the 4S model ensuring my comprehension. Your work serves as the basis of my research and I could not have completed this dissertation without your work, *literally*!! I am very honored and humbled for the encouragement I received during our discussion and via email conversations.

Lastly, thank you to the participants in this study for your generosity and courage in sharing your experiences with me. I am profoundly grateful for your contributions and honored to have you on my journey. THANK YOU for your service and sacrifice. And congratulations on your academic journey.

The gift of knowledge is the highest gift in the world. ~ Swami Vivekananda

ABSTRACT

EXAMINING THE IMPACT OF VETERAN-CENTRIC SUPPORT ON ACADEMIC
SUCCESS, RETENTION, AND DEGREE COMPLETION OF STUDENTS
UTILIZING POST-9/11 GI BILL AT A PUBLIC UNIVERSITY

Dipal Nish Parekh, B.Sc., M.Sc.
University of Houston-Clear Lake, 2023

Dissertation Chair: Dr. Paul Wagner
Methodologist: Dr. Kent Divoll

During the post-war period, American higher education experiences exponential growth in veteran enrollment. As post-9/11 GI Bill is the most utilized VA education benefits, the U.S. Dept. of VA spends billions of dollars annually on the GI Bill. Yet, veterans' retention and degree completions are much lower compared to other nontraditional students at public universities. This qualitative study explored the lived experiences of veteran students. A descriptive phenomenological approach used to understand the challenges and barriers veteran students encounter as they transition into academia and the impact of veteran-centric support services have on the students' overall academic success, retention, and degree completion goals. A purposeful sample of eleven diverse veteran students participated in semi-structured interviews. The questions were guided by Schlossberg's Transition Theory and the 4S Model found mixed perceptions of the veteran support offered on campus. All participants emphasized the importance of having veteran-centric support services on campus with more visibility and more resources, especially for graduate-level students. Data analysis found that 55% of participants perceived veteran support office to have a positive influence on their overall academic success, retention, and degree completion goals in terms of GI Bill process.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES

LIST OF FIGURES

CHAPTER I:

INTRODUCTION

During his second inaugural address on March 4, 1865, President Abraham
Lincoln affirmed the nation's obligation to care for military service members and
veterans with these immortal words, *"To care for him who shall have borne the battle
and for his widow, and his orphan,"* which serves as the basis of the current motto of the
United States (U.S.) Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) which is **"To fulfill President
Lincoln's promise to care for those who have served in our nation's military and for their
families, caregivers, and survivors"** (VA, 2023). Thus, President Franklin Roosevelt
signed the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, known as the "GI Bill," into law
which provided veterans with tuition-free education or career training (VA, 2022b).

In 2008, President George W. Bush expanded this aid by signing the "Post-9/11
GI Bill." To date, the current administration reasserts that *"as Americans, we have a
sacred obligation to care for our nations' veterans and their families – both while they
are deployed and after they return home"* (U.S. Office of the Press Secretary, 2021a). On
August 16, 2017, the Harry W. Colmery Veterans Educational Assistance Act, known as
the "Forever GI Bill," was signed into law bringing significant changes to educational
benefits for veterans (VA, 2022b). The changes enhanced and expanded education
benefits for veterans, servicemembers, families, and survivors (VA, 2022d; Zhang, 2018).

At the height of the post-war era, nearly 70% of all male college students were
veterans (Kofoed, 2022). The VA (2023) classified nearly 19.2 million Americans as
veterans, accounting for less than eight percent of the civilian noninstitutional adult
population who are 18-years or older living in the U.S. and territories (Schaeffer, 2021).
Over 2.5 million servicemen and women served in the military during the Afghanistan–
Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF), Iraq–Operation Enduring Freedom (OIF) and

Operation New Dawn (OND). Many of these veterans are now attending postsecondary institutions and are eligible to use benefits provided by the American government (Borsari et al., 2017; Vogt et al., 2018). According to Kastle et al. (2021), over the last five years, veterans represented about 900,000 college students on average yearly. As aforementioned combat veterans pursue their higher education ambitions, they are likely to require specific types of support services during their academic journey (Ahern et al., 2015; Hinton, 2020; Hope, 2020; Wenger et al., 2017).

Since 1973, the U.S. has had an all-volunteer military. Thus, the education benefits are an attractive incentive for inducing service in the military. For the current fiscal year, the VA (2023) budgeted $12.2 billion for over 921,000 (4.8%) veterans who are expected to utilize education and job training benefits. In addition to covering full resident college tuition, the post-9/11 GI Bill also pays monthly housing allowance and offers stipends for books and supplies (Absher, 2023). A study by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) found despite the increased education benefits from VA, many veterans are not utilizing these benefits (Holian & Adam, 2020).

With the traditional student population swiftly shrinking, most education institutions are seeking ways to attack nontraditional students such as veterans (Teixeira, 2021). Also, public universities have long assisted nontraditional populations (i.e., minorities, students with disabilities, first-generation students). Unlike the traditional age of 18–22 years old college students, most veterans are aged 24–40 years making up a total of 15% of veterans in academia (VA, 2023a). Furthermore, the VA (2023a) reported 62% of veterans are first-generation college students and 47% are married or have children. in Compared with traditional college students, veterans are twice as likely to be employed off-campus, support families and have a considerable amount of life experiences before starting college.

Usually, higher education is correlated with raising income, moderating pay inequality, and increasing economic growth and global competitiveness (Hill et al., 2019). Accordingly, Lopez et al. (2020) attest college degrees are increasingly associated with greater economic opportunities for individuals, and positive civic benefits for society. A recent analysis of census and college education data by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2022) revealed that bachelor's degree holders earn $27,300 more each year than high school diploma holders. Thus, during a typical 40-years career life, degree holder earns millions of dollars in additional income than a non-degreed individual.

Additionally, Hanson (2022b) noted over 39 million college students did not graduate nor earn credentials during the 2020–2021 academic year, such non-completion data are common problem encountered by many institutions today. Existing data on veterans emphasizes the dire need for targeted support ensuring veteran students remain in academia for degree completion. According to Kastle et al. (2021), universities need to pursue research regarding the variables affecting academic readiness, performance, motivation, and persistence of military-affiliated students. Military educational benefits afford veterans with the transformational opportunities to obtain higher education and career training ambitions commensurate with their transition back into civilian life.

Higher education institutions (HEIs) recruiting veterans have access to billions of dollars through GI Bill benefits allocations. Yet, Griffin and Gilbert (2015) identified that less than 22% of HEIs provide any kind of support specific to veteran students. Hill et al. (2019) asserted veterans still remain as an underrepresented group at public four-year institutions. Creating a robust veteran-centric support system on campus yet seems challenging for many colleges and universities (Gregg et al., 2016; Morris et al., 2019). The term "*veteran-centric*" refers to responding quickly and compassionately to the emerging needs of veterans, ensuring they receive all eligible benefits and services

(National Hospice and Palliative Care Organization, 2020). The development of a veteran-centric culture incorporates responsibility (Vogt et al., 2018) for offering suitable programs, tailoring support services, securing greater retention and degree completion.

Several studies (Ahern et al., 2015; Bailey et al., 2019; Boccieri et al., 2019; Drebing et al., 2018; Franco et al., 2021; Klaw et al., 2021; Semer & Harmening, 2015) revealed understanding the military culture could increase the ability to empathize, support mental health, find solutions for post-military education, and increase general appreciation for military service. Therefore, the positive direction of a highly focused veteran-centric support in academia is paramount in recruiting and emboldening this student population to reach for and attain postsecondary degrees as advised by the U.S. Department of Education (ED) list of "8 Keys to Veterans' Success" program. Early awareness for HEIs of veterans' needs provides opportunities for the academic community to develop appropriate techniques and strategies to minimize attrition and increase academic success, increasing retention and degree completion (Falkey, 2016).

Research Problem

The original GI Bill was created for millions of service members returning home after world war II to ensure they do not find themselves without home or employment (Teixeira, 2021). Historically, the post-war era is critical for the nation's economy as it has shown returning veterans are likely to seek higher education attainment (Bailey et al., 2019; Chan, 2018; Geiger et al., 2017; Morissette et al., 2021). As a catalyst for recovery in the aftermath of war, HEIs must prepare for an influx of veterans with retention strategies leading to degree completions and fulfill their commitment to Department of ED by ensuring veterans have access to high-quality education and training programs.

Findley and Metz (2022) reported that veterans' enrollment in HEIs soared to nearly 340% from 2008 to 2016. This spike not only raised the number of nontraditional

students but added potentially a new demographic with diverse set of needs requiring academic leaders to review support offered by their institutions. The current presidential administration's recent order to withdraw or reduce military interventions abroad (U.S. Office of the Press Secretary, 2021b), resulted in a large population of service members returning home primarily from the middle east. Duffin (2022) elaborated the largest numbers of veterans live in the states of Texas, Florida, and California. Thus, HEIs in these regions are better positioned to leverage greater numbers of veterans' enrollment. The VA's veteran population projection model of 2020 predicted the state of Texas will have the highest number of veterans (VA, 2023a) during the years 2030–2050.

Experts argued that with such an influx of veterans there is still a massive gap in understanding their needs by academic professionals (Elliott et al., 2011; Gordon et al., 2016b). Moreover, Tinto (2017) claimed interests of universities to increase retention leads to a range of beneficial outcomes, including heightened revenue. Wenger et al. (2017) acknowledged student retention in higher education is one of the greatest concerns of all stakeholders and is critical to the continued success of society (Kirchner & Pepper, 2020). Most of these stakeholders include legislators, higher education administrators, academic practitioners, faculty, campus support staff, students, and community members. Tinto (1994) and Falkey (2016) emphasized student retention is critical to the survival of educational institutions in the 21$^\text{st}$ century.

American higher education system has experienced exponential growth in veterans' enrollment since 2008 as a subgroup of nontraditional learners (Chan, 2018; Morris et al., 2019; Zhang, 2018). Hence, practices to recruit and strategies to retain veterans require different approaches than the standard methods used for traditional students. Most higher education practitioners are aware that typically veterans encounter many challenges during their transition from military to civilian society and reintegration

into academic environment, but how to efficaciously support these transitions still remain untamed (Elnitsky et al., 2017; Falkey, 2016; Richman, 2017; Schultz et al., 2022).

Navigation in and through college is not easy without understanding various processes (Mitchell, 2016) and obtaining targeted or sufficient guidance. Veloso et al. (2021) explained that for veteran students it may be more difficult because they possess different life experiences than their non-veteran peers. Dillard and Yu (2016) indicated veterans' retention and degree completion data collection at HEIs have been infinitesimal compared to traditional students. Also, Morissette et al. (2021) reported high dropout rates among veteran students. To date, there are no comprehensive data collected on veterans' retention and degree completion by HEIs or the VA (Morris et al., 2019). The steadily declining retention of veterans from public universities (Bailey et al., 2019; Mahoney et al., 2021) may have a significant impact on degree completion and ultimately may negatively affect fundings from state and federal sources (Mitchell et al., 2019).

Significance of the Study

Despite the numerous educational benefits, veteran students' retention efforts, and financial incentives, only a limited number of veterans complete postsecondary degrees (Jenner, 2019; Massa & Gogia, 2017). Williams-Klotz and Gansemer-Topf (2018) reported veterans tend to achieve lower levels of degree attainment than non-veteran students, and veterans were four percent more likely to drop out of college than non-veteran students (Elliott et al., 2019). According to the U.S. Dept. of Defense (2022), an overwhelming majority of active-duty military personnel have only earned a high school diploma or a General Education Diploma (GED).

Although, there is a considerable amount of recent literature on supporting military-affiliated students at community colleges (Ahern et al., 2015; Chan, 2018; Evans et al., 2015; Fortney et al., 2016; Heineman, 2017; Sitzes et al., 2021; Stevenson & Le

Buhn, 2020; Williams-Klotz & Gansemer-Topf, 2018) and a few studies touching on veteran retention and graduation through quantitative lenses (Azpeitia & Emerson, 2022; Gordon et al., 2016a; Steele et al., 2018; Wenger et al., 2017), not enough data are available on efficiently supporting veteran students at four-year public universities. Because the current practices from VA or HEIs do not focus on collecting data pertaining to retention, degree completion or post-graduation of veteran students. The gap in the existing research indicates there is an acute need for veteran students' data pertaining to retention and degree completion (Mentzer et al., 2015; Wenger et al., 2017) at public four-year universities. The information currently collected by the VA reflects primarily the funding disbursements to HEIs for veterans (Kofoed, 2022; Massa & Gogia, 2017).

The increasing number of veterans in higher education prompts institutions to reevaluate the services currently offered to students and to consider incorporating the specific needs of veterans in proving services on campus (DiRamio, 2017). Additionally, Cox (2019) found many veterans enrolled in universities with veteran-specific services did not utilize the services due to an insufficient knowledge of procedures or from facing the fear of judgement from other students. A report by NCES (2022) highlighted that during the 2021-2022 academic year, only five percent of veteran students used VA educational benefits. In spring 2022, the total postsecondary enrollment was 16.2 million students across the U.S.A with a total of 13.87 million students attended four-year public institutions (Hanson, 2022b). There were 1.6 million students enrolled in Texas HEIs, of which 89% enrolled in public institutions (Hanson, 2022a). Presently, such granular level data are not easily available on the enrollment of veteran students.

Recent studies focusing on veterans in higher education have been limited by narrowly defined research aims and a variety of methodological shortcomings (Vogt et al., 2018). There is also an absence of empirical evidence of best practices in campus

veteran-specific support (Hitt et al., 2015) for veterans' transition into a college environment. The amount of scholarly literature in the last few years that study veteran students in public universities and explore their lived experiences is slim and dated (DiRamio, 2017). Many higher education practitioners acknowledge the number of military students has grown and is expected to continue increasing in the near future (Stevenson & Le Buhn, 2020). Supporting veteran students' academic success will require much more data than the currently available. Accordingly, the failure to understand the needs of veterans is likely to result in an unsuccessful experience for both the student and the institution (Massa & Gogia, 2017).

Research Purpose and Questions

The purpose of this study was to examine the perceptions of veteran students at a mid-sized, suburban, four-year public university located in southeast Texas regarding the challenges they face, and the impact veteran-centric support services have on their academic success, retention, and degree completion. The study addressed the following research questions:

R1: What are the perceptions of veteran students regarding the veteran-centric support services at a four-year public university?

R2: What are the perceptions of veteran students regarding their needs at a four-year public university?

R3: What are the perceptions of veteran students regarding services that support their academic success?

R4: What are the perceptions of veteran students regarding services that support their retention and degree completion goals?

Definitions of Key Terms

The following list of key terms (in alphabetical order) are references in this study:

Academic Success is defined as inclusive of academic achievement, attainment of

learning objectives, acquisition of desired skills and competencies, satisfaction,

persistence, and post-college performance (York et al., 2015).

Challenges encountered by most veteran students are defined as experiencing a variety of

physical, cognitive/mental, and emotional challenges (Elnitsky et al., 2017).

Degree Completion is defined as the post-9/11 veteran students who graduated from their

program and received a degree (National Student Clearinghouse, 2014).

OEF: Operation Enduring Freedom veterans are service members of any military branch

who served in Afghanistan from October 2001 to December 2014 (VA, 2022a).

OIF: Operation Iraqi Freedom veterans are service members of any military branch who

served in Iraq from March 2003 to December 2011 (VA, 2022a).

OND: Operation New Dawn veterans are service members of any military branch who

served in Iraq from September 2010 to December 2011 (VA, 2022a).

Post-9/11 GI Bill or Chapter 33 (also referred to as Forever GI Bill, after 2017) is a

generous education benefit from the VA that helps pay for school and job training

for service members who served on active duty after September 10, 2001, and

also their dependents. It includes payment of tuition and fees, a monthly housing

allowance, and a stipend for textbooks and supplies. (Gross, 2019; VA, 2022b).

PTSD: Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder is a mental anxiety disorder that develops after

experiencing a traumatic event such as war or terrorist attack. Veterans who have

PTSD believe their life or others' lives are in danger, and they feel the loss of

self-control over what is happening. PTSD is a mental health problem that some

people develop after experiencing or witnessing a life-threatening event, like

combat, a natural disaster, a car accident, or sexual assault (VA, 2023b).

Retention is the rate at which an institution retains and graduate students who first enter

      the institution as freshman at a given point in time (Tinto, 2012). Veteran

      students' retention in this study, refers to the students using post-9/11 GI Bill

      education benefit who return to the same institution for their second academic

      year (National Student Clearinghouse, 2014).

Transition is defined as any event or non-event which results in changed relationships,

      routines, assumptions, and roles of the individual. (Schlossberg et al., 1995).

Veteran is a term referring to a former member of the armed forces. Title 38 of the Code

      of Federal Regulations defines a veteran as "a person who served in the active

      military, naval, or air service and who was discharged or released under

      conditions other than dishonorable." (VA, 2019).

Veteran-centric means responding quickly and compassionately to the emerging needs of

      veterans, ensuring they have all the benefits and services for which they are

      eligible. Developing a veteran-centric culture incorporates knowing the veterans

      and understanding their needs, including veterans in the process, and coordinating

      activities for veteran engagement (National Hospice and Palliative Care

      Organization [NHPCO], 2020).

Conclusion

The emergence of veteran students as a unique demographic has caused researchers to examine the challenges these students encounter and address the peculiar needs to support students overall academic success (Borsari et al., 2017). Recently, there are few studies (Evans et al., 2015; Kirchner & Pepper, 2020; Klaw et al., 2021; Morris et al., 2019; Stevenson & Le Buhn, 2020; Williams-Klotz & Gansemer-Topf, 2018) focused on veterans' transition experiences to collegiate environment, yet not enough research exists on veterans attending public four-year universities, especially in the southeast

region of Texas. Stull et al. (2020) explained that despite a growing interest among educators who recognize the unique needs of veterans, no current studies reported on the perceptions of veterans utilizing post-9/11 GI Bill regarding the needs and myriad challenges encountered by veterans at a public four-year university.

Gregg et al. (2016) shared that most veterans feel they are underrepresented on campus. Exploring perceptions of veterans through their lived experiences leveraged further research on military transition challenges and helped understand students' needs and strategies to enhance their transition into academia (Stull et al., 2020). The data are useful for higher education professionals in recruiting, retaining, and graduating students by re-shifting the focus to serve the needs of veteran students (Morissette et al., 2021).

Chapter I identified the need to examine the relationships of veteran-centric support services to unique challenges met by veteran students pertaining to their academic success, retention, and degree completion goals at public four-year universities. The research problems and significance of the study were reviewed, and research questions were presented. In Chapter II, historical and current perspectives on challenges faced by veteran students, campus support services and their impact on academic success, retention, and degree completion are discussed further.

CHAPTER II:

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The American military offers numerous benefits to its service members and their families. Among these benefits are generous educational benefits that allow service members and veterans to pursue higher education before, during, and after their honorable discharge from the military. Public and private higher education institutions (HEIs) have experienced a drastic increase in military-connected students' enrollment since 1944 due to passing of the Servicemen's Readjustment Act or the original GI Bill (Findley & Metz, 2022). Scholars (Heineman, 2017; Sitzes et al., 2021) approximate 43% of service members attend two-year HEIs after discharge from the military; many of which transfer to four-year institution in pursuit of a bachelor or higher degree.

The growing number of veterans in post-secondary education remains mostly understudied (Morales et al., 2019). Many universities seek to identify the best practices to support various nontraditional students such as veteran students (Borsari et al., 2017). Also, how veterans use their entitled benefits and the institutions they attend are not well documented (Kofoed, 2022). The literature review of this qualitative study involves the synthesis of information related to providing veteran-centric support to students at four-year public universities with a focus to address the unique needs of veterans that pose as barriers in their academic success, retention, or that deter them from degree completion.

Military veterans and active-duty service members are the epitome of nontraditional student populations in higher education; the support services provided to them must also be outside of the standard operating procedures (Caamal, 2019; Fortney et al., 2016). Specifically, the veterans who had combat exposures may be struggling with long-term consequences of that experience which negatively impact veterans' ability to successfully transition into higher education (Gregg et al., 2016). Although veterans

struggle with many barriers while pursuing their academic goals similar to other nontraditional student groups (Falkey, 2016), there are many more unique service-related stressors veterans face as part of their transition into the higher education environment (Flink, 2017; Umucu et al., 2020). Also, research conducted by Oster et al. (2017) further indicated higher learning institutional assistance is integral to aid students in their collegiate journey, and a systematic approach to that assistance is preferred.

Parker et al. (2019) found that about 50% of all veterans attending college and post-9/11 veterans are more likely to have enrolled in college full-time after leaving the military compared to veterans who served prior to year 2011. The U.S. Dept. of Veterans Affairs (VA) proclaimed the understanding of military culture could lead to an increased ability to empathize, support veteran mental health, and increase general appreciation for the military service (McDougall, 2019). Without clear pathways or coordination by the university veteran support office (VSO) and faculty in the classroom, some veterans might not receive all of the campus benefits and services available to them to be academically successful. Numerous studies (Buzzetta et al., 2020; Campbell & Riggs, 2015; Ghosh et al., 2019; Osborne, 2017; Romero et al., 2015) conclude some veteran students may be coping with mental health concerns such as anxiety, suicidal thoughts, alienation, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), traumatic brain injury (TBI), or even struggling to find meaning and their purpose outside of the military environment, prior to their enrollment in higher education.

Morales et al. (2019) identified two long-held competing narratives of veterans: one depicts veterans as heroes who signify power, strength, and patriotism, and the other stereotypes veterans as substance abusers, homeless, prone to aggression and domestic violence, emotionally unstable, jaded from civilian interactions, and suffering from a diagnosis of PTSD. Such ideas contribute to shape how society perceives veteran

population and may influence the institutional imagination of universities that try to support these students (Morales et al., 2019). So, accommodating military-affiliated students in an educational setting requires in-depth knowledge and understanding of the various obstacles encountered by these nontraditional students (Klaw et al., 2021).

The current population of veteran students at public four-year university may not be receiving the support they require for their academic success (Elnitsky et al., 2017; Kirchner, 2015), due to hesitancy about asking for assistance or being unaware of the available resources (Dean, 2020). Also, Blackwell-Starnes (2018) shared that in many cases, veteran students might learn about the services available to them on campus but find the support staff lack the understanding of veteran students' needs or the culture awareness (Wenger et al., 2017). The transition from a highly structured environment like the military to a flexible, less structured college atmosphere may be problematic for many veterans (Falkey, 2016; Osborne, 2017; Parker et al., 2019). Consideration of how universities can prepare to assist students with such difficulty may have a positive impact on the overall academic success, retention, and degree completions of veteran students.

Post-9/11 GI Bill and Higher Education

Since the inception of the Post-9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Act of 2008, also known as the post-9/11 GI Bill or Chapter 33 (VA, 2022b), a tremendous increase of veterans' enrollment in higher education system has occurred and it is anticipated to grow substantially in the next few years (Zhang, 2018). According to Dortch (2021) this evolution of the post-9/11 GI Bill had four key points: providing parity of benefits for reservists and members of the regular Armed Forces; ensuring comprehensive educational benefits; meeting military recruiting goals; and lastly, improving military retention through transferability of benefits. Moreover, Barr (2019) established that within the set of education subsidies, the post-9/11 GI Bill program has a significant

budgetary impact on the economy (Teixeira, 2021); at over $13 billion per year, it exceeds the amount of grants and scholarships provided by all states combined, that is roughly two-thirds of tax expenditures on benefits for higher education and equates to half of all Pell grant expenditures (Kofoed, 2022; Wenger et al., 2017).

The VA (2023) estimated $14.2 billion on education benefits expenditure for the current fiscal year. The largest share of the VA education benefits budget is the post-9/11 GI Bill which was estimated to be $10.3 billion (VA, 2023). With availability of the aforementioned data, higher education administrators are able to strategize efforts for recruitment of military-affiliated students since, after discharge from the military most veterans are highly likely to seek degrees leading to careers in the civilian society and to attain financial stability (Borsari et al., 2017). According to Kato et al. (2016), a large number of troops served in military Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF), Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF), and Operation New Dawn (OND) with many more service members being deployed and returned home in recent years.

