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Student Veteran Experiences in a Transition Seminar Course: Exploring the Thriving Transition Cycle

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Abstract

This holistic single-case study explores the experiences of 54 student veterans who participated in a veterans' transition seminar course at a regional, comprehensive institution in the West. Employing the Harris, Myhill, and Walker (2012) Thriving Transition Cycle as a framework for the inquiry, the study examines participants' experiences separating from the military, encountering the college and classroom environment associated with the transition seminar course, adjusting to the college student role, and their newfound stability as college students. Implications for student affairs practitioners, faculty, and the growing field of veterans studies are discussed.

Keywords: student veterans, Thriving Transition Cycle, non-traditional students, veterans studies

Introduction

Military-connected enrollment at higher education institutions continues to rise with the drawdowns of Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom, the current economic situation, and improved GI Bill benefits (National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics, 2017). Student veterans face unique challenges in their transition from military to civilian life when they choose to separate and pursue a college degree (Ackerman, DiRamio, & Garza Mitchell, 2009; Burnett & Segoria, 2009; Coll & Weiss, 2015; Jenner, 2016; Kelley, Smith, & Fox, 2013). Rumann and Hamrick (2010) found the transition from a structured, team-oriented military environment to the unstructured, individual-oriented college environment to be quite perplexing for veterans as they begin to assume a "student" identity. As a result of one higher education institution's attempt to smooth this transition, a first-semester transition seminar course was developed to provide personalized and targeted support for these students. This holistic single-case study focuses on the experiences of student veterans in the course to further understand the transition of this population using the Thriving Transition Cycle (Harris, Myhill, & Walker, 2012), as well as the ways in which higher education institutions can support the success of new student veterans. This research was sponsored in part by a JPMorgan Chase & Company grant entitled *Building Resilience and Success: Holistic Student Veteran Support*.

Literature Review

Subsequent to the passing of the Post-9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Act (GI Bill) in 2008, a progression of research has been conducted to establish successful educational strategies for student veterans of the modern era (Barry, Whiteman, & MacDermid Wadsworth, 2014; Brown & Gross, 2011; Callahan & Jarrat, 2014; Coll & Weiss, 2015; Hamrick & Rumann, 2013; Kelley et al., 2013; O'Herrin, 2011; Vacchi, 2012; Zoli, Maury, & Fay, 2015). Research-based best practices for these students include: connecting them with institutional resources vital to their success (i.e., veterans affairs certifying offices, disability services, and counseling services); pairing incoming veterans with current student veterans

and alumni for mentorship; providing veteran-specific programming through new student orientations and transition courses; and educating faculty and staff about military culture (Bissell, 2015; Blackwell-Starnes, 2018; Kappell, Boersma, DeVita, & Parker, 2017; Kees, Risk, Meadowbrooke, Nellett, & Spinner, 2017; McMenamin & Kurzynski, 2016; Whiteman, Barry, Mroczek, & MacDermid Wadsworth, 2013; Witkowsky et al., 2016).

While a plethora of veteran-specific programming exists at higher education institutions, student veterans often struggle with the transition. Despite the acquisition of leadership, discipline, and stress management skills in their military careers, many find it challenging to translate these skills to the college classroom (Blackwell-Starnes, 2018; DiRamio, Jarvis, Iverson, Seher, & Anderson, 2015; Jenner, 2016; Olsen, Badger, & McCuddy, 2014; Ryan, Carlson, Hughey, & Harris, 2011). Additionally, student veterans find it difficult to seek support, develop meaningful relationships with college peers, move past academic ability doubts, handle service-connected physical disabilities and mental health needs, and manage finances (Blackwell-Starnes, 2018; Church, 2009; DiRamio et al., 2015; Elliott, Gonzalez, & Larsen, 2011; Kranke, Weiss, & Constantine Brown, 2016; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010; Schiavone & Gentry, 2014; Tanielian & Jaycox, 2008; Wurster, Rinaldi, Woods, & Lui, 2013). These common transitional struggles can be lightened through the implementation of purposeful and intentional strategies in the first semester of their college experience. Tinto (2012) emphasized both academic and social cultural integration as the most important factors in college retention and persistence for all students, as those who are not assimilated into classroom and institutional cultures are more likely to struggle academically and, ultimately, leave higher education altogether. A first-semester course specifically designed for student veterans may aid in the academic and cultural integration process for this population (McMenamin & Kurzynski, 2016).