Many of these servicemembers and veterans will choose to access their military education benefits or transfer benefits to their dependents (Kofoed, 2022) and begin the next phase of their lives at postsecondary institutions (Barr, 2019; Griffin & Gilbert, 2015; Kato et al., 2016). However, some veterans may start early and accrue college credits while on active duty or continue to serve as Reservists or National Guards while enrolling in college or university (Belanger et al., 2021). Since the GI Bill benefits are nonrenewable and must be used within 15-years after discharge, veterans must plan and persist on program of their interest with aim of graduation.

As of the year 2020, a total of 609,525 veteran and military-affiliated students received post-9/11 GI Bill benefits to equate to 68% of all veterans who utilized education benefits (VA, 2022b). The current post-9/11 GI Bill provides full in-state

tuition, reimbursements for books and supplies, and basic housing allowance calibrated to the local housing market to all eligible students (Azpeitia & Emerson, 2022; Kowalski, 2016). In their study, Bailey et al. (2019) explained post-9/11 GI Bill may have two opposing effects on veteran academic performance. First, with an increasing number of veterans using their educational benefits, the quality of the pool of veterans and their average academic success may erode. On the other hand, the higher value of post-9/11 GI Bill benefits may increase veteran students' academic success because their financial pressures pertaining to education are reduced with their VA educational benefits.

Military veterans or dependents eligible for post-9/11 GI Bill benefits, are likely to strive for higher education attainment to increase their earning potential after the member's service departure (Gonzalez & Simpson, 2021). Some transitioning members may even enroll in college before their honorable discharge from the military. According to Jenner (2017), the post-9/11 GI Bill has benefited not only the military-affiliated population, but the society at large because U.S. military veterans have historically been a key to global competitiveness and economic prosperity and that potential to be key in the present exists as well. Thus, existing reticent competition among the American HEIs to increase the veteran enrollment and retention undoubtedly seems feasible.

Perceptions of Challenges Faced by Veteran Students

When military service members enroll in a university soon after their discharge from the military, it may cause increased stress levels and they may be more prone to poor mental health (Fortney et al., 2016; Mahoney et al., 2021). Because of the complexities of their military career, veterans are considered a distinct nontraditional student population (Kastle et al., 2021). Military training is rigid and typically team-based activities, unlike a more relaxed college environment (Dyar, 2019).

Veteran students may struggle to adapt and to cope with the differences in these contrasting environments. Although any college-bound student may encounter challenges entering a postsecondary institution, for veteran students making the transition to a college environment and reintegrating into a campus community, the transition is more challenging due to the independent nature of a university campus (Grimell, 2017). Numerous researchers (Blackburn, 2016; Boner, 2016; Deshpande, 2021; Evans et al., 2015; Mitchell, 2016) agree, transitions from military to civilian life has the potential to bring personal, familial, financial, social, and administrative challenges to most veterans.

Most, if not all, HEIs want to support veteran students to succeed academically (Morris et al., 2019). Nonetheless, Bailey et al. (2019) explored another factor that may pose as an additional barrier in veterans' academic success which is not evident in previous studies that a veteran student may also be a first-generation college student. Researchers (Cataldi et al., 2018; Jenner, 2019) further discussed that first-generation college students generally are less academically prepared for college, have lower grades, complete fewer credit hours, and are less likely to graduate on time compared to students whose parents completed a postsecondary degree. Additionally, Schroeder and Perez (2022) found that 62% of veteran students are first generation college students and they may not have the familial knowledge of navigating the steps to acquire a postsecondary education (Cataldi et al., 2018; VA, 2023a).

Although, the post-9/11 GI Bill has shown a positive impact increasing first-generation student enrollment, the veteran-centric support needed for such students is still lacking from the majority of HEIs (Zhang, 2018). Scholars (Borsari et al., 2017; Dean, 2020; Tinto, 2012) found once on campus, veteran students may not even take advantage of all available resources due to a lack of awareness or hesitation in seeking assistance. For instance, the unique needs of veteran students may include their struggle with effects

of deployment, transition experience, mental health conditions, and reacclimating to civilian life which requires support that is different from traditional students (Kastle et al., 2021). Thus, supporting post-military students in an educational setting requires a thorough understanding and knowledge of the various obstacles endured by the veterans.

Jones (2016) elaborated the understanding of a military culture could lead to an increased ability to empathize, support veterans and their family members' mental health, and increase general appreciation for the military service. As several recent studies (Boccieri et al., 2019; Crisp et al., 2017; Dean, 2020; Gregg et al., 2016; McDougall, 2019; O'Herrin, 2011; Schroeder & Perez, 2022; Sohn et al., 2017; Veloso et al., 2021) revealed skills such as compassion, empathy, comprehension of military terms and strategies, upkeep of the rules and guidelines from the VA, networking, and mentorship are all essential factors for providing adequate support for the military-affiliated students in HEIs. Doing so ultimately may have a positive impact on the overall veteran students' academic success, retention, and degree completions.

Bailey et al. (2019) and Mahoney et al. (2021) emphasized when on campus veterans confront reacquainting with academic environment, navigation through complex campus administrative systems, finding support for their unique needs, encountering negative reactions from the campus community based on their participation in military conflicts, and have difficulty connecting with classmates and faculty. Consequently, inadequate support and poor academic services (Parks et al., 2015) from HEIs may dissuade veterans from their educational goals (Dean, 2020). Furthermore, Marcus (2017) reported that data indicates veterans enrolled in public universities often do not graduate or take much longer to complete a degree, compared to traditional college students.

Academic Success, Retention and Degree Completion

Although there is an exponential growth in veterans' college enrollment in the last decade, the lack of understanding of this student culture among education staff and faculty still exists (Elliott et al., 2019; Mahoney et al., 2021; Semer & Harmening, 2015). It may be difficult for universities to pinpoint factors to adequately support veteran students with their academic success due to various factors. Precise data pertaining to retention, degree completion, or graduation often are not tracked by the universities nor by the VA (Barr, 2019; Kofoed 2022) for students using post-9/11 GI Bill benefits. Hence, student retention in higher education has been one of the most prominent concerns for many years now (Holder, 2016).

Furthermore, Elnitsky et al. (2017) acknowledged veteran students experience more chronic pain, PTSD, and TBI that interfere with their daily functioning at higher rates than their civilian counterparts. Even among students without any psychological or physical disorders, research shows more than 25% of veterans report difficulty in social functioning on campus (Mahoney et al., 2021). Such factors may significantly contribute to poor retention and therefore lower degree completion rates among veteran students. Additionally, Semer and Harmening (2015) stated that limited prior research has been conducted on the veteran population to understand the factors that influence their academic success, retention, or degree completion in postsecondary institutions.

Both academic and social systems make up a student's college experience. While the academic system aids in a student's academic success and degree completion (Dean, 2020), the social system ties to the retention of veterans. In addition, retention and degree completion of veteran students may play a significant role in a university's funding as student enrollment numbers are a variable in the budget calculations. Jenner (2017) stated continually reported low rates of postsecondary degree attainment and high rates of

dropouts among returning veterans are areas of critical concern to education researchers, policymakers, and higher education professionals.

Sense of Belonging

The environment of a typical American public four-year university provides many opportunities for traditional students to develop their sense of belonging on campus through a variety of options, such as participating in social organizations and campus activities or participating in classes where the majority of students are of a similar age group (Blackwell-Starnes, 2018). However, such an environment may not necessarily aid veteran students in developing their sense of belonging on campus. For instance, in a university environment the concerns of traditional-aged students can seem trivial to the veterans with combat experience, making it difficult for veterans to relate to their peers. Mitchell (2016) revealed the age differences, multiple roles, and lack of shared life experiences with nonveterans contributed to veteran students' perceptions of a paucity of campus social support and often led to a sense of distinct isolation.

A recent demographic study by the governor's office identified the median age of a veteran in Texas as 50 years old, whereas the median age of a nonveteran was noted as 35 years old (Texas Workforce Investment Council, 2021). So, veteran students may lack identity on campus, Borsari et al. (2017) stated taking a methodical approach to implement and evaluate current veteran programs and services on campus is prudent for administrators. Many institutions promote a welcoming culture on campus by serving this demographic with compassion and empathy that may change the future of veterans returning to school and have a positive impact on promoting sense of belonging (Blackburn, 2016; Falkey, 2016; Kastle et al., 2021; McDougall, 2019; Rumann et al., 2011). Furthermore, Tinto (2017) elaborated that although a sense of belonging may mirror veterans' experiences prior to entry that lead them to fear they do not belong at a

university, it is directly shaped by the broader campus climate and students' daily interactions with others on campus community. The sense of belonging factor is important in college student retention and degree completion because for veteran students, these feelings are strongly associated with college adjustment (Hinton, 2020).

Taylor et al. (2020) explained the military provides a range of unique opportunities to individuals that are not normally available in civilian society. As such, the military offers a sense of social belonging that is not easily attained elsewhere. The sense of belonging plays a significant role in any student's successful academic life (Blackwell-Starnes, 2018; Stevenson & Le Buhn, 2020). There are a few private, for-profit universities or community colleges that offer successful programs that encourage veteran engagement (Tinto, 2017). For example, Barnett (2016) indicated veteran students' involvement in campus leadership programs may help bridge gaps and establish the students' desire to engage in creating a sense of belonging to their university.

Falkey (2016) reported a student lounge specifically for veterans in the vicinity of the VSO provides an opportunity to acquaint or network to establish an informal peer support system on campus, yet not many public colleges and universities have this option (Blackburn, 2016) for veteran students. Kirchner and Pepper (2020) assured the sense of belonging on campus influences students' decision to persist and impacts their academic outcomes. Higher education leaders can have a positive impact on veterans' integration into a university and their overall collegiate experience (Heineman, 2017); as the adjustment to an academic environment is a process and a veteran students' sense of belonging can change accordingly (Hinton, 2020).

Mentorship and Peer Support

Mentorship and peer support (Kees et al., 2017) for veterans are as important as the sense of belonging to the institution. According to Crisp et al. (2017), providing

college students with access to mentorships has presently become a national priority. Universities that offer a mentorship program and peer group support allow transitioning service members to benefit greatly from having someone to talk to on a regular basis, someone who could provide informed guidance and responses to questions, and who could also serve as an accountability partner during the transition process (Veloso et al., 2021; Yomtov et al., 2017). Many private universities have peer support options for veterans which have proven to be an effective way to support the veterans because they can connect based on their shared backgrounds, in terms of the branch they served or the location of deployment (Belanger et al., 2021).

Veteran students working to cope with reintegration into the civilian community may benefit tremendously from efforts to build on interpersonal and community strengths along with resources to promote mental health care and to create opportunities for mentorships and peer support groups (Elnitsky et al., 2017). For a true "veteran-centric" support, mentorship or peer support program may serve as supplementary resource of collecting knowledge about related programs, policies, and new VA initiatives, which turns the focus on a student's experience and their needs (DiRamio, 2017). Researchers (Dean, 2020; Drebing et al., 2018; Elliott et al., 2019; Jenner, 2019; Schroeder & Perez, 2022; Yomtov, 2017) concurred mentorships serve as a great support to veterans in the social aspect, but mentors voiced the need for a veteran-centric support center with strong working knowledge of specific resources that aid with students' academic success.

Crisp et al. (2017) further explained that mentoring has long been considered a developmental and retention strategy for undergraduate students, and research suggests mentoring efforts are positively related to a variety of developmental and academic outcomes. Peers and mentors that provide academic support along with assistance with unique transitioning challenges may result in veteran students' successful transition into

civilian society. Drebing et al. (2018) stated an effective peer veteran mentor program asserts social support, experiential knowledge, and creates a concrete sense of belonging on campus. Peer mentoring has been used as an intervention, student-centered strategy for retention and proven to foster positive outcomes (Yomtov et al., 2017).

Likewise, in their research Kastle et al. (2021) indicated veteran students showed high desirability for mentorship programs on campus to help with transition from military to higher education. While finding a peer group may be less challenging for traditional students, veteran students may have a difficult time rebuilding those relationships due to factors like, the differences in age, maturity level, or even life experiences (Dean, 2020; Griffin & Gilbert, 2015; Heineman, 2017). Current literature provides an efficient and robust way for higher education professionals to identify evidence-based practices specific to designing, implementing, and evaluating mentoring programs for veteran students (Crisp et al., 2017). Because of the increasing number of veterans enrolling in postsecondary institutions in the near future, the time is crucial for more research on how veterans adapt to an academic environment (Camacho et al., 2021).

Mental Health

In 2020, approximately 53 million Americans (one in five adults, or about 21% of the U.S. adults) experienced a mental health illness; and 14.2 million people (one in 20 adults) live with a serious mental illness, including schizophrenia, major depression, or bipolar disorder as reported by the National Alliance on Mental Illness [NAMI] (2021), costing billions in lost earnings per year (Elnitsky et al., 2017). The issues related to mental health are challenges that some veteran students may struggle with as a result of exposure to the battlefield (Heineman, 2017; Richman, 2017; Stevenson & Le Buhn, 2020). Veteran students' mental and physical health concurrently may affect their ability to cope with post-transition decisions into academic life. A study by Bullman and

Schneiderman (2021) reported that mental health concerns of veteran students including suicide, are currently higher than ever experienced (Ganz et al., 2021).

As more information on mental health topics, specifically PTSD and TBI, becomes known, government agencies are focusing on providing resources to veterans to cope with these and other mental health issues (Schultz, 2018). Such awareness is critical for higher education professionals to provide adequate accommodations for veterans dealing with PTSD, TBI, depression, substance abuse, or substantial mobility limitations owing to the brain and or orthopedic injuries (Cheney et al., 2018; Ganz et al., 2021). Moreover, combat related emotional and behavior problems obligate public universities to address the needs of veteran students due to the enactment of Americans with Disabilities Act Amendments Act of 2008, and the passage of the post-9/11 Veterans Assistance Act of 2008 (Sansone & Tucker Segura, 2020).

Borsari et al. (2017) described about 1.6 million veterans of OEF/OIF/OND are more likely to be at a higher risk of PTSD than veterans from previous wars (Elliott et al., 2019). Furthermore, studies (LeViness et al., 2019; O'Herrin, 2011) reported up to 19% of deployed service members have developed symptoms of PTSD, TBI, anxiety, and depression (Buzzetta et al., 2020; Dieringer et al., 2017; Elliott et al., 2011, 2019). Avallone et al. (2019) shared OEF/OIF/OND veterans need institutional accommodations during transition due to the physical, emotional, and cognitive challenges which also impact the students' academic performance, experience in the classroom, persistence, and degree completion. All OEF/OIF/OND veterans have an increased risk of suicide compared to non-veterans (Bullman & Schneiderman, 2021).

Faculty Influence

Falkey (2016) stated that although returning veterans may bring maturity and a broader understanding of global issues to the learning experience because of their

military service, it is important for educators to understand the perceptions of the veterans as they transition into becoming college students. Campus community is likely to be less structured than a military environment; hence, creating a structured setting in the classroom is likely to reduce conflicts between the veterans and the faculty (Gordon et al., 2016a). Heineman (2017) shared it is a customary practice for the military to train its members to follow orders and expect accountability for their failures and mistakes.

Thus, veterans collaborating with civilian peers who do not appear to respect their professor or neglect assignments, can present problems for veterans that can stifle their integration in and acclimation into university life (Klaw et al., 2021). Students who form positive and supportive relationships with faculty are more likely to persist (Tinto, 1997). In a classroom, veterans may feel disconnected from other non-veteran students unable to relate to military experiences or make insensitive inquiries that trigger unwanted recollection of combat memories. Such isolation for veterans may deter their ability to identify peers or faculty as sources of support (Heineman, 2017; Rumann et al., 2011). To promote a positive learning environment, faculty can ensure interaction in the classroom which can be part of the learning experience (Tinto, 2017).

At times, veterans may be easily agitated or try to distance themselves until they feel comfortable interacting in the classroom. Such actions are easily perceived as a lack of interest or a disconnect from the class by faculty and classmates (Azpeitia & Emerson, 2022). Tinto (2012) indicated from a study of traditional students who had positive interactions with faculty members that they were likely to be successful, and conversely, students who had negative interactions with faculty had lost a of sense of belonging in the classroom and were less likely to be connected to the campus. It is important for faculty to engage veteran students in meaningful conversations about transitions throughout their college experience (Gibbs et al., 2019). Another study (Gordon et al., 2016a) implied that

when faculty include a veteran-friendly awareness statement on the course syllabi, veteran students are inclined to engage more in the classroom.

Some faculty may express their gratitude on Veterans' Day and point out a veteran in the classroom (Klaw et al., 2021). Although it may be well intended, some veterans may shy away from sharing their veteran status. Because they feel singled out and the faculty may not take such feelings into consideration, this could lead to unintentional discomfort for the veteran students in the classroom. Consequently, not only do veterans feel isolated from their peers, but may also struggle with not being supported by faculty and staff who do not understand the military culture (Dean, 2020). In addition, to efficiently support veteran students, it is important that faculty and staff make a cogent effort to understand veteran culture (Semer & Harmening, 2015).

Veteran Support Office (VSO)

Although the challenges of veteran students may not be apparent to school administrators or faculty, they are certainly noticeable to well-trained VSO staff members who have familiarized themselves with the conditions and obstacles that veterans face in their daily lives (Azpeitia & Emerson, 2022; Hitt et al., 2015). Hence, it is extremely critical for VSO staff members to have regular conversations about how veteran students view the concepts of meaning and purpose in their lives in the post-military environments (Ghosh et al., 2019), and collaborate with university counselors to develop strategies to assist the veteran students who may require intervention. Tinto (1997) established that students who show commitment to the university are more likely to persist, but they are less likely to do so if they do not perceive that the university is committed to them.

Falkey (2016) focused on veteran students and institution incompatibility, as some generations of students may hold perceptions that support staff or faculty do not understand the military culture or empathize with veterans facing challenges in an

26

academic setting (Osborne, 2017). The VSO staff serves as the liaison to federal VA and can offer periodic training to its staff members to discuss these, and other common concerns veteran students may experience. Sometimes, the unclear hierarchy, confusing job titles, and multiple student services offices in a higher education system can appear disorderly and create confusion to veteran students who are attempting to navigate the university environment (Buzzetta et al., 2020; Heineman, 2017; Rumann et al., 2011).

Gordon et al. (2016b) found higher education student affairs administrators may not be utilizing the valuable data from existing literature on veterans when creating policies and procedures pertaining to veteran students and their academic success. Nearly all major public or private HEIs receiving federal funds have a veteran affairs department and generally been seeking creative solutions to enhance veteran students' educational experience at their institution (Semer & Harmening, 2015). Based on previous veteran studies, it is evident that veterans prefer a knowledgeable point of contact who is trained to support their successful transition into the university along with their academic goals (Borsari et al., 2017; Richman, 2017). When visiting VSO, veteran students feel welcomed and comfortable to ask for assistance when the appreciation for the military and their services is apparent around the office or campus (Belanger et al., 2021).

Students are likely to develop a sense of inclusiveness and will feel comfortable asking for help when needed (Stevenson & Le Buhn, 2020; Tinto, 1994). However, Kastle et al. (2019) shared there are misconceptions that to efficiently support veterans on campus, the VSO must employ personnel with military service or background. Drebing et al. (2018) claimed well-trained civilian VSO staff members that are compassionate, empathetic, knowledgeable of frequent VA updates and changes regarding the GI Bill benefits can adequately support veteran students. Studies (Harris, 2017; Mason, 2011; Torregosa, et al., 2016) support that a positive and a caring campus climate can

27

contribute to drastically changing the students' performance and improve retention. Borsari et al. (2017) found using methodical approaches to implement and periodically evaluate military-affiliated programs and support services offered to veterans, may help alter any negative perspectives about the institution's commitment to its veterans.

Hill et al. (2019) stressed that when veterans attend postsecondary institutions matching their academic credentials, have high graduation rates, and have successful careers, the higher education sector will do a major service to veterans and the country. Creating an inviting and inclusive campus community may enhance meaning for students and develop mutual respect between individuals to improve retention and degree completion (Heineman, 2017). According to Lopez et al. (2020), veterans not only strengthen campus diversity and enrich the intellectual discourse, but also perform well academically, arrive on campus with ample financial support if using VA benefits, and likely to remain engaged members of the community post-graduation.

Summary of Findings

A thorough review of the literature supports the notion that veterans generally have a high desire for college education after military discharge (Crisp et al., 2017; Gonzalez & Simpson, 2021; Hinton, 2020; Mitchell, 2016; Osborne, 2017; Rattray et al., 2019; Ziencik, 2020). A survey by the Pew Research Center uncovered that nearly half (about 47%) of service members enrolled in HEIs after military discharge and 36% of post-9/11 veterans are more likely to enroll full-time in college (Parker et al., 2019). Despite the increasing enrollment of veteran students in higher education, their retention and graduation rates have been steadily declining in recent years (Mahoney et al., 2021).

Data indicates veterans enrolled in public universities often do not graduate or take much longer with degree completion compared to traditional college students (Marcus, 2017). As well, during their transition out of the military, veterans find it

difficult to readjust in a civilian sector and typically do not utilize all available campus resources to them (Parker et al., 2019; Sportsman & Thomas, 2015). As higher education becomes more accessible due to globalization, now may be the best time to recruit and develop strategies to retain veteran students. Supporting veterans on campus may have a positive impact by assisting them with overcoming non-academic challenges.

Veterans may encounter many obstacles in pursuing higher education, including lack of support services, administrative barriers, the inability to fit in with traditional college students, and difficulty transitioning from the structured military atmosphere to the often less structured life of a civilian (Semer & Harmening, 2015). Also, Parker et al. (2019) emphasized combat veterans describe their transition to civilian life significantly difficult. Successfully transitioning to university is a complex process for both veteran students and the higher education professionals who support them (DiRamio, 2017). Addressing the unique needs of veteran students can increase their chances of academic success and help them to reintegrate into civilian society (Mitchell, 2016).

The potential benefits of a postsecondary degree are significant as Mitchell et al. (2019) emphasized, with greater lifetime earnings for those with a bachelor's degree relative to high school diploma holders. Veterans may use their VA education benefits to reduce the financial strain associated with obtaining a college credential. Yet, there are challenges affiliated with poor retention and degree completions among veteran students as evident from current literature on veteran studies. Recruiting and retaining veterans requires a serious commitment from the institution (Hope, 2016). The American higher education system has an opportunity to help veteran community succeed in college by meeting their financial, health, and social needs, and by making campuses a place where veterans feel a sense of safety and belonging (Blackwell-Starnes, 2018; Elliott et al., 2011; NAMI, 2021) through implementing veteran-centric support.

Theoretical Framework

This descriptive phenomenological study examined the perceptions of veteran students at a four-year public university regarding challenges encountered and the impact of veteran-centric support services have on their academic success, retention, and degree completion goals. The study was conducted through the lens of Schlossberg's transition theory (1981, 1984) which is used to study adult transitions in any event and coping with the process. Theorist Dr. Nancy Schlossberg suggests transitions can be managed and that if a transition can be understood, the person who is experiencing it can be aided as the individual moves through the process (DiRamio, 2017). Schlossberg et al. (1995) defined *transition* as any event or non-event that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles of the individual. The theory explores internal and external factors to examine how individuals perceive themselves and their environment as they cope with a significant event or non-event in their life.

The HEIs play a vital role in the transitioning process of veteran students entering academic environment by providing or connecting students to the help they may need to be academically successful. The role of participant perceptions is significant as veterans go through the transition stages, it helps to determine the type and the impact transition has on their academic success, retention, and degree completion. The qualitative data highlight various aspects of higher education which leads to strengthening support provided to military-affiliated students at public universities (Findley & Metz, 2022; Gordon et al., 2016b; Sikes et al., 2020). The framework was used as a guide to examine the challenges veteran students experience during their academic transition and perceptions from semi-structured interviews and inductive coding for thematic analysis process. Thematic analysis is a method to find, analyze, and describe common patterns known as themes within data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Maguire & Delahunt, 2017).

Schlossberg's transition theory is appropriate for this study because of its applicability to the transition of military veterans, the nontraditional college students. Schlossberg identified four major sets of factors that influence an individual's ability to cope with a transition: situation, self, support, and strategies. In this study, *transition* refers to the veteran students' transition from the military to an academic environment. The impact of transition is referred to the unique challenges veteran students encounter compared to traditional college students. The transition theory was utilized to examine the perception of veteran students (Griffin & Gilbert, 2015). The theory indicates providing the needed support to veterans including the non-academic resources may have a positive impact on their academic success, retention, and degree completion.

The 4S model of Schlossberg's transition theory used to address the situation, self, support, and strategies guided the interview questions and inspired the coding analysis. The 4S model is universal and has successfully been applied to previous veteran transition studies (Anderson et al., 2022; Griffin & Gilbert, 2015; Morris et al., 2019; Ryan et al., 2011; Schlossberg et al., 1989, 1995). Each veteran student's situation is different and can be defined by distinct factors. Using the transition theory allows educators and student affairs practitioners to take students' uniqueness into account to develop better tools, techniques, and strategies to support (Semer & Harmening, 2015) veterans' academic success, retention, and degree completion goals.

Literature Gap

There are many studies on supporting military-affiliated students at community colleges (Ahern et al., 2015; Chan, 2018; Evans et al., 2015; Fortney et al., 2016; Heineman, 2017; Sitzes et al., 2021; Stevenson & Le Buhn, 2020; Williams-Klotz & Gansemer-Topf, 2018) and a few studies touching on veteran retention through quantitative lenses (Azpeitia & Emerson, 2022; Gordon et al., 2016a; Steele et al., 2018;

Wenger et al., 2017). However, the gap in the current research indicates there is an acute need for veteran students' data pertaining to retention and degree completion (Mentzer et al., 2015) at four-year public universities. Hence, the availability of such dataset is crucial to support the veteran students' success in postsecondary degree attainment as well as their overall collegiate journey. Morris et al. (2019) established despite the increase in the number of military-veteran students entering American classrooms, there is a lack of understanding of this student group among the academic community (Elliott et al., 2019).

The current literature on veterans indicates there may be a dire need for review of the support services for military-affiliated students in academia. The research available on efficacy of these best practices to support veteran students is limited (Stone, 2017). Studies included in this literature review have shown that veteran students, particularly those who were exposed to combat zones, face unique challenges in their transition to a civilian society as well as an academic life. A key recommendation from these studies (Borsari et al., 2017; McKinney, 2017; Osborne, 2017; Steele et al., 2010) is strategizing methods to address the challenges of military veteran students and their dependents in an academic environment to better align with the ever-evolving military guidelines.

To date, there are no comprehensive data collected on the post-9/11 veteran students' retention and degree completion or graduation rates by HEIs or the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (Morris et al., 2019). The steadily declining retention rates of veteran students from public universities may have a significant impact on the overall degree completion and ultimately, may negatively affect the institutions' state and federal funds (Bailey et al., 2019; Mahoney et al., 2021; Mitchell et al., 2019). While research on the utilization of post-9/11 GI Bill has been limited, the passage and structure of the VA benefit provides excellent opportunities for natural experiments to study the response of veterans and HEIs to this increase in veteran's benefits (Kofoed, 2022).

Conclusion

Borsari et al. (2017) stated efforts to enhance screening for mental health services would be beneficial for veteran students' academic success. The exploration from this descriptive phenomenological study offers insights to HEIs in better understanding the transitional experiences of veteran students and their needs to succeed academically as well as the factors that impact their retention and degree completion. The study intends to aid administrators, student affairs practitioners, faculty and education leaders in policymaking and programs development pertaining to military-connected students.

Despite the wealth of veteran research, not much is known about how student veterans actually experience the transition from the military to higher education, specifically into public four-year universities (Camacho, 2021). There is a lack of evident data about public four-year university veteran students, the various challenges encountered by veterans during their academic journey, and the impact of veteran-centric support services have on students' academic success, retention, and degree completion. American HEIs should proactively seek ways to assist this special population with their higher education goals (Morissette et al., 2021).

This chapter provided a review of relevant literature on veteran students' academic success, retention, degree completion, and sufficient veteran-centric support services in higher education. The material is useful for this research as it focuses on the efficacy of veteran student support services and its impact on academic success, retention, and degree completion goals of veteran students in public four-year university. Chapter III presents the methodology of the research study.

CHAPTER III:

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to examine the perceptions of veteran students at a mid-sized, four-year public university located in southeast Texas regarding the challenges they face, and the impact veteran-centric support services have on their academic success, retention, and degree completion. Qualitative research is critical in understanding the world through learning of past or current human experiences, and in complementing other forms of knowledge (Creswell, 2014; Darlington & Scott, 2002; Fossey et al., 2002). In contrast, selecting a quantitative method would have put heavy focus on the testing of objective theories, emphasize numerical data, measure relationships, and manipulation of variables (Creswell, 2014) and not have organic feedback from participants nor emphasize the lived experiences of veteran students, sought by this study. In a qualitative inquiry that may interfere with common interpretations is, unlike quantitative studies, qualitative research does not seek replicability (Stahl & King, 2020).

This study collected data through a descriptive phenomenological approach with semi-structured interviews (Moser & Korstjens, 2018) to gain better understanding of the lived experiences from a purposeful sample of veterans utilizing the post-9/11 GI Bill benefits. The data analysis by an inductive coding process guided the development of common themes, to ensure validation and a high-quality systematic approach enabling other researchers to review the data (Creswell, 2023). This chapter presents an overview of the research problem, research purpose and questions, research design, population and sample, participant selection, data collection procedures, data analysis, trustworthiness, privacy and ethical considerations, and the limitations of the study. As qualitative process is emergent, the initial plan evolved during the research (Creswell, 2023); this is because

qualitative research is an iterative process, where the researcher collects and analyzes data, and then uses the findings to inform future data collection and analysis.

Overview of the Research Problem

According to the *Veteran Population Projection Model* (2020) [VetPop2020] report from the Department of Veteran Affairs (VA), by the years 2030 to 2050 the state of Texas will have the highest population of military veterans in the country. Post-secondary institutions in Texas are likely to see a surge in the enrollment of veteran students in the decades ahead. According to the VA (2020), minority veteran students are predicted to rise to 35.5% by the year 2040 in America. Such a change in demographics may require universities to re-strategize recruitment practices. Student retention and degree completion are of a major concern to educators, policymakers, and researchers in higher education (Jenner, 2017). It is crucial for institutions to examine how the student services department creates a welcoming safe space for veteran students, offers a broad range of services, adapt policies, and grow staff expertise (Semer & Harmening, 2015).

The post-9/11 GI Bill is the most utilized VA benefit by veterans as it is a generous education benefit covering tuition, books, living expenses, and other miscellaneous educational costs (Zhang, 2018). The last published report from the VA (2022b) stated that as of the year 2021 there were over five million veterans using VA benefits. It was likely that over two million veterans used the post-9/11 GI Bill benefits. However, since the VA does not track the educational attainment of veterans' dependents, who may also use Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits, the actual number for post-9/11 GI Bill users may be much higher than two million. This lack of data on the number of post-9/11 veterans with higher degrees may contribute to the challenges they face on campus.

In 2018, the Edelman firm surveyed a total of 4,945 participants and found that 81% of veterans believe that average citizens do not understand the problems they and

their families encounter, and 75% of the general public agreed with the veterans' perception (Edelman, 2018). The emerging research focusing on the retention of veterans in postsecondary institutions may support administrators with innovating strategies to recruit and retain students, thus increasing the number of veteran graduates. Understanding the factors associated with veteran students' postsecondary degree completion may capture the attention of various stakeholders, including administrators, policymakers, educators, military-affiliated students and their families, military leaders, the VA, and the nation (Ming, 2014).

Research Purpose and Questions

The purpose of this study was to examine the perceptions of veteran students at a mid-sized, suburban, four-year public university located in southeast Texas regarding the challenges they face, and the impact veteran-centric support services have on their academic success, retention, and degree completion. The study addressed following research questions:

R1: What are the perceptions of veteran students regarding the veteran-centric support services at a four-year public university?

R2: What are the perceptions of veteran students regarding their needs at a four-year public university?

R3: What are the perceptions of veteran students regarding services that support their academic success?

R4: What are the perceptions of veteran students regarding services that support their retention and degree completion goals?

Research Design

For the purpose of this qualitative study, the researcher used a descriptive phenomenological design to examine the impact veteran-centric support services have on

veteran students' academic success, retention, and degree completion goals based on their perceptions and challenges they may encounter during their academic journey. A purposeful sample of 11 veteran students utilizing post-9/11 GI Bill benefits for their postsecondary educational goals from a medium-sized suburban four-year public university in the southeast region of Texas was recruited from an electronic demographic information form to participate in this study with the assistance from the university's VSO. Subsequently, interviews were conducted to gain a deeper understanding of participants' college experiences including their perceptions of the veteran-centric support on campus. The qualitative data were analyzed using inductive coding process.

The phenomenological design was selected to identify common themes among the shared experiences of the participants and to study the essence of lived experiences and to gain a deeper understanding of how participants perceive a particular phenomenon (Neubauer et al., 2019). The descriptive method aimed to describe as accurately as possible and without any preconceived assumptions about the challenges faced by veteran students and the impact veteran-centric support services have on their academic success, retention, and degree completion goals. The semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions for thematic analysis from inductive coding provided insights from participants to best understand their experiences. Thematic analysis allowed theoretical freedom along with high flexibility in approach which provided rich, detailed, and complex account of data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Nowell et al., 2017).

Schlossberg's transition theory (1981, 1984) and the 4S model provided structure for this research. The constructs in this study were academic success, retention, and degree completion goals. The variables, the challenges faced by veteran students and their perceptions, were explored in this study. Academic success, as defined by York et al. (2015) is inclusive of academic achievement, attainment of learning objectives,

acquisition of desired skills and competencies, satisfaction, persistence, and post-college performance. Retention is defined as the institutional rate at which the post-9/11 GI Bill veteran students remain at the same institution where they started in the fall semester and remained enrolled until the following fall semester (Kimbark et al., 2017). Retention is the rate at which an institution retains and graduates a student who first enters the institution as a freshman at a given point in time (Tinto, 2012).

For the purpose of this study, the fall-to-fall semester retention was considered. Degree completion is defined as the post-9/11 GI Bill veteran students who completed courses of study at a post-secondary institution and earned a degree from the program (Kimbark et al., 2017) including transfer students. The constructs of retention and degree completion goals were explained by using primarily the participant interview responses and institutional data collected from the university's website. The challenges encountered by most veteran students were defined as experiencing a variety of physical, cognitive, or mental, and emotional challenges (Elnitsky et al., 2017) that may result from post-traumatic stress disorder or an emotionally distressed situation while serving in the military. The perceptions of participants were measured by interviews.

Population and Sample

The population of this study consisted of military veteran students at a four-year university in southeast Texas. In 2023, this medium-sized, public, accredited university in the regional category earned a high ranking in the Top Public Schools list for 13-state region, top 50 in Best Value Schools with an overall score of 41 out of 100, and in top 25% as Best Colleges for Veterans in the nation (Usnews.com, 2023). At present, the university has about 9,300 undergraduate and graduate students . The use of maximum variation purposeful sampling techniques (Khan & Aldhafri, 2021; Patton, 2002; Suri, 2018) allowed subjective recruitment of participants who represented a wide range of

variation as they provided in-depth and detailed information about the phenomenon (Creswell, 2014; Palinkas et al., 2015).

After the university's Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, the student demographic information was collected through the university's veteran support office because such data were not part of common data sets publicly available for research use. Generally, qualitative research samples are small in size. A purposive, non-random sample of veteran students utilizing post-9/11 GI Bill benefits were recruited using an online Demographic Information Form (Appendix C) to participate in this study. The student data reflected Fall 2018 to Fall 2023 semesters or the last five academic years since there were several major changes to the post-9/11 GI Bill benefits from the VA during the COVID-19 pandemic which may have affected many veteran students' educational benefits or monetary allowances.

Participant Selection

Creswell (2023) emphasized the entire qualitative research process focuses on learning the meaning that the participants hold about the problem or issue. Therefore, the selection of participants was a very critical step in the study. While there is no specific number of participants given for qualitative research, when conducting semi-structured interviews with a descriptive phenomenological approach, researchers typically select three to ten individuals (Creswell, 2014). For this study, a total of 11 veteran students utilizing post-9/11 GI Bill were recruited. In compliance with the study institution's VSO guidelines, the researcher contacted the director of VSO to distribute solicitation email. The message included a direct link and a QR code to the virtual demographic form.

Veteran students were requested to complete the form indicating their interest in participation in the study. The form was active and accessible for a period of over two months for random selection. From data collected on the virtual demographic information

form, potential participants were contacted via email or by phone to schedule interview on Microsoft Teams® platform. The sample is demographically representative of the overall veteran population at Best University, because participants include variations in age, gender, age, ethnic background, marital status, years in the military service, degree of study, enrollment status, first generation status and academic levels. All participants were assigned pseudonyms to protect their identity and to encourage an open dialogue.

Data Collection Procedures

Prior to gathering data, the researcher obtained approval from the Committee for Protection of Human Subjects (CPHS) at the university as to which the research was conducted. Next, permission was attained to conduct research from the participating university's Institutional Review Board (IRB) as appropriate. Upon approvals, the researcher contacted university's VSO to request assistance with obtaining the contact information of currently enrolled veteran students utilizing post-9/11 GI Bill, as the data on veterans are not publicly available. After the VSO solicited veteran students via mass email announcement for the study's recruitment, the researcher monitored the virtual demographic information form for responses for up to two months.

The information regarding the purpose of the study, voluntary participation, instructions for completing the digital demographic information form, response deadline, and the confidentiality considerations were emailed. Frequency of the reminder emails depended on the promptness of responses from potential participants. Considering the high sensitivity of the veterans' information, all data were secured in a password-protected folder on the researcher's computer solely designated for this research. At the culmination of the study, the data will be maintained by the researcher for five years, the time required by CPHS and the study institution's guidelines. The researcher will destroy the contents of the file once the deadline is reached.

Qualitative data collected through individual interviews were conducted via a virtual platform, using approved interview protocol and an open-ended questionnaire (Appendix B). The interview questions were developed based on prior research, the theoretical assumptions of Schlossberg's transition theory, and existing literature on veteran students utilizing post-9/11 GI Bill education benefits. The goal was to identify how participants perceived barriers they encountered during their transition into higher education and how the support on campus impacted their academic success, retention, and degree completion. The responses were recorded for accuracy of the transcription process with participants' verbal permission at the beginning of the interview.

Researcher Role

The researcher is a foreign-born civilian woman, not affiliated with the military. The researcher has more than 20 years of experience in higher education and an eternal passion for serving underrepresented students such as veterans. The researcher had no personal or professional relationships with any of the participants. The study used purposive sampling, peer review, member-checking, reflexive journaling, and transparency in reporting findings to eliminate or minimize bias.

Data Analysis

Creswell (2023) described that typically, qualitative researchers work inductively, building patterns, categories, and themes from the bottom up by organizing the data into increasingly more abstract units of information. Inductive process illustrates working back and forth between the themes and the database until the researchers have established a comprehensive set of themes (Creswell, 2023). A thematic analysis by inductive coding of responses collected from the interviews guided the data analysis process for this study. Such analysis is very useful for grouping or categorizing subjective information such as participants' experience, opinions, perceptions, and generate unanticipated insights

41

(Nowell et al., 2017). Inductive coding allows to derive meaning and create themes from data without any preconceptions (Creswell, 2014).

Upon conducting the Microsoft Teams interviews, auto-generated transcripts from the calls were downloaded, then again recordings were transcribed using the AS-2400 Transcription Kit by the Olympus professional dictation system to ensure accuracy. The transcripts were reviewed, edited, compared, and color-coded to find matching patterns. All transcripts were compared to find common themes for codes assignment. After the themes were identified (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017) the data analysis process was mapped using Schlossberg's transition theory and the 4S Model (Anderson et al., 2022).

The transition theory and model were selected for addressing the following variables of the research questions: first, the *Situation* addresses what is happening. Circumstances of veteran students' transition into academia. Second, the *Self* addresses to whom it is happening. Individual's transition management abilities and outlook as each veteran has unique transition experience. Third, the *Support* addresses what help is available as network of support or resources vary for each veteran student. Lastly, the *Strategies* addresses how does the person copes. Veteran students' ability to use multiple coping strategies as many factors play a role in how the veteran is managing their personal transition out of the military and into academic environment.

Trustworthiness

Qualitative researchers strive for the goal of trustworthiness, meaning when readers interpret the written work, they will have a sense of confidence in what the researcher has reported (Stahl & King, 2020). Qualitative research trustworthiness refers to the credibility of data and interpretation to ensure quality and validity of study. For this study, the data collected from semi-structured interviews were recorded and transcribed.

Qualitative research is a valued paradigm of inquiry that requires rigorous and methodical techniques due to its complexity to create useful results (Nowell et al., 2017).

To establish trustworthiness and ensure credibility, peer review and member checking techniques were used in this study. The peer review strategy involves an interpretation beyond the researcher and reported by another person, adds validity, reliability, and authenticity to the research (Creswell, 2014). Researcher collaborated with person(s) who reviewed and asked questions about qualitative study that the account that resonated with people other than the researcher. This technique enhanced accuracy of the findings and ensured the researcher is grounded in the participants' experiences.

The interview questions and results were peer-reviewed by experienced educators, including university administrators, in order to ensure the questions, allow the researcher to collect the data needed to answer each research question. To explore the credibility of results, a participant validation technique known as member-checking was used (Birt et al., 2016). The member checking technique determined the accuracy of the qualitative findings by taking the themes, polished or semi-polished product, back to participants and determining whether these participants perceived that they were accurate (Creswell, 2014). Recorded interviews and transcripts were made available to the participants and peers for accuracy checking and review. The member-checking ensured interview data were accurately captured and thus increased the validity of the findings.

Privacy and Ethical Considerations

Prior to data collection, the researcher obtained approvals from the research institution's CPHS and the participating university's institutional review board (IRB). Pseudonyms for the university and the participants were used in the study to ensure confidentiality. All participants received detailed information related to the purpose of the study with interview protocol. Signed informed consent forms (Appendix A) were

gathered from participants before interviews. The researcher ensured collected data were secured in an electronic format and kept confidential. Each participant was notified via the informed consent form that participation was completely voluntary and participants may withdraw at any time. The researcher will keep data for five years as required by the CPHS and university guidelines and afterwards destroy all data associated with the study.

Limitations of the Study

This study had several limitations. First, due to the focus on veteran students utilizing post-9/11 GI Bill, the ability to generalize the results to a larger population and institution with similar demographics is limited. Second, the impact of veteran-centric support services on each participant varied as not all participants utilized veteran services on campus. Not all students that showed interest were available for interviews or they stopped responding to requests. Third, the challenges encountered by participants might differ since each military transition is a unique personal experience for veterans. Thus, selecting common challenges veteran students may encounter also limited the ability to generalize the findings. Fourth, the limitation due to the unavailability of the VSO to provide any current or archived data. Study institution did not track retention or graduation data on veteran students. An assumption was made that participants were truthful in their responses. Lastly, this study focused on the southeastern region in Texas and the findings might not be applicable on a global scale.

Conclusion

A descriptive phenomenological approach seeks to understand subjective experience and describe the universal essence of a phenomenon by investigating the everyday experiences of human beings while suspending the researchers' preconceived assumptions about the phenomenon. The purpose of this study was to examine the perceptions of veteran students at a suburban, four-year public university regarding the

challenges they met, and the impact veteran-centric support services had on their academic success, retention, and degree completion. This chapter described the details of qualitative methodology and provided information on research design. A purposeful sample of 11 veteran students utilizing post-9/11 GI Bill benefits for their postsecondary educational goals from a medium-sized university in the southeast region of Texas were recruited. The semi-structures interview questions were based on the 4S model of Schlossberg's transition theory. The data collected were analyzed to examine the perceptions of participants. The findings are reported in Chapter IV along with analysis and detailed discussion.

CHAPTER IV:

FINDINGS

The purpose of this study was to examine the perceptions of veteran students at a mid-sized, suburban, four-year public university located in southeast Texas regarding the challenges they face, and the impact veteran-centric support services have on their academic success, retention, and degree completion goals. To gain deeper understanding from the lived experiences of veteran students, a qualitative approach was used which will add value to the current knowledge base in veterans' studies. Common themes were identified using inductive coding and mapped based on Schlossberg's transition theory and the 4S Model. Semi-structured interview questions provided a comprehensive understanding of the relationship between veteran-centric support and veteran students' perceptions of the offered support. Additionally, the study was designed to seek answers to the following research questions:

R1: What are the perceptions of veteran students regarding the veteran-centric support services at a four-year public university?

R2: What are the perceptions of veteran students regarding their needs at a four-year public university?

R3: What are the perceptions of veteran students regarding services that support their academic success?

R4: What are the perceptions of veteran students regarding services that support their retention and degree completion goals?

This chapter describes the qualitative data collection from a purposeful sample of veteran students. An inductive coding process was used to analyze the interview data and to identify common themes. This chapter presents the findings of the data analysis and addresses each of the research questions that guided this study.

46

Research Design

This qualitative study used a descriptive phenomenological design to obtain insights to examine the impact of veteran-centric support services on students' academic success, retention, and degree completion goals based on their perceptions and challenges encountered during the academic journey. The purpose of this study design was to gain a deeper understanding and new perspectives from lived experiences of veteran students and add to the current literature on veteran studies. Semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions (Appendix B) were conducted to measure participants' perceptions.

The sample was recruited via a demographic information form digitally disseminated to veteran students with assistance from the university's veteran support office (VSO) director. Each interview took place based on the interviewee's preferred date, time, and mode. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. Each participant was offered the opportunity to review their transcript and provide clarifications or additions to their responses. An inductive coding process was used to identify themes that emerged from the study participants' interview responses.

Setting

The higher education institution used in this study is a suburban four-year public university located in southeast Texas. To maintain confidentiality of the university, the institution is referred to as "Best University" throughout this document. The university serves over 9,300 total students of which 278 are veteran students during the Fall 2023 semester. Of the 3% veteran students, there were 194 students (70%) utilizing the post-9/11 GI Bill to cover their tuition expenses. The U.S. Dept. of ED recognizes Best University as a Hispanic-Serving institution and also a Minority Serving Institution.

Table 4.1 presents an overview of the Best University student demographics. There are 73.0% undergraduates, while 27.0% are graduate students. The enrollment

status is divided almost equally between full-time (49.5%) and part-time (50.5%) students. Ethnically, the student population exhibits diversity, with the largest group being Hispanic/Latino (42.0%) followed by White (32.0%), Black/African American (9.0%), Asian/Pacific Islander (8.0%), and 9.0% identified as Other.

Table 4.1

Best University Student Demographics

Fall 2023 enrollment	Frequency ($n = 9300$)	Percentage (%)
Veteran students	278	21.5
Post-9/11 GI Bill students	194	12.5
Degree of study		
Undergraduate	6800	73.0
Graduate	2500	27.0
Enrollment status		
Full-time	4600	49.5
Part-time	4700	50.5
Ethnic background		
White	3000	32.0
Black/African American	800	9.0
Asian/Pacific Islander	750	8.0
Hispanic/Latino	3900	42.0
Other	850	9.0

The veteran student population of Best University is remarkably diverse. The participants volunteered by completing the demographic information form included in the study's solicitating email. Due to the nature of this highly sensitive and confidential information on military veterans, the university does not publish any relevant or statistical information. The VSO director assisted with sending research recruitment emails to veteran students for participation in the study.

Selection of Participants

The participants of this study consisted of veteran students utilizing the post-9/11 GI Bill educational benefits at a four-year public university in southeast Texas. The criteria for participants (listed on pgs. 39–40) guided the selection. After the solicitation email was sent by the institution's VSO director, a total of 21 responses were received. All 21 potential participants were contacted via email to schedule interviews. The demographic form was active and accessible to email recipients for over two months. A total of 17 veteran students (65% participation rate) completed the demographic information form indicating interest in participation.

Though there is no set number of participants for qualitative research, researchers typically select between three and ten individuals when conducting semi-structured interviews with a phenomenological approach (Creswell, 2014). Among interested respondents, 11 veteran students were successfully interviewed. Multiple efforts were made to contact the remaining respondents and the demographic information form was deactivated due to no further responses. The initial recruitment email included informed consent and interview protocol that participants signed and returned prior to the meeting. Interviews were conducted via Microsoft Teams® platform. The total time allocated for the duration of all the interviews was more than 12 hours and nearly 300 pages of initial transcription data was collected. The auto-generated transcripts were reviewed and cross-checked with manual transcribed data for accuracy.