A Student Veteran Transition Seminar Course

A three-credit transition seminar course (TSC) is offered for student veterans and other military-connected students as they begin their academic career. The course is designed to ensure these students are prepared for the shift in thinking and expectations that occur as they move from the military to the college classroom. Positioned within a campus-wide first-year seminar program, all students who enter the university with less than 30 college credits are required to enroll. The program includes crosscutting student learning outcomes and structured opportunities to familiarize students with campus resources from academic support to financial aid to student activities. Course goals comprise refining communication skills, engaging in project-based learning, cultivating critical research and technology competencies, and exploring academic and career options. Specific to the student veteran TSC, students are also introduced to the services and resources available through the institution's Student Veteran Center. Last, the TSC serves as a quasi-learning community that extends to other courses in which these individuals are enrolled. A dearth of research can be found that examines the particular role of transitional course offerings designed for student veteran success (McMenamin & Kurzynski, 2016).

Theoretical Framework

The Thriving Transition Cycle (TTC) (Harris et al., 2012) was applied as the theoretical framework for this study (see Figure 1). Frameworks build on a foundation of established knowledge, offer logical explanations for the relationships observed, and reveal new understandings about a phenomenon (Anfara & Mertz, 2014; Babbie, 2015)—in this

case, the experiences of student veterans in a TSC. The TTC is an adaptation and extension of Schlossberg's Transition Theory (1981, 1984) and Nicholson's Transition Cycle (1987). Each focus on understanding the transitions that change one's relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles, whether anticipated or not. Additionally, the effect of the transition is predicated on one's perception, context, and impact; although the stages are distinct, they are cyclical, interdependent, and influence one another. Harris et al. (2012) built on the foundational work of both Schlossberg and Nicholson by clarifying the transitional stages; however, the basic framework remains the same. The TTC serves as a tool for organizing and communicating ideas regarding the four stages of transition: Preparation, Encounter, Adjustment, and Stabilization. The framework specifies the mechanisms through which these stages occur as student veterans transition from military to college life. Additionally, it provides the opportunity to identify pragmatic issues of concern and to facilitate early intervention efforts relative to each stage.
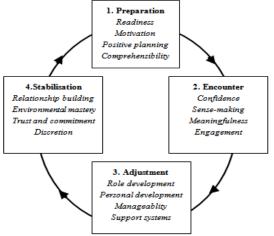

Figure 1. The Thriving Transition Cycle (Harris et al., 2012).

The first stage of the TTC is Preparation, which is the manner in which service members prepare to transition from military to student life. Their readiness, motivation, positive planning, and comprehensibility determine the success of their transition from the first stage to the next. The second is Encounter, the process in which student veterans first experience their new college campus environment and role in said environment. They begin to develop confidence, make sense of their new surroundings, find meaningfulness in their new life, and engage in a new lifestyle. The third stage is Adjustment, in which individuals begin to develop and manage new roles, both personally and academically, as well as create an expanded support system for coping with these changes. The fourth is Stabilization, in which student veterans build relationships and develop a sense of environmental mastery, leading to a demonstration of trust and commitment, as well as discretion, in their college student role.

Methods

Research Design

The TTC grounded the design of this holistic single-case study that explored the transitional experiences of student veterans in the TSC (Yin, 2018). The critical-case approach was underpinned by the theoretical proposition that transitions occur in the four distinct, yet interdependent stages of Preparation, Encounter, Adjustment, and Stabilization (Harris et al., 2012). As noted by Yin (2018), theoretical propositions are important in

determining the circumstances in which a phenomenon emerges—in this case, student veterans' perceptions of their transition from the military to the higher education environment, as well as how the TSC influences their transition. Additionally, this study contributes to the existing knowledge on the theory of the TTC by extending it to include student veterans. Focus groups provided multiple perspectives on these students' transition from the military through the end of their first semester of college (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2018). The research questions were as follows:

1. How do student veterans perceive the process of transitioning to higher education?
2. How does the structure of a student veteran TSC influence their transition to higher education?