Table 4.2 displays the detailed demographics of the participants that include breakdown in frequencies and percentages of gender, age range, marital status, ethnic origin, military branch, years of military service, degree of study, college enrollment status and the first-generation college student status.

Table 4.2

Demographics of Participants – Fall 2023

Category	Frequency (*n=11*)	Percentage (%)
Gender		
Male	9	82.0
Female	2	18.0
Age		
20-29 years	3	27.3
30-39 years	4	36.4
40-49 years	0	0.0
50+ years	4	36.4
Marital Status		
Single/Never married	5	45.4
Married	4	36.4
Divorced	2	18.1
Ethnic Origin		
African American/Black	3	27.3
Asian/Pacific Islander	3	27.3
Latino/Hispanic	4	36.4
White	1	9.0
Military Branch		
Air Force	0	0.0
Army	7	64.0
Coast Guard	1	9.0
Marine Corps	1	9.0
Navy	2	18.0
Years of Service		
2-5 years	6	54.5
6-9 years	2	18.2
10-13 years	2	18.2
14+ years	1	9.1
Degree of study		
Baccalaureate	7	64.0
Masters	1	9.0
Doctorate	3	27.0
Enrollment Status		
Full-time	8	73.0
Part-time	3	27.0
First Generation Status		
First Generation	9	82.0
Continuing Generation	2	18.0

The descriptive information for participants was collected from the demographic information form. The participants comprised of 82% (n = 9) male and 18% (n = 2) of the sample. The age variation resulted showing ages 20-29 years old at 27.3% (n = 3), ages 30-39 years old at 36.4% (n = 4) and the same 36.4% (n = 4) for 50 years or older. The marital status showed single/never married at 45.4% (n = 5), married at 36.4% (n = 4), and 18.1% (n = 2) for divorced. The ethnic origin showed a 36.4% percent (n = 4) Latino/Hispanic, 27.3% (n = 3) African American/Black, 27.3% (n = 3) Asian/Pacific Islander and 9.0% (n = 1) White. The majority at 64% (n = 7) served in the U.S. Army, 18% (n = 2) in Navy, 9% (n = 1) in Coast Guard and 9% (n = 1) in Marine Corps.

Years of service showed 54.5% (n = 6) for 2-5 years, 18.2% (n = 2) for 6-9 years, 18.2% (n = 2) for 10-13 years, and 9.1% (n = 1) for 14 years of more. No participants were enlisted in reserve duty as they all received an honorable discharge from their respective military branch. There were 64% (n = 7) of the participants classified as undergraduate, 9% (n = 1) in master's program and 27% (n = 3) pursuing doctorate degree. A total of 73% (n = 8) were enrolled full-time and 27% (n = 3) with part-time enrollment status during the Fall 2023 semester. Additionally, 82% (n = 9) participants reported being first-generation and 18% were continuing generation students.

Overview of the Participants

Currently enrolled veteran students were selected for semi-structured interviews. The university was chosen based on its national recognition and the veteran-friendly institution designation. To protect the main anonymity, the participants were given pseudonyms. Table 4.3 shows an overview of the participant profiles. It lists the pseudonyms of the participants, gender (M identifying male; F identifying female), age range, ethnic background, current degree of study (meaning doctorate; B meaning

baccalaureate; M meaning masters), military experience, first-generation college student and veteran support office (VSO) experience from the university.

The gender ratio of participants includes 82% males and 18% females. The age breakdown entails 20-29 years old students (27.3%) and over 30 years old (72.8%). There are 27.3% African American or Black students; 27.3% Asian or Pacific Islanders; 36.4% Latino or Hispanics and 9% of White students. Current degree of study, 64% are pursuing baccalaureate degree, 27% working on doctorate and 9% enrolled in master's program. When it came to the veteran students' perception of their overall military experience, 82% of participants perceived a positive experience and 18% perceived it was a negative experience. The same ratio repeated as 82% of participants are first-generation college students. Lastly, 55% of participants had an overall positive experience with the university's veteran support office (VSO) and 45% had an overall negative experience.

Table 4.3

Overview of Participant Profile

Name	Gender	Age range	Ethnicity	Current Degree of study	Military Exp	First-Gen status	VSO Exp
James	Male	50+	Latino/Hispanic	Graduate (D)	Positive	Yes	Negative
Olivia	Female	50+	African American/Black	Graduate (D)	Positive	Yes	Negative
John	Male	50+	African American/Black	Graduate (D)	Positive	Yes	Negative
Micheal	Male	20-29	African American/Black	Freshman (B)	Positive	No	Positive
David	Male	30-39	Latino/Hispanic	Sophomore (B)	Positive	No	Positive
Emma	Female	20-29	Latino/Hispanic	Freshman (B)	Negative	Yes	Positive
William	Male	30-39	Latino/Hispanic	Sophomore (B)	Negative	Yes	Negative
Richard	Male	50+	White	Sophomore (B)	Positive	Yes	Negative
Joseph	Male	20-29	Asian/Pacific Islander	Graduate (M)	Positive	Yes	Positive
Thomas	Male	30-39	Asian/Pacific Islander	Senior (B)	Positive	Yes	Positive
Robert	Male	30-39	Asian/Pacific Islander	Junior (B)	Positive	Yes	Positive

Profiles

James completed an associate degree prior to joining the military. He is pursuing a doctorate degree and plans to graduate by December 2023. He is a full-time student and works in higher education. His brother, father, and grandfather also served in the armed forces. James held a Second Lieutenant rank in the Army and served for over 10 years. He described himself as a proud veteran who was not shy about letting people know about his service to the nation. His military experience was positive, and he claimed he would join again if that was possible. James does not utilize services by VSO due to prior negative experiences with the office. His interactions with the VSO are limited to submitting paperwork required for confirming eligibility of the benefits.

Olivia is currently pursuing a doctorate degree and also expects to graduate by the end of the current semester. She is a full-time student and works in higher education. Olivia held the Staff Sergeant (E-6) rank in the Army and served 13 years. She has some college experience prior to joining the military. Olivia's military experience was positive. She described herself as not being shy about letting people know about her service to the nation. She did not utilize VSO on campus because she perceives it is geared more towards undergraduate students, and not much support is offered for graduate students.

John earned a high school diploma prior to joining the military. He is currently pursuing a doctorate degree with the expectation of graduating in December 2023. John is a full-time student and is also employed full-time. He held First Lieutenant rank in the Army and had very positive military experience. With 24 years of service, he described himself as a proud veteran but does not like sharing that with people due to the reactions he received. John utilized the VSO on campus although he has had negative experiences.

Micheal is currently pursuing a baccalaureate degree and expects to graduate in 2025. He is a full-time student. Micheal held a Specialist (E-4) rank in the Army and

served six years before discharging due to injury. His military experience was positive. He planned to stay in the military for 20 years and retire, but due to an injury he was honorably discharged earlier than he expected. Micheal described himself as a proud veteran but likes to keep a low profile so does not prefer to share that he served the nation. He utilized the VSO and feels very supported by the office in his educational journey. Micheal held a high school diploma prior to joining the armed forces.

David had some college coursework completed prior to joining the military. He is currently pursuing a baccalaureate degree and expects to graduate in 2024. He is a full-time student and works in higher education. David held a Specialist (E-4) rank in the Army and served four years. He had a positive military experience. Also, he described himself as a proud veteran but likes to keep a low profile so does not prefer sharing about his service. David utilized the VSO for GI Bill paperwork and remarked that he perceived the office very supportive as his experience so far has been positive.

Emma is currently pursuing a baccalaureate degree and expects to graduate in 2027. Prior to joining the military, she held a high school diploma. She is a part-time student and is employed full-time. Emma held a Petty Officer rank in the Navy and served four years. She had an overall negative military experience. Emma described herself as a proud veteran but prefers to keep a low profile. She utilized the VSO only for GI Bill paperwork and perceived the support as positive.

William is currently pursuing a baccalaureate degree and expects to graduate in 2026. He is a part-time student and employed full-time. William held a Sargent rank in the Marine Corps and served four years. William keeps a low profile and does not prefer to share his veteran status due to gaining unwanted attention from the public. His overall military experience was negative. He utilized the VSO on campus for GI Bill paperwork but did not perceive it to be supportive in his educational goals.

Richard is currently pursuing a baccalaureate degree and expects to graduate in 2025. He completed high school prior to joining the military. He is a full-time student and volunteers as a social worker with an entrepreneurial mindset about establishing his own non-profit organization supporting other veterans. Richard held a Petty Officer rank in the Navy and served four years. He described himself as a proud veteran who was not shy about sharing his very positive military experience. Richard shares resources with fellow veterans and enjoys helping people, especially fellow veterans. He utilized the VSO on campus for GI Bill paperwork and did not perceive the office to be supportive of anything else, likely due to the high personnel turnover in VSO. He mentioned, "seems like every few months, there is someone different in office."

Joseph is currently pursuing a master's degree and plans to graduate in 2024. He is a part-time student and employed full-time. Joseph held a Specialist rank in the Army Reserve for five years. Prior to joining the armed forces, he had some college experience. Joseph described himself as a proud veteran who was not shy about letting people know about his service. His experience with the military was positive. He utilized the VSO and feels very supported by the office in his educational journey at the university.

Thomas is currently pursuing a baccalaureate degree and expects to graduate by December 2023. He is a full-time student and also employed full-time. He held a Non-Commissioned Officer rank in the Marine Corps and served four years. Prior to joining the military, he completed a high school diploma. Thomas described himself as a proud veteran who keeps a low profile and does not prefer to share about his veteran status unless it is relevant to the discussion. His military experience was positive. Thomas utilized the VSO and perceived the support as positive impact on his educational goals.

Robert is currently pursuing a baccalaureate degree and expects to graduate in 2024. He is a full-time student and employed full-time. He held the Staff Sergeant (E-6)

rank in the Army and served for over seven years. Due to an injury, he was honorably discharged earlier than he expected. Prior to joining the military, Robert took some college courses. His overall military experience was positive. He described himself as a proud veteran but does not prefer to share his veteran status unless it is relevant to the discussion. Robert utilized the VSO for GI Bill paperwork and perceived the support at positive impact on his educational journey at the university.

Data Analysis

This study examined the perceptions of veteran students at a four-year public university regarding the challenges they faced, and the impact veteran-centric support services have on their academic success, retention, and degree completion. The data were generated through the analysis of the individual interviews with each participant. All interviews were recorded and transcribed to ensure trustworthiness. Also, peer review and member checking processes warranted credibility of the study. Data collection from the participant responses was reviewed and revised based on peer review to attest the interview questions are aligned with the research questions.

Each participant was informed about reviewing their interviews and checking for data accuracy. The data were peer reviewed to confirm integration of the 4S model of Schlossberg's transition theory for thematic coding analysis as guided by Braun and Clarke (2006). Despite the wealth of research on veterans' perspectives on higher education transition, this study intended to gain a better understanding with lived experiences of post-9/11 GI Bill veteran students' perceptions on the impact of veteran-centric support on their academic success, retention, and degree completion goals at a four-year public university. Thematic analysis is a way to find, study and describe patterns in data. As such several common themes emerged from the semi-structured interviews. The following section describes each theme and its relevance to this study.

Emerging Themes

        The framework of this study focused on the perceptions of veteran students utilizing post-9/11 GI Bill regarding the challenges they faced, and the impact of veteran-centric support services have on their academic success, retention, and degree completion goals at a four-year public university in southeast Texas. Each participant was interviewed once with an option for a follow-up interview as needed. The semi-structured interview had 16 open-ended questions and sub questions guided by the 4S model of Schlossberg's transition theory. The interviews were transcribed manually and with auto-transcription software. Emerged themes from the interview responses revealed how participants perceived their challenges and the impact of veteran-centric support services.

        Research question one focused on the perceptions of veteran students regarding the veteran-centric support services at a four-year public university. This question aligned with the *situation* factor of the 4S model as it focused on circumstances or the influence of transition. Research question two focused on the perceptions of veteran students regarding their needs at a four-year public university. This question aligned with the *self* factor of the 4S model as it emphasized the characteristics used when deciding to enroll in college. It highlights the individual's ability to manage the transition and outlook.

        Research question three focused on the perceptions of veteran students regarding services that support their academic success. This question aligned with the *support* factor of the 4S model as it emphasized the awareness of services and what students found supporting in their academic journey. It also explored the possible network of support available to the individual. Research question four focused on the perceptions of veteran students regarding services that support their retention and degree completion goals. This question aligned with the *strategies* factor of the 4S model as it centered on what helped or is helping overcome barriers during their transition into academic

environment. Thus, emphasizing the individual's ability to use multiple coping strategies. The data pertaining to these research questions were organized and categorized into themes that explored different aspects of the participants' experience with barriers and impact of veteran-centric support services.

There were 12 dominant themes that emerged from the study were (a) work-life-school balance, (b) socio-economic status, (c) frustrations and stress, (d) to be a role model, (e) being a nontraditional student, (f) family responsibilities, (g) lack of awareness about resources, (h) difficulty navigating college, (i) peer support, (j) self-efficacy, (k) persistence, and (l) misconceptions. These themes developed from common codes that align with each of the four research questions based on the commonalities in the responses from all participants. The following sections provide a discussion of each research question and summarize the participant responses.

Research Question One

Research question one, "*What are the perceptions of veteran students regarding the veteran-centric support services at a four-year public university?*" was answered using a qualitative inductive thematic coding process. All participants responded to interview questions that addressed the *Situation* factor (4S model) in this research question. As participants' perspectives are shaped by their situations, understanding their backgrounds helps recognize their perceptions of support services in regard to the type of services or support they expect or seek on campus.

The *situation* plays a significant role in selecting the higher education institute for veteran students' educational goals. Coding analysis based on situations developed three distinct themes of responses on veteran students' perceptions of veteran-centric support services, the themes are (a) work-life-school balance, (b) socio-economic status, and (c) frustrations and stress. The following sections explore each emerging theme.

Work-Life-School Balance

All participants described their *situation* in response to interview questions and the majority showed commonalities. Veteran students often struggle to balance their academic commitments with their work and family obligations. Veterans seek and would appreciate support services that help them manage their time and workload effectively (VA, 2023). This research question centers on students' perceptions of support services. Hence, it is imperative to understand the specific challenges that veteran students face in balancing their academic commitments with their work and family obligations. The researcher perceived students' unique backgrounds shape their mindsets, and it also has an influence on their expectations from the institution in teams of support. Responses regarding why participants selected Best University emphasized the needs of these students. Understanding their situation can help the university identify the specific needs and develop targeted support services to address those needs.

Findings entailed most participants chose this university because of the convenience of location and the low cost of attendance. The smaller class sizes and the smooth transfer of credits from a local community college to the university were also common views. Best University currently has a veteran support office (VSO) on campus. The institution also has the designation of being a military-friendly college. Participants perceived veteran-centric support as meaning the VSO would offer assistance to address numerous factors that contribute to balancing work, life, and school. The following responses help identify the specific needs of participants and how the university can improve its support services to help them manage their time and workload effectively.

Olivia did not find much information on services for graduate students offered by VSO on their website. She was an evening student, so did not have an opportunity to visit the VSO during their office hours. She shared why she chose a public institution for her

doctoral program. Olivia stated, "I chose a public university primarily because of the cost of attendance. Best University offers lower tuition rates compared to other similar public universities in southeast Texas." She expected VSO resources that provided guidelines or help to develop coping strategies to juggle full-time work, school and family or other responsibilities. Olivia's expectations for campus support were not met as she perceived the VSO to offer resources that would help graduate level students in considering their full-time employment or the amount of time and stress involved in doctoral studies.

John also stated, "My particular reason for choosing this university was basically just convenience and it was also a good thing for me and my daughter. My daughter also attends the university, focusing on convenience." All participants lived or worked in the vicinity of the university. Similarly, William stated, "The university's location is convenient. I picked what was closest to me and what would fit in my schedule in better regards to work." His transition out of the military and into higher education was difficult, he stated,

> I had to choose work over school, and it negatively affected my grades because some classes I could finish, but others I could not. I also had transportation issues where I used up all my savings to purchase a vehicle.

Joseph stated he attended the college, "To get a better job from which I could ensure a better work-life balance," to indicate the importance of having a good work-life-school balance. Joseph's views mirrored other participants' views when it came to the cost of attendance. He stated that "it was less expensive compared to other universities, small classroom size which means the availability of professors will be much better."

Robert affirmed, "Honestly, it was convenient. If I had to take classes face-to-face, it would be right here, it is local to where I live." James explained how he tried to maintain his work-life-school balance,

I got married at a young age and I have to keep my family going, so I work[ed] part time. Told myself that I will fill all the needs of the house, plus finding that time to study and go that extra mile to overcome those barriers [which] I am always running into, besides all the obstacles I am determined to take care of my stuff [referring to responsibilities].

David shared, "I enrolled in college three months after discharge from military, I had no break, it definitely reflected on my grades," indicating poor grades due to lack of preparation for academic environment. He further stated the reason for choosing this university because, "it was convenient for travel for me because I live nearby."

Emma mentioned,

It is kind of something that I am still really going through right now and that is just being able to find the time to take the courses. I work from 7:00 [am] to 4:00 [pm]. And honestly, there are not a lot of courses available in the evening that I can take.

Due to time conflict with work hours during daytime, Emma enrolled in evening or online classes. The specialized program she is pursuing has many hands-on trainings. It is a difficult situation for her, and others enrolled in a similar program to utilize university services where offices are likely to close at five o'clock. All participants live or work in the vicinity of the university making it a convenient location for commuting which saves time. The flexibility of evening courses allowed students to come to campus after their work hours, eliminating the need to request time off from work for school. The smaller class sizes allowed more personalized attention from instructors and provided more opportunities for students to interact with each other. The lower cost of attendance not only may reduce the financial burden on students, but also allows efficient use of their GI Bill and all associated funding.

Veteran students' *situation* contributed to their perceptions of veteran-centric support services they expect from the institution. It was evident from the responses of participants that time and money management are essential factors in their decision to attend their university. The responses also indicate having a smaller campus community fostering the sense of belonging has also influenced the decision for selecting this university. The university's designation of military-friendly college may have contributed to some of students' considerations in selecting this college. Veteran students have diverse backgrounds and could be attempting to balance education with family responsibilities, a career, mental illness, financial troubles, or even continued military duty (Teixeira, 2021). Participants perceived the current practices of the VSO did not provide all services that may be helpful to veterans with work-life-school balance.

Socio-economic Status

A second theme emerged as participants described their *situation,* where the common factor emphasized the socio-economic status. Responses for sub question seven focused on any barriers or problems encountered by participants during their transition to higher education. Some participants sought resources from VSO to address these challenges. For example, individuals experiencing food insecurity sought assistance from VSO food pantries or other related resources. However, the findings revealed that participants did not perceive VSO to offer financial assistance apart from the benefits available through the federal department of VA.

James shared about his situation,

And coming from a lower socioeconomical family, poor in simple words, we did not have a car to travel to school or anything like that. Every day, I walked up and down the road hitchhiking to college for the first degree that I acquired [referring to associate degree attainment prior to joining the military].

He also indicated the burden was overwhelming as he was still young when he got married. James continued,

> At the moment, I was in a way, that was the one we called the 'chosen one.' I was not aware of that, so I have been having a rough ride, very rough route to reach it [higher education], I took every opportunity that came my way, because not having anything to begin with, I don't have anything to lose.

Olivia, a female veteran shared regarding her employment experience after military discharge, she stated,

> I was originally in PK-12 for more than 13 years. Under the new administration, my position was dissolved. I was looking to teach part-time at a local college and I was offered an opportunity to run a grant program. Initially, I felt like there were several barriers. Primarily, I worked on a grant-based (soft money) job, and do not feel as valued as individuals working on hard money jobs. No opportunity for career advancement on soft money and there is always uncertainty.

Therefore, to change Olivia's current situation she will have to seek a permanent salaried position which allows advancement. William echoed a similar experience describing his situation. These details help in understanding why the veteran chose this institution and the kind of support student required while attending college. For example, VSO might connect the student with public transportation or a rideshare service. William shared,

> I lived with my parents, and I was expected to pay bills while in school…they told me, you are living here, so you need to help pay. And then finding transportation for me was another one [barrier]. So, I had to use all the money I had for savings. I had to put it in towards a vehicle.

> William's situation had a negative impact on his academics. William would take a full load of coursework at school, then end up dropping courses due to his situation with

home and money. He described his experience and stated, "So, if I took a full load one semester, I might finish two of the classes of the four and that put me in a bad position now because those are classes that reflected poorly on grades and some of them, I had to drop [classes]." William perceived VSO to be unhelpful in the aforementioned situations.

Emma also described her employment situation which caused her to change her school enrollment status from full-time to part-time, adding more semesters to her graduation. She stated,

> Jobwise, I have kind of hit this peak where if I wanted to become a salaried employee, I need to have the degree. So, I have been working in a lot of like DoD [Department of Defense] aviation space related jobs, and I have gotten to the point where it's like, OK, well, I want to be the engineer that does the work or that designs the work, not just the technician that is being told what to do. So, in order to do that I need the degree for it. Well, when in the military you are already used to getting paid a decent salary, so when you get out of the military, it is very different. Yeah, the GI Bill does pay for things, but I think the max in Houston [Texas] I can get right now is like $1,600 a month, which is not enough for me to live alone. It is not enough for a car, food etc....I think just rent at my place right now is like $1,400 and I think now it is going up to $1,500. Then add on $200 for car payment. And that is literally all of the money from GI Bill [sighed]. I am kind of forced to actually work in order to still go to school at the same time and just work a normal nine-to-five job.

Richard took a long pause before sharing about his socio-economic status. He stated, "In short, I was going through a rough time about 10 years ago. I ended up homeless. I ended up broke, living in shelters, without a car and so forth." His journey since then has changed and is moving towards a positive outlook. Richard stated that

living in the shelters helped him find his purpose in life. He claimed, "Because of the situation I was in, there was no reason to be living. So, when I saw what they were going through, it gave me motivation to do something for them." Therefore, he decided to grasp the opportunity for going to college and plans to run a non-profit organization that helps his fellow veterans improve their socio-economic status.

The socio-economic status varies depending on many different factors, including age, gender, race, ethnicity, and resources available to them. In the case of military veterans, there are additional factors such as length of service, rank, location of service, and eligibility for VA benefits. Veteran students from low-income backgrounds may face harder financial challenges that might influence their overall academic success. Some of the participants encountered significant barriers including poverty, homelessness, unemployment, and other financial challenges.

Therefore, having access to VA benefits is a significant factor affecting veteran students' socio-economic status. The researcher found students would appreciate support services that provide financial assistance, such as tutoring, scholarships, and meal vouchers just to name a few. Participants perceived support services from the university to address or assist with aforementioned needs, however the VSO does not currently offer assistance specifically addressing all of these concerns.

Frustrations and Stress

The third theme that emerged from their situation was coping with frustrations and stress. These factors negatively impact veteran students' academic performance and overall well-being. Unaddressed frustrations result in excessive stress. Richard explained,

> For me, the problem is learning to cope with the stress that comes with enrolling in college, most significant is the amount of stress involved with keeping up with the assignments, organization, and meeting deadlines.

He is a fulltime first-generation college student with experience of living on a ship overseas most of his career life. About 10 years ago Richard was homeless and lived in shelters. His coping mechanism for frustration and stress was to seek help from counseling and enroll in therapy to improve his overall mental health. He stated,

> As a result, I developed depression and anxiety. I went to the [federal] VA, not the school's VSO, I got into therapy. I had one-on-one therapy and also had group therapy. When I started this university, I liked my classes because there is a lot of reading and writing. Writing is not my problem; it is easy for me to write. All that comprehension, analyzing all that…as I stay in classes like that, I am OK. If I have to do any kind of math or anything else like that, I am in trouble; it is very stressful. From the therapies, I have learned to understand the different stress levels.

Mental illness can have a substantial impact on student's life. Veterans with access to full healthcare benefits may or may not seek help for their mental health condition, but those without access have no choice and are at risk of reduced overall well-being. While Richard found VSO helpful for GI Bill paperwork and benefit eligibility confirmation, he did not perceive them helpful for the mental health resources needed to cope with frustrations and stress.

Olivia had three deployments to various locations during her 13-year military career. That much traveling in the military can make it difficult for the servicemember to build friendships or have a good social life outside of service. Upon returning to the civilian sector, it is stressful for the first couple of months or years for individuals to normalize as they cope with their transition. That is when most veteran students are likely to seek assistance. Olivia stated, "I do not go to the VSO because I feel the services were

more geared toward undergraduates. There was not much assistance for graduate students, especially doctoral students." Similarly, Micheal shared,

> I am aware of the support services, but I pretty much feel like I do not want to use them as much because I know other people might need it more than me. I did use some of the veteran services, such as getting enrolled into the school, and they would just help me out and giving me different resources to where I need to go for different things.

Micheal's overall experience with the VSO was positive. On the contrary, John's experience with the VSO was negative. He stated,

> It is just sometimes dealing with the campus VSO can be a chore. They are not very helpful, sometimes I would consider them not user friendly. Uh, so that was one of the barriers... But it took a while to get to learn the process, and once I did it, it became a little easier. But it is still even today a little challenging.

> James was aware of the veteran-centric support services but chose not to utilize the VSO services due to prior negative experience. He explained, "I joined the Army from Puerto Rico, and they [VSO] told me I was not eligible for some of the state benefits as I did not join from Texas." There was a slight anger in his tone of voice when James stated,

> After I gave my time, I gave my life to this country because that is what I gave them. They said if you are not from here [Texas], we cannot do this [referring to state benefits]. So, I ended up getting student loans, like everybody else. I should not have to do that. They did not provide me with the services. They should have found me alternatives or other funds, that I now know I could have used.

James had already earned a bachelor's degree before his honorable discharge from the military. Michael's college experience deviated from that of the other participants. He

attended a junior college, successfully graduated, and secured gainful employment post-military. However, his workplace environment proved to be as stressful as his military position. As he explained,

> Once I got a taste of that lifestyle, it kind of reminded me so much of like the military, it was like 12 hours a day shift. I was like, you know what, maybe this is not the right direction. I want to go to into my life because it will remind me so much of that.

Changing careers can cause stress and influence veterans' mental health. Robert shared,

> When I started here [university] that's when COVID was going on, and so the school shut down. Everything was online. Things of that nature and I struggled a little bit to keep up with some of the things because of the types of learning, it was different for me and so I struggled with it. However, since then I am on track and plan to graduate with a good GPA by next year.

Nontraditional and first-generation students often face greater challenges managing the higher education environment than traditional college students, as they encounter a wider range of factors that can affect their mental health (Rockwell, 2023). Such factors include academic pressure, frustrations, financial concerns, personal problems, and possibly social pressure. Osborne (2017) found that veteran students often encounter insensitive and inappropriate questions on campus about their military service, such as whether they have ever killed anyone in combat. Such conversations may trigger stress or anxiety that can have a negative impact on students' mental health. Based on the responses from participants, the veteran support office (VSO) at Best University does not currently provide additional services or veteran-centric support services to meet the needs that these themes reveal. However, the majority (55%) of the participants who had a positive experience with VSO are undergraduate veteran students.

<center>**Research Question Two**</center>

Research question two, "*What are the perceptions of veteran students regarding their needs at a four-year public university?"* was answered using a qualitative inductive thematic coding process. All 11 participants responded to this question by answering interview questions that addressed the *Self* factor in this research question. Coding analysis developed three distinct themes of responses on perceptions of veteran students regarding their needs at the university, the themes are (a) to be a role model, (b) being a nontraditional student, and (c) family responsibilities.

To Be A Role Model

Generally, being a role model is important to individuals because it allows them to positively influence others by setting a good example. For participants, it inspired their dependents and family members to make better choices, develop important values, and strive for academic success. Understanding the students' characteristics and their values can better help VSO in tailoring the support services to meet their needs. All participants shared their reasons for overcoming or battling the barriers they overcame or challenges they still encounter. Each military veteran deciding to become a student meets some similar obstacles in their academic journey.

James stated that he grew up in a large low-income family. Despite various struggles he was able to hike his way to college for an associate degree while working odd jobs to support his family. James further stated,

> I always had a dream of completing a doctoral degree. Because coming from that
> low socio-economic background of mine, simply being poor, with all those basic
> necessities. I had an opportunity to being a role model for my family, for the
> students that I teach from my own generation, for my own people, being in the
> 2% population with doctorate degree, plus being a first-generation Hispanic male,

<center>69</center>

put me higher in that two percent, it is historical. So, for me, I am making history.

I am showing something to many people who say they run from all this because

well, where we come from, but I am showing them the way that is possible.

James mentioned it was not an easy path for him as initially he failed the writing test required for admission to the doctoral program, he successfully passed in his second attempt. When asked what this degree will do for him, [with excitement] he responded, "For me it will be a personal fulfillment that I did for my family, for my parents, and my brother, who passed away." James is very proud to share with others that he served the nation, and he is a veteran. His pride was obvious in his statement when he said,

I fulfill something for the country, and I feel, I owe always for other people in

same situation as me. I was very proud of being a serviceman and now a veteran. I

am ready to go back if they [military] ask me to, without a problem.

On the other hand, John stated,

Well, I've always known that as for me as an African American male, that I would

need higher education to actually pursue the goals that I wanted to do as far as my

life goes within the military as well as outside of the military….A brief history, as

I come from a family of seven individuals [siblings], I am now the only one that

completed college and is going above.

In a family of nine members, as a first-generation college student, John perceived himself as a good role model to not just his seven siblings, but to all their children and future family members. Most first-generation students take pride in their educational milestones.

Olivia is passionate about higher education and works to provide educational opportunities to youth. The majority of her post-military career has been K-12 and her current job in higher education allows her to work with underserved students to offer educational resources and opportunities. She shared, "After working on the program for

about two years, I decided this was where I needed to be…I still had the opportunity to work with high school students in the college setting." Olivia serves as a role model for many students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

During his post-military days when Richard was living in homeless shelters, he met fellow veterans and decided to be the change he was looking for himself. He [emotional] stated, "I was in group therapy… I heard the stories…That is when I began looking for my purpose in life. So, when I saw what they were going through, it gave me motivation to do something for them. I started out. I did peer support certification." With this credential, Richard has the opportunity to work one-on-one with veterans seeking help. Sharing his own lived experience to overcome various barriers allows him to be a role model for many veterans.

> Robert is a full-time student, employee, and parent, he shared his experience,
> Before joining the military, I knew education was important. But I did not really
> care because there was no support from family. As I matured, now I understand
> the value of education, especially if you want to thrive in society today, you need
> it [education]. Now my kids are watching me, and I want to make sure I stay
> determined to complete school to be a good example. In my family upon my
> graduation, I will be a first-generation college graduate.

Robert is a role model for his children and possibly other family members as upon his graduation, he will be the first person in his family to do so.

According to the VA (2023), a total of 62% of veterans are first-generation college students. And, of the participants in this study, a total of 82% veterans has first-generation status. That is a remarkable statistic because Best University has more first-generation veteran students than the national average, indicating that the college experiences of these students are likely to be similar.

Being A Nontraditional Student

Being a nontraditional student, especially the age aspect, can add to the many challenges that veteran students confront. It also plays a role in the perceptions of veterans regarding their needs at the university. For example, older veteran students may feel out of place on campus, and they may have difficulty balancing their studies with work or family commitments. Nontraditional students may also lack the traditional support network of family and friends who are attending college.

The VA (2023) reported that nearly 15% of total veterans in college are aged between 24–40 years. In this study, about 73% of participants are aged 30-years or older. In comparison with traditional college students aged 18–24 years (Borsari et al., 2017), participants have dependents and are employed part-time or full-time while attending the university. It is difficult to measure any impact of veteran student's age on their overall academic performance. Yet older veterans may have more life experiences and discipline, which can help them succeed in college.

Michael is in the 20–29 years age range and attending college full-time. Yet, he felt different in the classroom, he elaborated, "Well, my experience as a college student has been quite the experience, it feels like I am the oldest person in every class that I go to. It has been quite a challenge." He was in the Army for six years with two deployments overseas. Michael shared he had his military career all planned out, he stated,

> …my whole plan was to do 20 years in the military and then retire and give my educational benefits to my kids, if I got to that point, but I ended up getting injured and got early discharge from the Army. That is the reason why I have to pursue a degree right now. And it is just a big change of lifestyle because I was not so into school, but now I have to do it to get myself into a better situation.

Today, James falls in the 50+ age category but he stated, "One obstacle that I am still dealing with is that I got married at a young age and I had to keep working even if its parttime for my family." He had to provide for his large family but also knew higher education attainment would help change their future. James hitchhiked his way to college and workplace, working two jobs. After graduating with an associate degree, he decided to join the Army as a non-entry level officer and served in the armed forces for over 10 years with one deployment.

Olivia also is in the same age range, and she expressed, "There is a lack of respect and not many opportunities for career advancement for her without a higher degree." She also was working full-time while attending Best University for her doctoral program. She did not use VSO on campus because she felt there was no support provided for doctoral students. Most services seemed to target new and younger students. Olivia also served in the Army for 13 years with three deployments.

Also, John served in the Army for 24 years, mostly overseas with three deployments. With a large family of nine in the low-income bracket, the responsibilities came much earlier to John. He started, "Education was always a key part of what I always wanted to do that that was just something inbred into me." After long service years, John was determined to enroll in college. He is a full-time doctoral student. He stated, "My daughter also attended this university for an undergrad degree, and she recently graduated. So, it was a good thing for a father-daughter duo to go to [referring to convenience of university's location]."

The priorities of nontraditional students are different from the traditional college students. Being a nontraditional student is becoming more common in higher education institutions, yet the challenges unique to veterans still remain uncommon. The age of the veteran student when enrolling in higher education does have an impact on their

academic performance and overall success. For example, the younger generation of students are likely to more engage in all non-academic university activities to help build their extracurricular or co-curricular transcript, the older veteran students are likely more focused on their academic transcript.

Family Responsibilities

As nontraditional students, veterans usually come to campus with a lot more responsibilities on their shoulders compared to students entering college from high school. In this study, 54.5% of participants were married or divorced and 45.5% were single or never married. The VA (2023) reported 47% of veterans are married or have children. Family responsibilities can have a significant impact on veterans' academic success, retention, and degree completion. Veterans may also have to travel for work or school, which can take time away from their families.

When William transitioned out of the military, he was unemployed without housing or a vehicle and had a child to take care of. He enrolled in college during the first week after his military discharge. He moved in with his parents to better take care of his child. William thought his decision would help him, but instead he was overwhelmed to be in school, working, taking care of the child, and financially supporting his parents. His stress had a negative impact on his classes, and he withdrew from school. He shared, "So, I ended up leaving school and got a job similar to what I did in the military. After 10 years of work and no growth, returned to school for a higher degree for better job. So, I had a difficult transition."

James' large family includes a few service members which motivated him to join the armed forces. However, when the rest of family members were serving in the military, the responsibility of family came to him. James was home taking care of his parents, wife, children, and other family members. It was difficult for him at the time, but

due to his determination to get out of poverty, he was able to do stay focused on what mattered the most to him. Also, John comes from a large family and needed opportunities to be able to support six siblings and parents. He stated,

> Well, two sisters, five brothers out of the family members, two of us, my brother and I were the only two high school graduates. I am now the only one that also completed high school. Well, excuse me, college and above.

John's daughter also attended Best University, so they were attending college together before she recently graduated. John cherishes those memories with his daughter.

Robert is a full-time student working on his baccalaureate degree at Best University with expected graduation in 2024. He is married and takes care of the family. Robert always valued education but did not pursue it earlier because his family did not support him with higher education. After having children of his own he understands to stay determined and be the first-generation college student in his family.

On the contrary, Thomas had a different situation at home. His family wanted him to attend college and not join the military. His family has high value for higher education. Thomas had to convince his family to allow joining the military and promise that he would pursue education during service and after discharge. Thomas stated, "I am the first of my family to not go to college after high school. It [joining military] was kind of a big decision for me and my family." Thomas had family and social support needed for a successful transition into a postsecondary environment.

Along with veterans, their families also may face unique challenges and responsibilities. Especially if the veteran is dealing with service-related physical or mental health issues. The social support from inside and outside of the family plays a critical role as the veteran copes with the transitions. Service members who have gone far and for long time may feel different about their families upon return. And the families

may struggle to effectively support their loved veteran. This sort of experience is completely different for each individual because of a range of factors influencing their relationships.

Veteran students perceive their needs to be similar to any other college students. Such needs include academic support, financial support, mental health resources, social support, and basic necessities. Some participants perceived a lack of respect when asking for help. They also felt at times they were not able to keep up with the academic demands of college. Nontraditional veteran students may also feel that they are not able to connect with other students, because of age and as they may have different life experiences. In addition to these general needs, veteran students may have other specific needs that are related to their military experiences. For example, students who have been deployed to war zones may need help dealing with trauma or grief. Participants did not utilize VSO regarding the aforementioned perceived needs as relevant services were not offered.

Research Question Three

Research question three, "*What are the perceptions of veteran students regarding services that support their academic success?*" was answered using a qualitative inductive thematic coding of the semi-structured interviews questions. All 11 participants responded to this question by answering interview questions that addressed the *Support* factor in this research question. Coding analysis developed three distinct themes of responses on perceptions of veteran students regarding services that support their academic success at the university, the themes are (a) lack of awareness about support, (b) difficulty navigating college, and (c) peer support.

Lack of Awareness About Resources

The American military places a strong emphasis on offering comprehensive assistance to servicemembers before their discharge, ensuring a smooth transition out of

the military. For example, the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) provides valuable information, resources, and tools to separating servicemembers for their transition to civilian society (VA, 2023c). Based on participants' responses, despite such programs from the military, when veterans arrived at the higher education institution, the lack of awareness about all available resources and assistance may be evident. Most participants were not aware of resources available from the institution or the VSO.

James always dreamt of having a doctorate degree but did not know where to start. He worked at a school district and on a random day found a flyer about a doctoral program orientation. He stated, "I just applied to the program without any preparation and failed the first writing test." After inquiring about the retest, James passed the test and was admitted to the program. James did not know about the assistance available from the writing center. The lack of preparation was due to not knowing what the program admission process entailed. He added,

> Academic success, that is a broad term. It has so many links, so many areas and
> because this is like a holistic trend, academic success is not just. For example, you
> can have a bachelor's degree, but you don't find a job on that. You have got to go
> around. That will be your academic success.

Indicating that having a clear idea of what academic success means for each veteran student is essential in their journey.

Similarly, Olivia had a setback due to an injury during the first year in her doctoral program which delayed her degree completion. She expressed, "I was a little discouraged at times but continued and determined to finish." Not having assistance that focuses on veteran students' degree completion hinders the process for individual and likely the program as they also thrive for student success. John also shared,

What academic success means to me is achieving the goals in which you said, and

persisting until graduation, which is part of academic success, and then that

degree to actually propel you to the career field in which you want to go into.

The entire process requires various types of support and resources. David defined

academic success as,

So academic success to me means better grades, being able to say you are

progressive in college. Yes, a good GPA as well as have good academic social

life. Like having connections with your professors or your program chair. So, you

will be able to reach out and ask questions about your program or classes…and

create that rapport with them [program leaders] to where they do not have a

problem answering it or don't try to kind of set you off to the side. Not saying that

professors do that, but I mean, let us be real.

Faculty and program leaders can be a great resource for veteran students. David stated, "I

don't really know what the services at the [federal] VA would give for education." He

was unaware of the scholarship opportunities listed on the federal veteran affairs website.

David [surprised] responded,

I did not know that was even an option. I never even thought of that, to be honest.

It is funny that you say that because I have seven months left of my GI Bill and I

will need to do scholarships after this to be able to cover the rest.

Emma currently feels academically successful because she is taking only basic or core

courses. She stated,

It is just it's not really challenging at the moment yet and I would rather just be

able to do the courses that are actually going to get me towards my degree, not

like I took an art history class and it's like, OK, well, this was a fun class to take,

but it's not really related to my job field and it's not going to get me further

anywhere in my job.

Emma is aware there are some resources for students on campus but unable take

advantage due to her evening class schedule. She explained,

I do know a lot of different services the school itself provides. But I have not had

any time ever really to look into or utilize them. I am also busy with work. A lot

of these things, the campus is mostly closed by the time I am able to even show

up. Everyone's already kind of dipped out. Offices are closed. I know they are not

going to stay there past five to support me.

So, even with awareness veteran students like Emma are not able to utilize

services that may contribute to their academic success. Also, Robert shared,

I am aware that there are resources for students, but to what extent I did not know.

I did not even know about the orientation at university. I was unfamiliar, I did not

know that there were veteran services provided. I do not know if necessarily how

well it works with veterans. I have never actually been there. I have never used it,

you know. I just literally go to school just to take my classes and I leave. Well, I

have to submit some documents to the veteran services and then I think they

handle rest [the process]. But yeah, so they handle the GI Bill.

Based on the gathered responses, currently Best University's VSO does not offer follow-

up service or reach out to the students for any assistance or support they may need. In the

current structure, veteran students reach out to VSO when they have any question

regarding their GI Bill paperwork. Participants suggested having a resource bank so

veteran students could access various resources available to them even if the VSO does

not provide the services. Participants shared that guidance and direction to education and

non-educational resources would be very helpful for current and future veteran students.

Difficulty Navigating College

Participants with first-generation status shared similar experiences when they first enrolled in college. Difficulty in college navigation may occur for several reasons as it also depends on student's willingness to take the initiative to overcome the intimidations. Students may have awareness of available services on campus but may not know how and where to access them.

Richard is a well-versed and engaged student at Best University as he is aware of and utilizes many services available to all students. He stated,

I know pretty much all the services available on campus. I go to counseling, to the writing center, I have checked in the tutoring, I utilized the food pantry, and I am part of many organizations on campus.

However, when it comes to the veteran-centric support on campus, he shared,

Yes, I like to go to the Veterans Center [VSO]. The thing is, I mean the services that they offer are to help students enroll, get all that paperwork through the VA stuff done. But as far as whatever else there is, is not much. There is a lounge, I would go there, but it is like a working environment because everybody else there is working. It is not a place for me [as veteran]. I will go in and just chat sometimes, but I do not consider it conducive for a bunch of veterans to come and gather or have just the fellowship. And it [VSO] is also remote [referring to physical location]. It's up on the third floor. It's way in the back and a lot of veterans don't like it. Because well if they have got issues then they don't like the closed-up places. They like to be able to see where they are and stuff like that. So, I mean, as far as veteran services, basically they just help students with enrollment, some help with the classes, but that's pretty much where it's limited.

You know other services, they do events like veteran's day which I have been a

part of some, but that's it, it's pretty limited.

In regard to assistance with counseling services, Richard shared, "Regarding counselors, every veteran does not have one at the university. VSO has talked about getting somebody, but I don't know if it's happened yet. But I feel very comfortable with what the school offers at the counseling center."

James also agreed and stated, "Let's say when you are in high school, you go to your counselor because they try to help you to see your potential, open your mind about your future. At college, with VSO, No, it's not like that though." Initially, he had struggled understanding his ineligibility from Texas state educational benefits, possibly due to the language barrier. James felt he did not receive the support he needed from VSO and was not directed or guided towards alternative options. He learned about the financial aid office. He stated,

See in this case whether you qualify for VA benefits or not, and if you do, you

can go to VSO for paperwork and process. So, in my case I cannot. Like I said

before the veteran support office, let me down. So, I am using federal loans that

everybody else.

Emma also experienced a little difficulty navigating through the process for VA paperwork. She finds VSO very helpful because they are supportive in certifying courses and submitting paperwork to the VA which allows stipend to come in timely manner. However, Emma shared, "I have only been there [VSO] like a small handful of times for paperwork…I did feel it was a little disorganized there. Some of the steps that they make us go through each semester. I find it is unnecessary."

The current process entails submitting benefit eligibility paperwork through the VSO webpage. Emma stated, "I have the website pulled up; I am not sure where it's at."

Students receive a reminder each semester to verify their enrollment as a requirement by the federal VA. It is unclear if the instructions are coherent for students to follow. The campus VSO is helpful in contacting the VA to address issues on behalf of the students. After his separation from the military, David immediately enrolled in college. He regretted the decision as he was not ready. He stated,

> Believe it or not, I was still in over my head. There was no guidance. I was definitely trying to figure it out things as I went through it. I did not know if there were benefits for veterans provided at the school.

David eventually withdrew from college with a low GPA. After a long break he recently re-enrolled in higher education and is doing better academically.

Findings indicate the veteran students' perceptions of services that support their academic success were mixed. Some veterans found VSO to be limited and not tailored to their specific needs. On the other hand, some participants perceived VSO to be helpful but disorganized. Overall, inability of college navigation may negatively affect veteran student's academic success.

Peer Support

Offering peer support or mentoring at university might prompt students for engagement, which can contribute to their retention (Yomtov et al., 2017). As service members, veteran students are trained to work in teams and rely on peer support during military operations. Most participants shared that with peer support through mentoring helped them feel more integrated and supported. Yomtov et al. (2017) reported, a lack of perceived social support (Mallinckrodt, 1988) is related to an increased likelihood of dropping out of college. Peer support is essential because it can provide veteran students with a sense of belonging in the campus community. All participants shared peer support could be helpful in understanding various needs of students for their academic success.

Richard described himself as being passionate about helping his fellow veterans by sharing his experiences in academia. Living in homeless shelters post-military, he realized the need for positive socialization for the veteran population. Richard stated,

> When I was in Group therapy, I saw veterans, men and women with problems and situations much worse than mine…it kind of broke me for them. When I saw what they were going through, it gave me motivation to do something for them.

After attending group therapy sessions, he committed to completing a Peer Support Certification. Richard is planning to pair this credential with a degree in social work. He further shared that as a disabled veteran himself, Richard is committed to support his peers in their success.

James also emphasized the importance of peer support through his experience in higher education. He stated,

> After my degree completion, I want to empower students like us who come from other countries. The way immigrant students are treated is not good, they [administrators in higher education] don't understand different backgrounds. So, I want to make a positive impact in trying to help with all this, that is the goal of having this degree and using it to make a difference.

James plans to provide peer support to students at different academic levels. David defined academic success as also having a good academic social life. During the interview, he stated that he does not feel comfortable announcing to classmates about his veteran status. He explained, "When we are in the classroom, we're all on the same level. We are all trying to achieve our degrees, all trying to achieve our goals. I don't think just being a veteran…makes me better than anyone…I just don't flaunt it."

Although David is not fond of getting attention from people for his military service. He described himself as being very proud to be a veteran and willing to support

his peers to be successful. While describing peer support, John shared his first-year college experience and stated,

> My progression, initially not having attended school for a while, was a little slow and cumbersome. But the classes I took with peers, we worked together, we were able to really get on a consistent path. It was a good thing as far as having a good core of classmates to really help and motivate me to keep me moving forward.

Olivia on the other hand did not mind sharing her veteran status among classmates. She found it helpful to announce about her service experience, and learned there were other veterans in her program who also took classes with her. She indicated it was a positive experience to be able to support fellow veterans and learn about different resources from them. She stated, "the military embodies the urge to build or work in teams." Emma stated she only prefers to share about her military experience if serves a purpose in the discussion. She explained,

> There has been a time where I have mentioned it and it wasn't until halfway into the semester, it's just if it makes it part for any discussion, if it helps build upon that, then I will, but it's not something I'm just going to immediately saying I am a veteran. I've done this since I don't try to get too much attention drawn to myself.

Due to her evening classes, she is not able to engage much on campus during daytime activities. She expressed her willingness to help other veteran students when possible and agrees peer support is helpful.

Academic success was defined by each participant with their own perspective and goals. For some participants, due to the gap in education resulting from their military service obligations, remedial basic courses were required to meet the proficiency level required by the institution. The GI Bill may not cover the costs of the additional courses that are not on the degree program such as the remedial course, leaving the veteran

84

students seeking alternate sources for funding. Academic success is a personal journey therefore VSO's one-size-fit-all approach may not be ideal to meet students' needs to be successful.

Overall, participants perceived VSO to be helpful in being a liaison to the federal VA for GI Bill benefits. However, the current services or support do not address the abovementioned needs. Students' lack of awareness of resources, difficulty navigating college and absence of peer support can have a negative impact on veteran students' academic success. For example, if veteran students do not feel comfortable or supported asking for help, they may be less likely to seek out the services that they need. Additionally, if the services are not well-coordinated, veteran students may have difficulty navigating through the system and accessing the resources that they need.

Research Question Four

Research question four, *"What are the perceptions of veteran students regarding services that support their retention and degree completion goals?"* was answered using inductive thematic coding process. All 11 participants responded to this question by answering interview questions that addressed the *Strategies* factor in this research question. Coding analysis developed three distinct themes of responses on perceptions of veteran students regarding services that support their retention and degree completion goals at the university, the themes are (a) self-efficacy, (b) persistence, and (c) misconceptions.

Self-efficacy

According to Bandura et al. (1977), an individual's belief in their ability to succeed, self-efficacy, and the world around them, the environment, influences what they expect to happen and what they actually achieve, the outcomes. Therefore, the researcher perceives participants demonstrated a great level of academic self-efficacy in their

responses. Military members often possess a high level of self-efficacy or belief in their ability to succeed at challenging tasks. It is likely due to strict military training where troops learn to overcome obstacles and work under pressure. Self-efficacy is an important factor in mental and physical health, well-being, and success in civilian life.

Thomas took some courses at the military base and thought after discharge he would only have to take a few more classes to complete his degree. He learned that most of his military credits did not transfer to his current program. He took one year break before enrolling in college. Thomas stated, "with the support from the GI Bill, it made it more feasible, more practical for me to do my studying and I was more motivated for sure to kind of pursue it more." Richard also stated,

> I have never really used the VSO for advising because honestly, I am not sure how up to par they are. I have developed a system where I will check and cross check with course list sent by academics advising office. I go to the program director and develop course plans each semester. So, once the advising office and the department agree, I have a good plan for the semester. So, I don't use the VSO for that.

His goal is to have an internship by next Fall semester, so he volunteers at an organization that will hire him as an intern next year. He secured his employment without requiring assistance or support from university's student services. James takes high pride in who he is today. He stated,

> I didn't finish my high school diploma on time, I did night high school. That took a long time, I ended up taking the longer route to everything in my life. So, for me, academic success is measured by me coming from being that student nobody cares about to now where I'm about to finish a terminal degree, doctoral degree.

He described his self-confidence as being unshakable. The various barriers James met as a veteran student, he found a way to overcome it and cope with the transition. Currently, James does not utilize the VSO or other student services on campus. After he learned his post-9/11 GI Bill benefits were exhausted, he joined Army Reserve to get support for his educational goals. He explained,

> I went to request the services. VSO did not provide me with the services. They said that I did not qualify those [supplemental benefits] because I was not, I did not join the services while being in Texas. So, yes, in my personal case, because I didn't join those, this even though I joined the reserve being they didn't qualify me that location to pay for my doctoral degree. Yes, a rude awakening. Yes, it's allowed to do that to veterans. To be very honest with you, I had never used those [advising, counseling, financial aid, VSO] services from the school or from the VA. Because I do my own things and I am successful.

> Similarly, Olivia did not utilize many of the services available on campus. She managed her own degree plan and worked with the program faculty for academic advice. Joseph also created his own plan of study, he stated, "I have planned my curriculum and am trying to follow the curriculum to ensure completion of my degree within the expected timeframe." Emma meets with academic advisor once but gets courses planned for the entire year. Regarding additional services, she [with confidence] stated,

> I am almost 30 [years], and I haven't been in the military since I was like 24 [years], so I pretty much completely settled into like, civilian adult working life. There are a lot of services provided at the school. I just haven't had a need for it since I've already just established myself.

Robert met with an advisor after admission, he stated,

When I first started, I got my 'plan of study' thing and then from there I picked classes then after I enrolled into them. After that, I create my schedule and send it to advisor to confirm. And they'll discuss with me if it's a good plan. I guess a lot of it has been self-chosen, and I just use whatever recommendations they [advisor] have for my degree and concentration.

The researcher perceived self-efficacy of veteran students as a key factor in their academic success. Veteran students who believe in their ability to succeed are more likely to achieve their goals. Participants agreed VSO could promote self-efficacy among veteran students by providing them with opportunities to connect with other veterans, by recognizing their accomplishments, and by celebrating their academic milestones.

Persistence

Participant responses indicate there are multiple transitions veteran students go through and face various obstacles along the way. Schlossberg's transition theory suggests that veteran students' academic persistence is likely to be influenced by how well they are able to manage these transitions. Student retention is correlated with academic persistence leading to degree completion.

In describing his first-year college experience as a first-generation student navigating through college, James stated,

I don't quit. I will never quit. I am not a quitter. In whatever I do, I never quit. And that's something that you need to take into consideration in order to reach this [doctoral] level, because that's one of the major obstacles that you will find. In my case, in the family, in the case of people is will power. They don't have the will to continue moving forward.

James perceived his progress to be based on his internal drive and not the services from the VSO. During his enrollment in college, Michael found study groups very helpful on campus. John utilized most services on campus for his academic success. He explained,

> Well, I am at the last class to finish [program], so I just have to make sure I have funding left to do that. So that's pretty much the only thing that's left to do…finish my [dissertation] chapters four and five and do my final defense, so that I can graduate this year.

David realized he was not academically ready when he initially began as he received poor grades and low GPA during first semesters. Richard described his reason for pursuing a degree with persistence, he stated,

> Having a degree means the difference between night and day because I tried working without a degree and you don't get much pay. I have no worries about what I'm going to do because the need is too big. Especially working with veterans. I want to work with veterans coming out of incarceration and generally people coming out of incarceration.

Joseph and Emma almost echoed each other, "I believe this degree will help get a better job with better opportunities to advance and better pay." Thomas listed career opportunities for his motivation to pursue higher education. He further described,

> I wanted to kind of join academia to further my education, but also to have stable job, a good paying job and something [subject] that I was interested in. So, my whole purpose for college was to hopefully find a good job in something that was interesting and something that I was interested in.

Robert described what the degree completion will do for him in future, he stated,

> I believe it does open doors. I know a lot of places they don't really care where or what degree you have as long as you're a college graduate. And nowadays, having

a bachelor's degree is just entry-level employment. Almost everyone has a

bachelor's degree, and so you need to do more. For me, I want to continue on to

get a master's degree. So, in order to do so, I need to get my bachelor's degree

first and so by doing these steps that's kind of like it's building me up so I can

have a successful future.

Although persistence is used in various ways for each participant, the one thing in

common is academic persistence itself. All participants demonstrated a certain level of

self-confidence and determination for their degree completion. That trait is likely to be

instilled from military training. The discipline, the drive and the self-confidence in most

veteran students appeared to be common traits in these participants as well. Despite the

services provided by VSO that the participants desired, the researcher perceived the

participants to complete their degree programs as they may view it as a mission and their

determination to overcome obstacles in their academic journey.

Misconceptions

One misconception is that when service members were ready to depart from the

armed forces, they received several training courses to prepare them in the civilian world.

However, based on participants' responses not all were afforded those opportunities.

Many service members do not have the time for the courses or based on their rank, may

not be aware. When attending sessions as a group it may make sense but coming out and

navigating college by self may be more difficult.

An additional misconception is that all veterans have a clear understanding of

various benefits afforded to them for their service. However, this is not always the case.

Some veterans may not be aware of all of their benefits, or they may not understand how

to access them. For example, various misconceptions from veterans may influence how

they define academic success. James stated, "What is academic success to me is not the

same to you or someone else. In my case, surviving this journey in one piece and continually having the energy to go to the next level continuing to redefine my academic success."

Another misconception is that veterans avoid socialization on campus. Initially, veteran students may seem shy or anti-social during their first year of college, especially if they were first-generation college students. But that changes over time, as some participants shared, they enjoy the company of fellow veterans or peer mentoring. Richard shared,

> For two semesters, I have been to group programs and last semester I was having one-on-one and group therapy every week. I just have to stay on top of that part because I live alone, and I live on campus. I am there from about 8:30 a.m. until about 8:00 p.m. because I just do not function good if I am not around people, even if I am not interacting. It is just being in an environment where there are other people. I love therapy. I am 110% for therapy because some way or another we all need it. But society has this stigma where if you go to get help, there is something wrong with you. And yeah, there's something wrong, but that does not mean much. It is like people get an infection, people get a broken bone, people get some other problem, they'll go to the doctor and then not be afraid to talk about it. But you talk about mental health care and all of a sudden everybody goes on weird. For me, it is not a problem talking to people and telling them that I do therapy. I have this issue and that issue and don't bother me because it is life.

Additional misconception is that all VSO staff are veterans and therefore understand the needs of veteran students. This is not always true because some VSO staff may not have any affiliation with the military, or they may not have experience working with veteran students. In that case, it is important for veteran students to advocate for themselves.

91

However, Kastle et al. (2019) shared there are misconceptions in higher education that to efficiently support the veteran population, the VSO must employ personnel with military service or background. Well-trained staff that are compassionate, empathetic, who can maintain the updates to their knowledge of changes from the VA regarding the education benefits can adequately support veteran students (Drebing et al., 2018). Studies (Harris, 2017; Mason, 2011; Torregosa, et al., 2016) support that a positive and a caring campus climate can contribute to drastically changing the students' performance and improve retention. Additionally, Borsari et al. (2017) found using methodical approaches to implement and periodically evaluate military-affiliated programs and support services offered to veterans, may help alter any negative perspectives about the institution's commitment to its veterans.

When in a classroom, not all participants felt comfortable revealing their identity as a veteran. This is due to stigmatism or misconceptions regarding veterans and mental disorders such as PTSD, as well as veterans' own concerns about being perceived as entitled. Such factors may discourage veterans from voicing their concerns or seeking VSO assistance. Veteran students' perceptions regarding their academic success, campus community, VSO, their jobs, and their personalities were heavily influenced by their time and position in the military.

Self-efficacy and persistence are some of the critical factors in veteran students' academic success. Veteran students who believe in their ability to succeed are more likely to achieve their goals. Findings highlight that as there are misconceptions about veterans on campus, some veteran students also have misconceptions about the services that are available to them or are reluctant to seek help. Participant perceived the VSO does not provide an environment that contribute to fostering or promote self-efficacy, academic persistence or help clarify existing misconceptions about veteran students.

Conclusion

The descriptive nature of the phenomenon aimed to describe as accurately as possible and without any preconceived assumptions about the challenges faced by veteran students and the impact of the veteran-centric support services have on their academic success, retention, and degree completion goals. All participants seemed incredibly determined and were able to overcome what they considered a major barrier in their journey. The increasing veteran enrollment in higher education and the everchanging GI Bill regulations force institutions to create and or improvise existing support provided to veteran students on campus, especially when the impact is on their academic success, retention, and completions. These factors also may confirm the lack of data on the subject.

This research continues to show the need for additional studies in veteran students at medium-sized four-year public university. This study provided an opportunity to share veteran students' lived experiences emphasizing their academic life. Once the data were reviewed and analyzed, the themes were then evaluated in the context of earlier research and Schlossberg's transition theory with the 4S model were used as the conceptual framework for this study. The qualitative findings suggested that the overall positive military experience contributed to veterans utilizing education benefits in pursuing higher education. Also, the overall positive transition out of the military determined success in personal, academic, and career life of veterans. It is important to note that this is just a small sample of veterans, and the results may not be generalizable to all veterans.

This chapter presented the results of the qualitative data analysis of this study. A sample of 11 veteran students were interviewed. When describing utilizing campus support services at four-year university, most participants emphasized the importance of having veteran-centric support services on campus with more visibility and more

resources for graduate level veteran students. Peer support or frequent contact with counselors may contribute to veteran students' retention (Wurster et al., 2013). It may also lead to developing a sense of belonging for veteran students.

The 4S Model (situation, self, support, and strategies) from transition theory was used as theoretical model in this study to address the unique barriers aspects of the research questions. The situation-variable focused on the veteran's transitioning from military to civilian life to collegiate life. The self-variable explored the veteran's unique transition experience. The support-variable discovered that not every veteran may have the same support and access to resources for their overall academic success. The strategies-variable looked at many factors that play a role in how the veteran is coping with their personal transition out of the military and into academic environment, and how the veteran-centric support services on campus may or may not impact their retention and degree completion goals.

Analysis of the data found the veteran support office has an overall positive influence on retention of veterans because those who utilize the service prefer going to the office when needed for securing GI Bill fundings. Participants with negative VSO experience are likely to complete their degrees soon or they exhausted their GI Bill funds, so no longer require assistance. Either way, these students did not intend to utilize the current veteran-centric support services on campus as they do not perceive the services to be helpful in their academic success, retention, or degree completion.

CHAPTER V:

SUMMARY, IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Introduction

This qualitative research used a descriptive phenomenological design to examine the perceptions of veteran students at a four-year public university regarding the challenges they face, and the impact of veteran-centric support services have on their academic success, retention, and degree completion goals. This chapter discusses the findings reported in chapter IV. In addition, this chapter presents the relationship to the theoretical framework and research questions, considerations for higher education student support services, recommendations, practice, and implications for future research.

Summary of Findings

Several recent studies (Ahern et al., 2015; Chan, 2018; Evans et al., 2015; Fortney et al., 2016; Heineman, 2017; Sitzes et al., 2021; Stevenson & Le Buhn, 2020; Williams-Klotz & Gansemer-Topf, 2018) focus on supporting veteran students at a community college or for-profit institutions. Nevertheless, the data on supporting veteran students at a suburban four-year public university are scarce with insufficient literature when focusing on how academic success, retention, and degree completion are perceived by veteran students. This study was designed to examine the perceptions of veteran students regarding the barriers they encountered, and the impact veteran-centric support services have on their academic success, retention, and degree completion goals.

Based on the participant's responses, twelve categories emerged from the data include: a) work-life-school balance, (b) socio-economic status, (c) frustrations and stress, (d) to be a role model, (e) being a nontraditional student, (f) family responsibilities, (g) lack of awareness about resources, (h) difficulty navigating college, (i) peer support, (j) self-efficacy, (k) persistence, and (l) misconceptions. The findings

conclude that there are mixed perceptions of the barriers encountered by veteran students and the impact veteran-centric support services has on their academic success, retention, and degree completion goals. Participants had unique experiences for which they perceived barriers based on their lived experiences.

In regard to the impact of veteran-centric support services on veteran students' academic performance success, retention and degree completion goals, the reactions were mixed. The majority of participants (55%) found VSO had a positive influence on their transition into higher education and their overall academic success. The other participants (45%) had negative experiences with VSO and did not find services useful for their overall academic success. There was no correlation between positive military experience and the experience with VSO. A total of 82% participants claimed positive experience with military and remaining 18% had negative experience with the military.

Today's higher education institutions must understand the uniqueness of veteran students. To offer veteran-centric support services on campus, several factors have to be considered to ensure veteran students' success. A good balance of work-life-school is very important to veteran students as they have been away from normal civil society. Reintegration into society can be hard for any individual depending on time spent away.

For veterans it is more of acculturation and catching up to the standards society calls normal and finding that sense of belonging whether it is at home, at work or at school. Although a sense of belonging may mirror veterans' experiences prior to entry that lead them to fear and isolation on campus, it is directly shaped by the broader campus climate and students' daily interactions with others on campus community (Tinto, 2017). Having a veteran-centric support is likely to foster the sense of belonging among students and utilize the support and resources to cultivate the balance they desire.

Most participants had a similar social-economic status prior to joining the military. The GI Bill was originally designed to help veterans transition back to civilian life, but it also aimed to boost the economy. Teixeira (2021) explained that by raising the education level of veterans, the country would reduce unemployment and increase the number of skilled workers in the workforce. Participants who are close to exhausting their post-9/11 GI Bill benefits perceived the VSO as not helpful in their overall academic journey. Because it was time consuming to keep explaining their particular situation for exception or waivers to staff due to high turnover of personnel in that office.

A majority of participants mentioned they felt that every few months there was someone new in the office and the previous person did not leave anything for reference. As far as receiving the processing of the GI Bill paperwork for received education stipends, basic housing allowance and related benefits, VSO staff was helpful in submitting information to the federal VA in a timely manner. Researcher perceives that since an ideal veteran-centric support service focuses primarily on the needs of veteran students, any personnel changes in the office should have minimum to no impact on the students' academic success, retention, or degree completion.

Participants did not find any specific resource from VSO on campus pertaining to mental health or to cope with stress. However, a couple of participants shared that they enjoyed visiting VSO and meeting fellow veteran students throughout the semester. While waiting for paperwork to process, they engage in conversations with other students and this networking helps them de-stress. However, the majority of participants prefer contacting VA hospital for mental health resources as the medical staff processes the health benefits for veterans. To offer veteran-centric support for mental health matters, it is suggested to have a VA counselor on campus or designate a professional from the counseling office that works with veteran students to identify tools and resources needed.

Another common theme among the participants was the desire to be a role model. All except two participants were first-generation college students, developing that desire is understandable. However, the very reason of being a first-generation student also brings different experiences as the participants shared in earlier sections. Participants perceived the current practices do not offer specific services or resources for first-generation college students who are military veterans. Having a designated counselor or advisor for this group would be a very helpful support for veteran students.

Being a nontraditional student is one of the significant factors that differ from traditional 18–22 years old college students. Evidently, the perceptions of each participant were peculiar, likely due to individual's age. Focusing on academics, the younger participants viewed their needs as being more self-focused. In contrast, the elder participants' needs were more about their dependents. Veteran students' academic goals, pace for degree completion, access to funding or ability to manage stress all vary based on individuals' current perception of themselves. At present, the VSO on campus is not perceived as helpful in this matter by participants because they do not offer resources or service based on age groups or enrollment status or related needs. The researcher perceived that it may be difficult to entirely personalize the services offered to veterans.

Family responsibilities were another major concern for veteran students. Participants over the age of 40 years mentioned the possibility of transferring their leftover GI Bill benefits to their dependents. Hence the student cannot fail or repeat any course nor have any additional course outside of their degree program. Evaluating military transcripts to receive academic credits is a popular option for older veterans. The VSO refers veteran students to academic advisors for military transcript evaluation. At least two participants shared they were not given any academic credits from their military transcript. These participants thought VSO would provide alternatives, so students do not

have to take placement tests. One of the participants was advised to take a series of remedial courses before beginning coursework for the degree program.

Data indicates there is a lack of awareness about resources among the participants. However, veteran students who are unaware of the resources available to them may decide to not use the resources once they do learn about them for various reasons. Participants who do not use the VSO are aware of the office existence, but they are willingly deciding to not utilize the services due to a prior negative experience or the in accessibility of the services, for example the office hours. If college staff are not trained to identify problems common to veteran students, it can have long-term consequences. Veterans often avoid seeking help because they fear it will be seen as a sign of weakness (Kirchner & Pepper, 2020). Spreading awareness through different avenues to reach all veteran students would be a helpful strategy.

Most participants shared they had difficulty navigating college, probably because they are first-generation college students. Participants' perceptions regarding services that support their academic success varied, but many expressed a need for more guidance and support. Some participants reported that they were not aware of the many services available to them from VA or the university's VSO, while others said that they felt intimidated or uncomfortable using them. Participants shared that currently VSO provides orientation for veteran students. However, if a student misses the orientation, they are not aware of how to obtain the information shared in the orientation. It would be helpful to have the orientation published on the VSO website, with password protection.

Peer support is another factor that was common among most participants which is perceived to be helpful in their academic success. This is likely because veteran students share many common experiences, including the transition from military to civilian life, the challenges of balancing education with other responsibilities, and the unique stressors

that can come with being a veteran student. Peer support groups and programs can provide veteran students with a safe space to connect with other veterans who understand what they are going through. In these groups, veteran students can share their experiences, learn from each other, and support each other through the challenges of college. Peer support or mentoring has long been considered a developmental and retention strategy for undergraduate students, and research suggests mentoring efforts are positively related to a variety of developmental and academic outcomes (Crisp et al., 2017). Presently, the VSO does not offer opportunities for peer support or peer mentorship at the university.

Self-efficacy is the belief in one's ability to succeed in a particular situation. It is a powerful predictor of veteran students' academic success, considering the various barriers they encounter. Teixeira (2021) found 84% of veterans reported they believe the American public does not understand the difficulties service members face. Hence, almost all participants were self-reliant. Some participants shared they do not utilize any services offered by the university unless required to do so, such as submitting VA benefits eligibility paperwork. Other than that, anything pertaining to their academic success is managed by veterans themselves. Almost half (45%) of participants did not perceive VSO as a positive influence or contributing to their retention or intentions of degree completion.

Persistence is the ability to continue working towards a goal despite challenges or setbacks. It is an important factor for being successful in college, especially for veteran students. Despite the various challenges, veteran students who are persistent are more likely to graduate from college. Participants shared that university could play a role in helping veteran students persist in college by providing resources that help students stay motivated as they complete their educational milestones. Currently, VSO does not offer a

service that sends reminders to students regarding deadlines or important dates and does not have follow ups emails or calls to ensure student is still on academic track after the GI Bill funding. This is likely to be due to the limited staff in the office.

Many misconceptions and stigma can have a negative impact on veteran students in a number of ways. Some participants shared that they were reluctant to seek out help or use services because they fear being stigmatized. At times, they felt misunderstood and isolated by their peers and professors. Some VSO staff are veterans, while others are not. Some VSO staff have a deep understanding of the needs of veteran students, while others may have less understanding. Veteran students who are seeking support from their VSO should be prepared to communicate their needs clearly and concisely. They should also be prepared to advocate for themselves if they do not feel like their needs are being met.

It is important to note that the aforementioned are just some possible reasons why participants' perceptions of services that support their academic success varied. More research is needed to better understand the factors that contribute to this variation. Finding retention and supporting veteran students with academic resources along with catered non-academic resources, can have a positive impact on their overall academic success, help with retention, and increase degree completions. Perceptions of services from VSO are mixed as only about half of the sample had had a positive experience.

Relation to Theoretical Framework

The study was conducted through the lens of Schlossberg's transition theory (1981, 1984) which is used to study adult transitions in any event and coping with the process. The theory explored internal and external factors to examine how individuals perceive themselves and their environment as they cope with a significant event or non-event in their life (Griffin & Gilbert, 2015). In this case, theory was used to examine the perceptions of veteran students.

Higher education institutions are essential in helping veteran students transition to an academic environment. They provide or connect students with resources that can help them succeed academically. Veteran students' perceptions of their individual transition are important because they influence the type and impact of their transition on their academic success, retention, and degree completion. Qualitative data highlights aspects of higher education that can be improved to better support veteran students at public universities (Findley & Metz, 2022; Gordon et al., 2016b; Sikes et al., 2020).

Transition theory is appropriate for studying the transition of veteran students to college because it can be applied to nontraditional students. Schlossberg identified four major sets of factors, the 4S model, that influence an individual's ability to cope with a transition: situation, self, support, and strategies. The universal 4S model has successfully been applied to previous veteran transition studies (Griffin & Gilbert, 2015; Ryan et al., 2011; Schlossberg et al., 1989, 1995). Each veteran student's situation is different and can be defined by distinct factors. Use of this transition theory allows educators and student affairs practitioners to take students' uniqueness into account to develop better tools, techniques, and strategies to support (Semer & Harmening, 2015) veteran students' academic success, retention, and degree completion.

The analysis of qualitative data guided by thematic analysis used inductive coding of interviews to establish a comprehensive set of themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). According to Nowell et al. (2017), this type of analysis is very useful for grouping or categorizing subjective information such as the participant's experience, opinions, perceptions, and generate unanticipated insights. An inductive coding allows to derive meaning and create themes from data without any preconceptions (Creswell, 2014, 2023).

The 4S model of Schlossberg's transition theory is an important part of the research questions. The 4S model focuses on four factors including *Situation, Self,*

Support and *Strategies* that affect veterans' ability to cope with their transition in higher education as students. Application of the 4S model in this study proved to be productive as the four factors were integrated into the four research questions.

The first research question concerning the perceptions of veteran students regarding the veteran-centric support services at a four-year public university, was addressed with the *Situation* factor of the 4S model. Participants' interpretations of situations vary as they are influenced by their natural environments. Factors (work-life-school balance, socio-economic status, and frustrations and stress) that contributed to transitioning into college, setting the intention of attending college, and exploring options, influenced the type of support participants are expecting or seeking from VSO.

The second research question concerning the perceptions of veteran students regarding their needs at a four-year public university, was addressed with the *Self* aspect of the 4S model. Participants' characteristics highlight participant's self-acknowledgement of transitional involvement and help understand who they are as individuals. Factors (desire to be role model, being a nontraditional student, and family responsibilities) that contributed to college enrollment based on participants' values and what makes them who they are and how they see the world around them in an academia.

The third research question concerning the perceptions of veteran students regarding services that support their academic success at a four-year public university, was addressed with the *Support* factor of the 4S model. Participants' awareness of services for veterans on campus and what students found supportive in their success. Factors (lack of awareness about resources, difficulty navigating college, and peer support) that contributed to participants' definition of academic success and how they are achieving it. Additionally, it helped identify peer support as an attribute that participants found useful for their academic success.

The fourth research question concerning the perceptions of veteran students regarding services that support their retentions and degree completion goals, was addressed with the *Strategies* factor of the 4S model. Participants' coping mechanism during this transition to college life and expectations of type of assistance from the institution that would encourage the student to continue their course of study at the institution eventually leading to graduation. Factors (self-efficacy, persistence, and misconceptions) that contributed to participants' continuous enrollment or adjustment to enrollment status and degree progression. Participants' showed adaptation was the key for their retention and goals for degree completion, regardless of the assistance from veteran-centric support services on campus.

Figure 5.1

4S Model and its application to this study

Schlossberg's Transition Theory - The 4S Model	
Situation [RQ1] Influences for transition into college (characteristics of event or non-event) • Work-life-school balance • Socio-economic status • Frustrations and stress	**Self [RQ2]** Characteristics used when deciding to enroll in higher education (personal traits) • To be a role model • Being a nontraditional student • Family responsibilities
Support [RQ3] Awareness of services and what student found supportive (social support) • Lack of awareness about resources • Difficulty navigating college • Peer support	**Strategies [RQ4]** What helped during this transition to academic environment (coping response) • Self-efficacy • Persistence • Misconceptions

Figure 5.1 shows application of the 4S Model to this study.

Implications

For many veterans, the transitions from military to civilian society to academia has the potential to bring personal, familial, financial, social, and administrative challenges (Boner, 2016; Deshpande, 2021). Thus, students with these challenges are seeking support services that help them with addressing these barriers. As participants shared their experience, it is evident that military service members who pursue higher education with short or no break after military discharge, have higher stress levels and are more prone to poor mental health (Fortney et al., 2016; Mahoney et al., 2021).

Student demographics such as age, marital status, number of dependents, years served in the military, enrollment status and first-generation college student status all influence the veterans' decision towards retention and degree completion goals at the institution. Some of these factors also have an impact on the students' willingness to seek assistance from campus services. Furthermore, first-generation college students generally are less academically prepared for college, have lower grades, complete fewer credit hours, and are less likely to graduate on time compared to students whose parents completed a postsecondary degree (Cataldi et al., 2018; Jenner, 2019).

The VSO might promote self-efficacy among veteran students by providing them with opportunities to connect with other veterans, peer support or mentorship, by recognizing their accomplishments, and by celebrating their academic milestones. The VSO can support veteran students' persistence by providing them with academic support, financial assistance, and personal counseling. The VSO can work to educate veteran students about the services that are available and encourage them to seek help when needed or to refer peers to the services.

Higher education institutions, especially the mid-size public four-year universities must understand the impact veteran-centric support services have on students and their

overall academic success, retention, and degree completion goals. Many veterans enrolled in universities with veteran-specific services do not utilize the services due to an insufficient knowledge of procedures or from facing the fear of judgement from other students (Cox, 2019). Participants voiced having options to find resources at a centralized location whether its in VSO or in a virtual platform.

Participants also shared that having a competent military transcript evaluator and or academic advisor with military knowledge or counselor designated to veteran and military-affiliated students is ideal and greatly beneficial. The counselors then may work directly with the faculty to make arrangements and develop plans to help the student stay on track and the veteran student does not compromise learning. For instance, a veteran student may need to miss a lecture due to a long-awaited VA medical appointment, and the student has not informed the faculty of his or her veteran status. The faculty may mark the student absence due to unawareness.

Generally, military personnel are trained to be disciplined and are used to receiving literature and procedural manuals that are developed in a step-by-step or checklist format in order to maintain and replicate orders in an exact manner. Employing similar processes and restructuring forms or streamlining processes would help veteran students understand and follow the procedures better. Developing a comprehensive new student orientation, specifically for military-connected students, would be essential in supporting this population (Stevenson & Le Buhn, 2020). Making such improvements may establish and sustain a thriving student-veteran retention program (Hope, 2020).

Spreading awareness of military culture and including veteran student related information in various trainings at the institution. For example, training such as onboarding of new faculty or student services staff, or general new student orientation. Azpeitia and Emerson (2022) emphasized that to help veterans transition to a supportive

academic environment, university counselors, academic advisors and other student services personnel should expand their knowledge to understand the psychological and physical challenges veterans might bring with them into the university or classrooms.

As for the institution, DiRamio (2017) affirmed that as more veterans enroll in higher education, institutions must reevaluate the services they offer and consider how to meet the unique needs of this nontraditional student population. According to Jones (2016), understanding military culture can help people to empathize with veterans and their families, support their mental health, and appreciate their service. Recent studies (Boccieri et al., 2019; Dean, 2020; McDougall, 2019; Schroeder & Perez, 2022; Veloso et al., 2021) show that skills such as compassion, empathy, understanding of military terms and strategies, knowledge of VA rules and guidelines, networking, and mentoring are essential for providing adequate support to military-affiliated students in higher education institutions. Providing this support can have a positive impact on the overall academic success, retention, and degree completion of veteran students.

Recommendations for Future Research

The aim of this descriptive phenomenological study was to examine the perceived challenges through the lived experiences encountered by the veteran students utilizing post-9/11 GI Bill and the impact of veteran-centric support services has on students' academic success, retention, and degree completion goals at a public four-year university. In an effort to further expand strategies to overcome barriers to higher degree attainment among veterans at public universities the research proposes the following future studies.

Conduct a longitudinal study exploring the retention and degree completion of veteran students at larger Texas universities located near military bases to improve disparity with support provided by the institutions contributing to veterans' academic success. Quantitative data to be collected from university records to track the retention

and degree completion rates of veteran students. Survey questionnaires can provide responses for a better statistical dataset.

Conduct a mixed-methods study including community colleges and public universities with high veteran enrollment. The perceptions of veteran students may differ depending on the type of institution and services offered to support their academic success. By comparing quantitative and qualitative data, researchers can gain a more comprehensive understanding of the perceptions of veteran students at different types of institutions. This information can be used to develop more effective programs and services to support their academic success.

Conducting a qualitative study to explore perceptions of university veteran office staff, faculty, and administrators regarding veteran students would provide a thorough datasets and can help gain deeper understanding of the factors that contribute to veteran students' academic success. It would also be helpful in developing more effective programs and services to support the students. The study would help foster a sense of belonging among veteran students at the university.

Research Limitations

First, conducting this study after a major world pandemic. Second, small sample size due to limited number of available veteran students utilizing post-9/11 GI Bill. Third, the impact of veteran-centric support services on each participant varied since not all participants utilized the veteran support office on campus. Fourth, Potential bias in responses from personal individual experiences navigating through higher education transition could vary. Differences between military experience, the branch served in and or the rank held by the veteran students and the length of time after military separation and before enrolling in the university. Fifth, Limited availability of data from the university's veteran support office. After several meetings with the director of VSO, no

archive data was accessible due to unavailability of the director. Limited availability of data from scholarly works on veteran studies for public four-year university.

Conclusion

This study examined the perceptions of veteran students at a mid-sized, suburban, four-year public university located in southeast Texas regarding the challenges they face, and the impact veteran-centric support services have on their academic success, retention, and degree completion goals. A descriptive phenomenological approach was used for this study. This qualitative research focused on the study of individual's lived experiences. Interviews were conducted, audio recorded, transcribed, and analyzed by the researcher. The research questions focused on perceived challenges and influence of veteran-centric support services on academic success, retention, and degree completion. The analysis of the interviews revealed mixed perceptions regarding challenges encountered and mixed reactions towards the influence of veteran-centric support services on veteran students' academic success, retention, and degree completion goals.

REFERENCES

Ahern, A., Foster, M., & Head, D. (2015). Salt Lake Community College veterans

services: A model of serving veterans in higher education. *New Directions for*

Community Colleges, *2015*(172), 77–86. https://doi.org/10.1002/cc.20165

Absher, J. (2023). *Post-9/11 GI Bill Overview*. https://www.military.com/education/gi-

bill/new-post-911-gi-bill-overview.html

Anderson, M., Goodman, J., Schlossberg, N. (2022). *Counseling adults in transition:*

Linking Schlossberg's theory with practice in a diverse world. (5th ed). Springer

Publishing Company. DOI: 10.1891/9780826135476

Avallone, K., Smith, E., Ma, S., Gargan, S., Porter, K., Authier, C., Martis, B., Liberzon,

I., & Rauch, S. (2019). PTSD as a mediator in the relationship between post-

concussive symptoms and pain among OEF/OIF/OND veterans. *Military*

Medicine, 184(1-2), 118–123. https://doi.org/10.1093/milmed/usy225

Azpeitia, E., & Emerson, S. (2022). Assessing veteran services and success in higher

education: Cal Poly Pomona's Veterans Resource Center Case Study. *Journal of*

Veterans Studies, 8(1), 29–40. https://doi.org/10.21061/jvs.v8i1.238

Bailey, A., Drury, M., & Grandy, H. (2019). Student veterans' academic performance

before and after the post-9/11 GI Bill. *Armed Forces & Society, 45*(1), 101–121.

https://doi.org/10.1177/0095327X17737283

Bandura, A., Adams, N., & Beyer, J. (1977). Cognitive processes mediating behavioral

change. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 35(3), 125–139.

https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.35.3.125

Barr, A. (2019). Fighting for education: Financial aid and degree attainment. *Journal of*

Labor Economics, 37(2), 509–544. https://doi.org/10.1086/700191

Belanger, B., Steele, A., & Philhower, K. (2021). Tailoring higher education options for smaller institutions to meet veterans' needs: Enhancing inclusion in higher education: Practical solutions by veterans for veterans. *Journal of Veterans Studies, 7*(1), 138–147. http://doi.org/10.21061/jvs.v7i1.229

Birt, L., Scott, S., Cavers, D., Campbell, C., & Walter, F. (2016). Member checking: A tool to ensure trustworthiness or merely a nod to validation?. *Qualitative Health Research, 26*(13), 1802–1811. https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732316654870

Blackburn, D. (2016). Transition from military to civilian life: Examining the final step in a military career. *Canadian Military Journal, 16*(4), 53–61.

Blackwell-Starnes, K. (2018). At ease: Developing veterans' sense of belonging in the college classroom. *Journal of Veterans Studies*, *3*(1), 18–36.

Boccieri, B., Gazdik, K., Kerns, L., Williams, P., Landgraff, N., & Ge, W. (2019). Severe pain in veteran students. *Journal of Allied Health*, *48*(3), 172–180.

Borsari, B., Yurasek, A., Miller, M., Murphy, J., McDevitt-Murphy, M., Martens, M., Darcy, M., & Carey, K. (2017). Student service members/veterans on campus: Challenges for reintegration. *The American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, *87*(2), 166–175. https://doi.org/10.1037/ort0000199

Braun, V. & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 3*, 77–101.

Bullman, T., & Schneiderman, A. (2021). Risk of suicide among U.S. veterans who deployed as part of Operation Enduring Freedom, Operation Iraqi Freedom, and Operation New Dawn. *Injury Epidemiology, 8*(1), 40. https://doi.org/10.1186/s40621-021-00332-y

Buzzetta, M., Lenz, J., Hayden, S., & Osborn, D. (2020). Student veterans: Meaning of life, negative career thoughts, and depression. *The Career Development Quarterly, 68*(1), 361–373. https://doi.org/10.1002/cdq.12242

Caamal, N. (2019). Afghanistan and Iraq war veterans' understanding of followership and following in the civilian workplace. *Journal of Veterans Studies, 4*(2), 159–179. http://doi.org/10.21061/jvs.v4i2.104

Campbell, R., & Riggs, S. (2015). The role of psychological symptomatology and social support in the academic adjustment of previously deployed student veterans. *Journal of American College Health, 63*(7), 473–481. https://doi.org/10.1080/07448481.2015.1040408

Cataldi, E., Bennett, C., & Chen, X. (2018). Stats in brief: First-generation students: College access, persistence and post bachelor's outcomes. National Center for Education Statistics. https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2018/2018421.pdf

Chan, H. (2018). Academic success for student veterans enrolled in two-year colleges. *Journal of The First-Year Experience & Students in Transition, 30*(1), 49–69.

Cox, C. (2019). Military students' strengths and challenges based on their military experiences: An integrative review. *Journal of Nursing Education*, *58*(7), 392–400. https://doi.org/10.3928/01484834-20190614-03

Creswell, J. (2014). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches, 4*[th] *ed.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.

Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, J. D. (2023). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches, 6*[th] *ed.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.

Crisp, G., Baker, V., Griffin, K., Lunsford, L., & Pifer, M. (2017). Mentoring undergraduate students. *ASHE Higher Education Report, 43*(1), 7–103. https://doi.org/10.1002/aehe.20117

Darlington, Y., & Scott, D. (2002). Qualitative research in practice: Stories from the field. Routledge, London. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003117025

Dean, T., Sorgen, C., & Zinskie, C. (2020). Social integration of student veterans: The influence of interactions with faculty on peer-group interactions. *Journal of Veterans Studies, 6*(2), 20–29. http://doi.org/10.21061/jvs.v6i2.188

Deshpande, A. (2021). From combat to classroom: An analysis of perceptions, challenges, and support practices for the undergraduate online military student population. *Journal of Higher Education Theory and Practice, 21*(4), 259–269. https://doi.org/10.33423/jhetp.v21i4.4223

Dillard, R., & Yu, H. (2016). Best practices in student veteran education: Making a "veteran-friendly" institution. *The Journal of Continuing Higher Education*, *64*(3), 181–186. https://doi.org/10.1080/07377363.2016.1229106

DiRamio, D. (Ed.). (2017). *What's next for student veterans? Moving from transition to academic success*. Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina, National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience & Students in transition.

Dortch, C. (2021). Veterans' educational assistance programs and benefits: A Primer. CRS Report R42785, version 15. updated. In *Congressional Research Service*. Congressional Research Service. https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED617477

Drebing, C., Reilly, E., Henze, K., Kelly, M., Russo, A., Smolinsky, J., Gorman, J., & Penk, W. (2018). Using peer support groups to enhance community integration of veterans in transition. *Psychological Services, 15*(2), 135–145. https://doi-org.uhcl.idm.oclc.org/10.1037/ser0000178

Duffin, E. (2022). *U.S. veterans 2021, by state*. Statista Inc. https://www.statista.com/statistics/250329/number-of-us-veterans-by-state/

Dyar, K. (2019). Veterans as students in higher education: A scoping review. *Nursing Education Perspectives*, *40*(6), 333–337.

Edelman, J. (2018). *2018 Veterans well-being survey report.* Edelman: New York. https://www.edelman.com/post/2018-edelman-veterans-well-being-survey

Elliott, M., Gonzalez, C., & Larsen, B. (2011). U.S. military veterans transition to college: Combat, PTSD, and alienation on campus. *Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice, 48*(3), 279–296. https://doi.org/10.2202/1949-6605.6293

Elliott, B., Chargualaf, K., & Patterson, B. (2019). Committing to my mission: Faculty experiences with student veterans in baccalaureate nursing education. *Nursing Forum, 54*(4), 619–628. https://doi.org/10.1111/nuf.12386

Elnitsky, C., Fisher, M., & Blevins, C. (2017). Military service member and veteran reintegration: A conceptual analysis, unified definition, and key domains. *Frontiers in Psychology, 8*(369*)*. 1–14. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2017.00369

Evans, J., Pellegrino, L., & Hoggan, C. (2015). Supporting veterans at the community college: A review of the literature. *The Community College Enterprise, 21*(1), 47–65.

Falkey, M. (2016). An emerging population: Student veterans in higher education in the 21st century. *Journal of Academic Administration in Higher Education, 12*(1), 27–39. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1139143.pdf

Findley, S., & Metz, A. (2022). Contributing factors to academic success among student veterans. *Journal of College Student Development, 19*(1).

Flink, P. (2017). Invisible disabilities, stigma, and student veterans: Contextualizing the transition to higher education. *Journal of Veterans Studies, 2*(2), 110–120. http://doi.org/10.21061/jvs.v2i2.20

Fortney, J., Curran, G., Hunt, J., Cheney, A., Lu, L., Valenstein, M., & Eisenberg, D. (2016). Prevalence of probable mental disorders and help-seeking behaviors among veteran and non-veteran community college students. *General Hospital Psychiatry*, *38*(1), 99–104. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.genhosppsych.2015.09.007

Fossey, E., Harvey, C., McDermott, F., & Davidson, L. (2002). Understanding and evaluating qualitative research. *Australian & New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry, 36*(6), 717–732. doi:10.1046/j.1440-1614.2002.01100.x

Franco, Z., Hooyer, K., Ruffalo, L., & Frey-Ho Fung, R. (2021). Veterans health and well-being–collaborative research approaches: Toward veteran community engagement. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, *61*(3), 287–312. https://doi.org/10.1177/0022167820919268

Ganz, A., Yamaguchi, C., Parekh, B., Koritzky, G., & Berger, S. (2021). Military culture and its impact on mental health and stigma. *Journal of Community Engagement and Scholarship, 13*(4). 116–128.

Geiger, R., Sorber, N., & Anderson, C. (Eds.) (2017). American higher education in the postwar era, 1945–1970. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315104317

Ghosh, A., Kessler, M., Heyrman, K., Opelt, B., Carbonelli, M., & Fouad, N. (2019). Student veteran career transition readiness, career adaptability, and academic and life satisfaction. *The Career Development Quarterly, 67*(4), 365–371. https://doi.org/10.1002/cdq.12205

Gonzalez, J., & Simpson, J. (2021). The workplace integration of veterans: Applying diversity and fit perspectives. *Human Resources Management Review, 31*(2). 1–19. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.hrmr.2020.100775

Goodman, J., Schlossberg, N., & Anderson, J. (2006). *Counseling adults in transition: Linking practice with theory (3rd ed.)*. New York: Springer.

Gordon, H., Schneiter, H., & Bryant, R. (2016a). Academic faculty members' perceptions of student-veterans' transition. *Educational Research: Theory & Practice, 28*(2), 1–8. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1252585.pdf

Gordon, H., Schneiter, H., Bryant, R., Winn, V., Burke, V., & Johnson, T. (2016b). Staff members' perceptions of student veterans' transition at a public two-year and four-year institution. *Educational Research: Theory & Practice, 28*(1), 1–14.

Gregg, B., Howell, D., & Shordike, A. (2016). Experiences of veterans transitioning to postsecondary education. *The American Journal of Occupational Therapy, 70*(6), 1–8.

Griffin, K., & Gilbert, C. (2015). Better transitions for troops: An application of Schlossberg's transition framework to analyses of barriers and institution support structures for student veterans. *The Journal of Higher Education, 86*(1), 71–97.

Grimell, J. (2017). Making dialogue with an existential voice in transition from military to civilian life. *Theory & Psychology, 27*(6), 832–850. https://doi.org/10.1177/0959354317739164

Gross, N. (2019). Your GI Bill benefits: Everything you need to know. *Education and Transition.* https://militarytimes.com/education-transition/2019/07/20/gi-bill-benefits-guide/

Hanson, M. (2022a). *College enrollment & student demographics statistics*. Education data initiative. https://educationdata.org/college-enrollment-statistics

Hanson, M. (2022b). *College dropout rates*. Education data initiative. https://educationdata.org/college-dropout-rates

Heineman, J. (2017). From boots to suits: Women veterans transitioning to community college students. *New Directions for Community Colleges, 2017*(179), 77–88. https://doi.org/10.1002/cc.20264

Hill, C., Kurzweil, M., Pisacreta, E., & Schwartz, E. (2019). *Enrolling more veterans at high-graduation-rate colleges and universities*. Ithaka S+R. https://doi.org/10.18665/sr.310816

Hinton, C. (2020). I just don't like to have my car marked: Nuancing identity attachments and belonging in student veterans. *Journal of Veterans Studies*, *6*(3), 84–100. https://doi.org/10.21061/jvs.v6i3.211

Hitt, S., Sternberg, M., Wadsworth, S., Vaughan, J., Carlson, R., Densie, E., & Mohrbacher, M. (2015). The higher education landscape for US student service members and veterans in Indiana. *Higher Education, 70*(3), 535–550. doi:10.1007/s10734-014-9854-6

Holian, L., & Adam, T. (2020). *Veterans' educational benefits: A profile of military students who received federal veterans' education benefits in 2015–16.* U.S. Department of Education, Statistics in Brief.

Hope, J., (2020). Establish and sustain a thriving student-veteran retention program. *The Successful Registrar: Wiley Periodicals, 20*(1), 8–9. https://doi.org/10.1002/tsr.30692

Jenner, B. (2017). Student veterans and the transition to higher education: Integrating existing literatures. *Journal of Veteran Studies, 2*(2), 26–44. http://doi.org/10.21061/jvs.v2i2.14

Jenner, B. (2019). Student veterans in transition: The impact of peer community. *Journal of The First- Year Experience & Students in Transition, 31*(1). 69–83.

Jones, K. (2016). Understanding transition experiences of combat veterans attending community college. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice, 41*(2), 107–123. https://doi.org/10.1080/10668926.2016.1163298

Kastle, S., Fox, B., McRay, J., & Moon, H. (2021). Supporting the student service member and veteran population as learners: An exploratory study of academic motivation and best practices in student services at a state comprehensive university. *Teacher-Scholar: The Journal of the State Comprehensive University, 10*(2). https://scholars.fhsu.edu/ts/vol10/iss2/2

Kato, L., Jinkerson, J., Holland, S., & Soper, H. (2016). From combat zones to the classroom: transitional adjustment in OEF/OIF student veterans. *The Qualitative Report, 21*(11), 2131–2147. https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2016.2420

Kees. M., Risk, B.,Meadowbrooke, C., Nellett, T., & Spinner, J. (2017). Peer Advisors for Veteran Education (PAVE): Implementing a sustainable peer support program for student veterans on college campuses. *Metropolitan Universities, 28*(3), Article 3. http://doi.org/10.18060/21541

Khan, S. & Aldhafri, S. (2021). The use of maximum variation sampling in qualitative study: A critical review. *Journal of Nursing Education and Practice, 11*(1), 20–26.

Kimbark, K., Peters, M., & Richardson, T. (2017). Effectiveness of the student success course on persistence, retention, academic achievement, and engagement. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice, 41*(2), 124–138. https://doi.org/10.1080/10668926.2016.1166352

Kirchner, M. & Pepper, S. (2020). Student veteran engagement in online education. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing education, 2020*(166), 95–109. https://doi.org/10.1002/ace.20386

Klaw, E., Young, B., Li, K., & O'Rourke, P. (2021). Best practices in serving college student veterans: A scoping review. *Journal of Military, Veteran and Family Health, 7*(1), 76–86. https://doi.org/10.3138/jmvfh-2020-0024

Kofoed, M. (2022). *Where have all the GI Bill dollars gone? Veteran usage and expenditure of the Post-9/11 GI Bill*. The Brookings Institution. https://www.brookings.edu/research/where-have-all-the-gi-bill-dollars-gone/

Kowalski, K. (2016). What shall we do with our boys? an impact of the GI Bill on the US economy. *Annales. Ethics in Economic Life, 19*(4), 167–180. https://doi.org/10.18778/1899-2226.19.4.12

Lopez, S., Schwartz, E., & Pisacreta, E. (2020). *Making the case for student veterans: Building support for student veteran enrollment.* American talent Initiative. https://americantalentinitiative.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/ATI_Veterans-Brief_r04-01.pdf

Maguire, M. & Delahunt, B. (2017). Doing a thematic analysis: A practical, step-by-step guide for learning and teaching scholars. *All Ireland Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education (AISHE-J), 9*(3), 33501–33514.

Mahoney, M., Rings, J., Softas-Nall, B., Alverio, T., & Hall, D. (2021). Homecoming and college transition narratives of student military veterans. *Journal of College Student Psychotherapy,* 1–23. https://doi.org/10.1080/87568225.2021.1926034

Marcus, J. (2017). At some colleges that recruit veterans and their GI Bill money, none graduate. *The Hechinger Report.* https://hechingerreport.org/colleges-recruit-veterans-gi-bill-money-none-graduate/

Massa, T., & Gogia, L. (2017). Exploring veteran success through state-level administrative data sets. *New Directions for Institutional Research, 2016*(171), 87–95. https://doi.org/10.1002/ir.20196

McDougall, J. (2019). Empathetic leadership: Understanding the human domain. *Military Review: The Professional Journal of the U.S. Army, 2019*(6), 28–34.

https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Journals/Military-Review/English-Edition-Archives/November-December-2019/

Mentzer, B., Black, E., & Spohn, R. (2015). An analysis of supports for persistence for the military student population. *Online Learning*, *19*(1), 31–47. https://doi.org/10.24059/olj.v19i1.500

Military Leadership Diversity Commission [MLDC]. (2011). *Department of Defense core values: Decision paper #6.* Diversity Leadership. https://diversity.defense.gov/Portals/51/Documents/Resources/Commission/docs/Issue%20Papers/Paper%2006%20-%20DOD%20Core%20Values.pdf

Mitchell, K. (2016). Understanding academic reasonable accommodations for post-9/11 veterans with psychiatric diagnoses, part 1: The foundation. *Federal Practitioner, 33*(4), 33–39.

Mitchell, M., Leachman, M., & Saenz, M. (2019). *State higher education funding cuts have pushed costs to students, worsened inequality.* Center on Budget and Policy Priorities Report. https://www.cbpp.org/research/state-budget-and-tax/state-higher-education-funding-cuts-have-pushed-costs-to-students

Morales, E., Narayan, A., & Atienza, W. (2019). Vulnerable vets? How gatekeeping and stereotypes shape access to student-veterans in the qualitative interview process. *The Qualitative Report, 24*(4), 717–730. https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2019.3659

Morissette, S., Ryan-Gonzalez, C., Yufik, T., DeBeer, B., Kimbrel, N., Sorrells, A., Holleran-Steiker, L., Penk, W., Gulliver, S., & Meyer, E. (2021). The effects of posttraumatic stress disorder symptoms on educational functioning in student veterans. *Psychological Services, 18*(1), 124–133. https://doi.org/10.1037/ser0000356

Morris, P., Albanesi, H., & Cassidy, S. (2019). Student-veterans' perceptions of barriers, support, and environment at a high-density veteran enrollment campus. *Journal of Veterans Studies, 4*(2), 180–202. http://doi.org/10.21061/jvs.v4i2.102

National Alliance on Mental Illness [NAMI]. (2021). Mental health by the numbers. https://www.nami.org/mhstats

National Center for Education Statistics [NCES]. (2014). *Services and support programs for military service members and veterans, 2012–2013*. Postsecondary Education Quick Information System. Washington, D.C.: United States Department of Education. http://nces.ed.gov/

National Center for Education Statistics [NCES]. (2022). IPEDS Fall enrollment component. Washington, D.C.: United States Department of Education. https://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/search/ViewTable?tableId=33457

National Hospice and Palliative Care Organization [NHPCO]. (2020). *Building a veteran-centric culture.* https://www.wehonorveterans.org/resource-library/building-a-veteran-centric-culture/

Neubauer, B., Witkop, C., & Varpio, L. (2019). How phenomenology can help us learn from the experiences of others. *Perspectives on Medical Education, 8(2)*, 90–97.

Nowell, L., Norris, J., White, D., & Moules, N. (2017). Thematic analysis: Striving to meet the trustworthiness criteria. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods, 16*(1), 1–13. https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406917733847

O'Herrin, E. (2011). Enhancing veteran success in higher education. *Peer Review: Emerging Trends and Key Debates in Undergraduate Education, 13*(1), 15–18.

Osborne, N. (2017). Student veterans' heroic journey in higher education. *E-Source for College Transitions, 15*(1), 1–4.

Oster, C., Morello, A., Venning, A., Redpath, S., & Lawn, S. (2017). The health and

    wellbeing needs of veterans: A rapid review. *BMC Psychiatry, 17*(414), 1–14.

    https://doi.org/10.1186/s12888-017-1547-0

Palinkas, L., Horwitz, S., Green, C., Wisdom, J., Duan, N., & Hoagwood, K. (2015).

    Purposeful sampling for qualitative data collection and analysis in mixed method

    implementation research. *Administration and Policy in Mental Health*, *42*(5), 533.

    https://doi.org/10.1007/s10488-013-0528-y

Parker, K., Igielnik, R., Barroso, A., & Cilluffo, A. (2019). *The American veteran*

    experience and the post-9/11 generation. Pew Research Center.

    https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2019/09/10/the-american-veteran-

    experience-and-the-post-9-11-generation/

Patton, M. (2002). *Qualitative research & evaluation methods (3rd ed.).* Thousand Oaks,

    CA, Sage Publications.

Richman, M. (2017). *Navigating the college experience: Veterans face challenges in*

    higher education not seen by other students. VA Research Communications.

    https://www.research.va.gov/currents/1017-Veterans-face-challenges-in-higher-

    education.cfm

Romero, D., Riggs, S., & Ruggero, C. (2015). Coping, family social support, and

    psychological symptoms among student veterans. *Journal of Counseling*

    Psychology, 62(2), 242–252. https://doi.org/10.1037/cou0000061

Rubin, H., & Rubin, I. (2012). *Qualitative Interviewing: The Art of Hearing Data (3rd*

    ed.) Los Angeles, CA: Sage publications.

Rumann, C., Rivera, M., & Hernandez, I. (2011). Student veterans and community

    colleges. *New Directions for Community Colleges, 2011*(155), 51–58.

Ryan, S., Carlstrom, A., Hughey, K., & Harris, B. (2011). From boots to books: Applying Schlossberg's model to transitioning American veterans. *NACADA Journal, 31*(1), 55–63.

Sansone, V., & Tucker Segura, J. (2020). Exploring factors contributing to college success among student veteran transfers at a four-year university. *The Review of Higher Education, 42*(3), 888–916. John Hopkins University Press. https://doi.org/10.1353/rhe.2020.0011

Schaeffer, K. (2021). *The changing face of America's veteran population*. Pew Research Center. https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/04/05/the-changing-face-of-americas-veteran-population/

Schultz, J. (2018). *State help for returning veterans*. National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL). https://www.ncsl.org/research/military-and-veterans-affairs/state-help-and-benefits-for-returning-veterans.aspx

Schlossberg, N. (1981). A model analyzing human adaptation to transition. *Counseling Psychologist, 9*(2), 2–18. doi:10.1177/001100008100900202

Schlossberg, N. (1984). *Counseling adults in transition*. New York: Springer.

Schlossberg, N., Waters, E., & Goodman, J. (1995). *Counseling adults in transition: Linking practice with theory.* New York, NY: Springer.

Schroeder, M., & Perez, R. (2022). Exploring the salience of veteran identity for US college students. *Journal of Veteran Studies, 8*(1), 54–66. http://doi.org/10.21061/jvs.v8i1.289

Semer, C., & Harmening, D. (2015). Exploring significant factors that impact the academic success of student veterans in higher education. *Journal of Higher Education Theory and Practice, 15*(7), 31–43.

Sikes, D., Duran, M., & Armstrong, M. (2020). Shared lessons from serving military-connected students. *College Student Affairs Journal, 38*(2), 186–197. https://doi.org/10.1353/csj.2020.0013

Sitzes, J., Akroyd, D., & Thompson, T. (2021). Program services for veteran students in North Carolina community colleges: perceptions of administrators and students. *The Community College Enterprise, 26*(2), 33–57.

Sohn, B., Thomas, S., Greenberg, K., & Pollio, H. (2017). Hearing the voices of students and teachers: A phenomenological approach to education research. *Qualitative Research in Education, 6*(2), 121–148. https://doi.org/10.17583/qre.2017.2374

Sportsman, M., & Thomas, L. (2015). Coming home to school: Challenges and strategies for effective teaching with military veterans. *Insight: A Journal of Scholarly Teaching, 2015(10),* 43–55. https://doi.org/10.46504/10201504sp

Steele, B. (2015). Postsecondary preparatory programs for veterans: A federal reporting chasm. *Planning for Higher Education Journal, 34*(2), 63–70.

Steele, J., Salcedo, N., & Coley, J. (2010). Service members in school: Military veterans' experiences using the post-9/11 GI Bill and pursuing postsecondary education. *RAND corporation*. https://doi.org/10.7249/MG1083

Steele, J., Buryk, P., & McGovern, G. (2018). Student veterans' outcomes by higher education sector: Evidence from three cohorts of the baccalaureate and beyond. *Research in Higher Education, 59*(7), 866–896. https://doi-org.uhcl.idm.oclc.org/10.1007/s11162-017-9491-x

Stevenson, C., & Le Buhn, M. (2020). All in: Developing a community college veterans resource center with student veterans. *The Journal of Continuing Higher Education, 68*(1), 15–25. https://doi.org/10.1080/07377363.2019.1680267

Stone, S. (2017). Internal voices, external constraints: Exploring the impact of military

    service on student development. *Journal of College Student Development, 58*(3),

    365–384. https://doi.org/10.1353/csd.2017.0028

Stull, F., Herd, A., & Kirchner, M. (2020). Learning challenges faced by transitioning

    military service members: Voices of military transition counselors. *Journal of*

    Military Learning, 4(1), 36–56.

Suri, J. (2018). A systemic review of purposeful sampling in qualitative research. *Journal*

    of Nursing Scholarship, 50(4). 400–407.

Taylor, S., Miller, B., Tallapragada, M., & Vogel, M. (2020). Veterans' transition out of

    the military and knowledge of mental health disorders. *Journal of Veterans*

    Studies, 6(1), 85–95. http://doi.org/10.21061/jvs.v6i1.131

Teixeira, S. (2021). Breaking barriers to success: Aligning program offerings to better

    serve student veterans. *Journal of Student Affair. 17*(1), 49–63.

Texas Workforce Investment Council [TWIC]. (2021). *Veterans in Texas: A*

    demographic study 2021 update. Office of the Governor, Austin, TX.

    https://gov.texas.gov/uploads/files/organization/twic/Veterans-Summary-2021.pdf

Tinto, V. (1994). *Leaving College: Rethinking the Causes and Cues of Student Attrition*.

    Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Tinto, V. (1997). Classrooms as communities: Exploring the educational character of

    student persistence. *Journal of Higher Education, 68*, 599–623.

Tinto, V. (2012). *Completing College: Rethinking Institutional Action.* Chicago:

    University of Chicago Press.

Tinto, V. (2017). Reflection on student persistence. *Student Success, 8*(2), 1–8.

    https://doi.org/10.5204/ssj.v8i2.376

Umucu, E., Wu, J., Sanchez, J., Brooks, J., Chiu, C., Tu, W., & Chan, F. (2020). Psychometric validation of the PERMA-profiler as a well-being measure for student veterans. *Journal of American College Health, 68*(3), 271–277. https://doi.org/10.1080/07448481.2018.1546182

U.S. News Best Colleges. (2023). https://www.usnews.com/best-colleges

U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics [BLS]. (2022). *Education pays, 2021.* Career outlook. https://www.bls.gov/careeroutlook/2022/data-on-display/education-pays.htm

U.S. Department of Defense [DoD]. (2022). Education level of active-duty Armed Forces personnel 2021. Statista. https://www.statista.com/statistics/232726/education-levels-of-active-duty-us-defense-force-personnel/

U.S. Department of Education [Ed]. (2013). *8 keys to veterans' success sites*. Military families and veterans. https://www.ed.gov/category/keyword/military-families-and-veterans

U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs [VA]. (2019). Determining veteran status. https://www.va.gov/OSDBU/docs/Determining-Veteran-Status.pdf

U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs [VA]. (2020). Veteran Population Projection Model. https://www.va.gov/vetdata/docs/Demographics/New_Vetpop_Model/VetPop2020_A_Brief_Description.pdf

U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs [VA]. (2022a). *Veterans health issues related to service history.* https://www.va.gov/health-care/health-needs-conditions/health-issues-related-to-service-era/

U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs [VA]. (2022b). *Forever GI Bill - Harry W. Colmery Veterans Educational Assistance Act.* Education and Training. https://benefits.va.gov/gibill/forevergibill.asp

U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs [VA]. (2022c). GI Bill comparison tool [report].

     Education and Training. https://www.va.gov/education/gi-bill-comparison-tool/

U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs [VA]. (2022d). Building your future with GI Bill

     series, part two: A guide to understanding your benefits.

     https://benefits.va.gov/gibill/docs/gibguideseries/chooseyoureducationbenefits.pdf

U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs [VA]. (2023). *New VA mission statement recognizes*

     sacred commitment to all Veterans, their families, caregivers and survivors. Press

     release March 16. https://www.va.gov/opa/pressrel/pressrelease.cfm?id=5867

U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs [VA]. (2023a). *Learn about student veterans*.

     https://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/student-veteran/learn-about-student-

     veterans.asp

U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs [VA]. (2023b). PTSD: National center for PTSD.

     https://www.ptsd.va.gov/

U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs [VA]. (2023c). Your VA transition assistance

     program (TAP). https://www.benefits.va.gov/transition/tap.asp

U.S. Office of the Press Secretary. (2021a). *Factsheet: The American jobs plan supports*

     veterans, 04/15/2021. https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-

     releases/2021/04/15/fact-sheet-the-american-jobs-plan-supports-veterans/

U.S. Office of the Press Secretary. (2021b). *Remarks by President Biden on the*

     Drawdown of U.S. Forces in Afghanistan, 07/08/2021. Speeches and remarks.

     https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speechesremarks/2021/07/08/

     remarks-by-president-biden-on-the-drawdown-of-u-s-forces-in-afghanistan/

Veloso, E., Yehl, A., Pann, J., Connolly, J., Grabner, S., Zoller, L., Staley, N., &

     Goldhagen, R. (2021). Returning veterans' experiences of a holistic therapeutic

program. *The Qualitative Report, 26*(8), 2390–2404.

    https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2021.4697

Vogt, D., Perkins, D., Copeland, L., Finley, E., Jamieson, C., Booth, B., Lederer, S., &

    Gilman1, C. (2018). The veterans metrics initiative study of U.S. veterans'

    experiences during their transition from military service. *BMJ Open,*

    doi:10.1136/bmjopen-2017-020734

Wenger, J., Miller, T., Baird, M., Buryk, P., Daugherty, L., Graf, M., Hollands, S.,

    Jahedi, S., & Yeung, D. (2017). *Are current military education benefits efficient*

    and effective for the services? RAND Corporation.

    https://doi.org/10.7249/RR1766

Williams-Klotz, D., & Gansemer-Topf, A. (2018) Examining factors related to academic

    success of military-connected students at community colleges. *Community*

    College Journal of Research and Practice, 42(6), 422–438.

    https://doi.org/10.1080/10668926.2017.1339647

Yomtov, D., Plunkett, S., Efrat, R., & Marin, A. (2017). Can peer mentors improve first-

    year experiences of university students?. *Journal of College Student Retention:*

    Research, Theory & Practice, 19(1). 25–44. DOI: 10.1177/1521025115611398

York, T., Gibson, C., & Rankin, S. (2015). Defining and measuring academic success.

    Practical Assessment, Research, and Evaluation, 20(1).

    https://doi.org/10.7275/hz5x-tx03

Zhang, L. (2018). Veterans going to college: Evaluating the impact of the post-9/11 GI

    bill on college enrollment. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis, 40*(1),

    82–102. https://doi.org/10.3102/0162373717724002

INFORMED CONSENT

You are being asked to participate in the research project described below. Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary and you may refuse to participate, or you may decide to stop your participation at any time. Should you refuse to participate in the study, or should you withdraw your consent and stop participation in the study, your decision will involve no penalty or loss of benefits to which you may otherwise be entitled. You are being asked to read the information below carefully and ask questions about anything you don't understand before deciding whether or not to participate.

Title: Examining the Impact of Veteran-Centric Support on Academic Success, Retention, and Degree Completion of Students Utilizing Post-9/11 GI Bill at A Public University

Student Investigator(s):   Dipal Nish Parekh

Faculty Sponsor: Dr. Paul Wagner

Purpose of the Study: The purpose of this study is to examine the perceptions of veteran students at a mid-sized, suburban, four-year public university located in southeast Texas regarding the challenges they face, and the impact veteran-centric support services have on their academic success, retention, and degree completion.

Procedures: The procedures used for the interview process will be for the participant to meet with the researcher in a virtual private Zoom room or Microsoft Teams. The researcher will take notes during the interview and record the conversation for analysis. A few questions will be asked with possible follow up questions for clarification.

Expected Duration: The total anticipated time commitment will be approximately 60 minutes per participant.

Risks of Participation: There are no anticipated risks associated with participation in this project.

Benefits to the Subject: There is no direct benefit received from your participation in this study, but your participation will help the investigator(s) to better understand the perceptions of veteran students regarding the challenges they face, and impact of the veteran-centric support services may have on veterans' academic success, retention, and degree completion at the university.

Confidentiality of Records: Every effort will be made to maintain the confidentiality of your study records. The data collected from the study will be used for educational and

publication purposes, however, you will not be identified by name. For federal audit purposes, the participant's documentation for this research project will be maintained and safeguarded by the Principal Investigator or Faculty Sponsor for a minimum of three years after completion of the study. After that time, the participant's documentation may be destroyed.

Compensation: There is no financial compensation to be offered for participation in the study.

Investigator's Right to Withdraw Participant: The investigator has the right to withdraw you from this study at any time.

Contact Information for Questions or Problems: If you have additional questions during the course of this study about the research or any related problem, you may contact the Student Researcher, Dipal Nish Parekh by telephone at ████████ or by email at ████████████████. The Faculty Sponsor, Dr. Paul Wagner, may be contacted by telephone at ████████ or email at ████████████.

Identifiable Private Information *(if applicable):* Identifiers might be removed from identifiable private information or identifiable biospecimens and that, after such removal, the information or biospecimens could be used for future research studies or distributed to another investigator for future research studies without additional informed consent from the subject or the legally authorized representative, if this might be a possibility

OR

Information or biospecimens collected as part of the research, even if identifiers are removed, will not be used or distributed for future research studies.

Signatures: Your signature below acknowledges your voluntary participation in this research project. Such participation does not release the investigator(s), institution(s), sponsor(s) or granting agency(ies) from their professional and ethical responsibility to you. By signing the form, you are not waiving any of your legal rights.

The purpose of this study, procedures to be followed, and explanation of risks or benefits have been explained to you. You have been allowed to ask questions and your questions have been answered to your satisfaction. You have been told who to contact if you have additional questions. You have read this consent form and voluntarily agree to participate as a subject in this study. You are free to withdraw your consent at any time by contacting the Principle Investigator or Student Researcher/Faculty Sponsor. You will be given a copy of the consent form you have signed.

Subject's printed name: Click or tap here to enter text.

Signature of Subject: Click or tap here to enter text.

Date: Click or tap here to enter text.

Using language that is understandable and appropriate, I have discussed this project and the items listed above with the subject.

Printed name and title: Dipal N. Parekh, Student Researcher

Signature of Person Obtaining Consent: Click or tap here to enter text.

Date: Click or tap here to enter text.

THE UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON-CLEAR LAKE (UHCL) COMMITTEE FOR PROTECTION OF HUMAN SUBJECTS HAS REVIEWED AND APPROVED THIS PROJECT. ANY QUESTIONS REGARDING YOUR RIGHTS AS A RESEARCH SUBJECT MAY BE ADDRESSED TO THE UHCL COMMITTEE FOR THE PROTECTION OF HUMAN SUBJECTS (281.283.3015). ALL RESEARCH PROJECTS THAT ARE CARRIED OUT BY INVESTIGATORS AT UHCL ARE GOVERNED BY REQUIREMENTS OF THE UNIVERSITY AND THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT.

(FEDERALWIDE ASSURANCE #FWA00004068)

APPENDIX B:

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL AND QUESTIONS

Participants will be provided with the interview protocol and questions prior to participating in the interviews. Consent forms will be completed before the interview and collected by the researcher. The interviews will be audio recorded and students will state their name during the introduction before starting the interview. Participating in this study is completely voluntary and will provide invaluable data to the researcher.

Disclaimer: Please note this is research in progress. Please feel free to express your opinions, feelings, and concerns at any time during the process. During this interview, I will ask questions about student success and your interpretation of it. Further, I will ask you questions about the programs and services offered by your college/university for veteran students and how or to what degree those programs and services assisted you in meeting your educational goals. Your answers may prompt further questions all centered on your experience transitioning into civilian and college life.

The purpose of this study is to examine the perceptions of veteran students at a mid-sized, suburban, four-year public university located in southeast Texas regarding the challenges they face, and the impact veteran-centric support services have on their academic success, retention, and degree completion.

Note: This interview will be recorded and transcribed for the data analysis process of this research. Do you give permission to record this interview? (no identifiable information will be used).

Schlossberg's 4S Model (Anderson et al., 2022)

Situation = influence transition into college

Self = characteristics used when deciding to enroll in higher education

Support = awareness of services and what student found supportive

Strategies = what helped during this transition to academic environment

Date: _____ **Time:** _____

Participant: _____ **Enrollment status: Fulltime / Parttime**

1. What was your educational experience and highest educational level prior to the military? [**Self**]

2. Would you please share information regarding your military service including the years of service, branch, rank, service location, number of tours, and your overall positive or negative military experience.   [**Self**]
    a. Years of service:
    b. Branch:
    c. Rank:
    d. Service Location:
    e. Number of tours/deployments:
    f. Military experience:

3. Tell me about your experiences as a college student. [**Self**]
    a. Why did you decide to pursue higher education?

4. Why did you select public university opposed to a private university or trade school?
    a. Why this university? [**Situation**]

5. What goals did you set for yourself when you first enrolled in university?   [**Self**]
    a. How do you perceive your progression?

6. What do you think the college degree will do for you?   [**Situation**]

7. Tell me about your transition to higher education. [**Situation**]
    a. Have you experienced any problems or barriers? If so, what?
    b. Which problem or barrier do you think was the most significant?

8. What does "academic success" mean to you?   [**Support**]
    a. Do you currently feel academically successful? Why or why not?

9. Are you aware of the university's services for students?   [**Support**]
    a. Does your campus have a veteran-centric support center?
    b. Did you utilize the services?

10. When you need advising service, do you feel comfortable using your school's designated department office or the veteran support office? Why? [**Support**]

    a. When you need counseling service, do you feel comfortable using your school's designated department office or the veteran support office? Why?

    b. When you need financial aid service do you feel comfortable using your school's designated department office or the veteran support office? Why?

11. Do you feel comfortable identifying yourself as a veteran in the classroom? Why or why not? [**Self**]

12. Did you use the federal VA as an education resource? If so, why? If not, why not? [**Support**]

    a. Do you feel federal VA is more helpful than your school's veteran support office? If so, how?

    b. Are there any areas where federal VA support is better than your school's veteran support office?

13. Tell me more about your veteran support office. Do you feel that they are helping you meet your educational goals? If so, how? If not, why not? [**Support**]

14. What steps have you taken or are planning to take to ensure completion of your degree program? [**Strategies**]

15. Overall, do you feel the veteran support office has been a positive or negative influence on your transition into higher education? [**Strategies**]

16. Is there any additional information you would like to add that may serve as advice to future transitioning members or veterans seeking higher education attainment? [**Strategies**]

Thank you for your time. Your contributions in this study are commendable and invaluable. I genuinely appreciate your participation in my research.

APPENDIX C

DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION FORM

Link to the digital form: https://forms.office.com/r/afrS9srDwE