Research Site

This study was conducted at a comprehensive, regional university in the West. The university is categorized as a mixed residential-commuter campus and is one of the fastest growing institutions in the country. The student body includes nearly 20% students of color, an almost equal female-to-male ratio, and 30% who are eligible for Federal Pell Grants. Military-connected students comprise over 15% of the nearly 12,000 student population, with greater than 80% holding a veteran, reserve, or active duty status, and 20% being military family members using a transferred educational benefit. The mean age of these students is 30, with a mode of 27. Nearly 60% identify as male, with the majority of males holding a veteran or active duty status and most females receiving a transferred benefit. The most commonly selected racial classification is Caucasian, followed by Hispanic. The mean estimated grade point average (GPA) for military-connected students is 2.98, with 38% in the range of 3.6–4.0, and nearly 80% earning a GPA of 2.0 or higher. The retention rate of military-connected students who enrolled full time from 2010-2017 was 68%, with a graduation rate of 46%. These rates are similar to the overall student population, with a 65% retention rate and a 43% graduation rate.

Participants

The study participants included all 54 students enrolled in the veteran TSC course over three semesters. Engineering, followed by Humanities and Nursing, were the most commonly indicated majors. The study included 10 females and 44 males, ages 23–40 (M = 26). All military branches (Air Force, Army, Coast Guard, Marine Corps, and Navy) were represented in the sample, with the majority from the Army and over 60% being combat veterans. Years of military service ranged from 3–22 (M = 7); years of separation included less than one year–six years, with the clear majority being separated less than one year. The retention rate of those enrolled in the TSC was 78%, substantially higher than the rates for military-connected students and the overall student population.

Data Collection

Focus groups with students in the TSC were conducted for triangulation. A one-phase approach of data collection was employed with the focus groups (Yin, 2018) to allow for a shared perspective on the experiences of student veterans, particularly the way in which the course aided in their transition through the use of the TTC. The study utilized maximum variation and purposeful/criterion-based sampling, as all course members were invited to participate (Patton, 2015). Upon obtaining Institutional Review Board approval, participants received and signed consent forms that detailed the purpose of the study and focus group

procedures. A semi-structured protocol was designed to describe the process of the focus group and the areas to be explored. The protocol questions were based on the TTC framework—Preparation (readiness, motivation, positive planning, and comprehensibility); Encounter (confidence, sense-making, meaningfulness, and engagement); Adjustment (role development, personal development, manageability, and support systems); and Stabilization (relationship building, environmental mastery, trust and commitment, and discretion). Additionally, a document analysis of the course syllabi was conducted to prepare for the focus groups. Adherence to the protocol ensured that questions were carefully worded and asked in a specific order, and probing questions were embedded to provide opportunities to seek clarification and meaning (Patton, 2015). The digitally-recorded focus groups averaged 90 minutes in length and were transcribed for data analysis.

Data Analysis

Focus group transcripts were analyzed using strategies established by Stake (1995), whose technique follows a deductive approach through the use of a theoretical framework to search for patterns and themes in the data. This method is referred to as deductive thematic content analysis. Coding involved a comprehensive process to identify cross-references between the data and the evolving themes while memoing (recording reflective notes), which allowed for dependability when approaching research patterns in deductive ways (Hayes, 1997; Watt, 2007). Stake's four-step process was followed for reporting themes, which included direct interpretation, categorical aggregation, pattern recognition, and naturalistic generalizations (Stake, 1995). These methods were employed throughout the data analysis process, with coding in four cycles and frequent reflection as follows.

Cycle 1: Initial read-through with deductive coding. An initial read-through process was independently conducted using deductive methods. This was accomplished through coding by the stages of the TTC, which allowed for detection and identification of factors from the theoretical framework that potentially influenced issues generated by the participants. This process enabled the researchers to draw interpretations consistent with the focus group transcripts.

Cycle 2: Provisional coding using propositions and macro-codes. Using the deductive approach in Cycle 1, the researchers independently began with broader generalizations and moved to precise content in Cycle 2 through the development of propositions and macro-codes. This process ensured themes were effectively linked to the data (Patton, 2015). The connectivity also assisted in incorporating the literature review and theoretical framework into the codes garnered from the focus groups.

Cycle 3: Deductive sub-coding. Deductive sub-codes were developed in Cycle 3. Again, deductive thematic content analysis was used to group associated data. Collections of data were then coded to identify similar categories and to search for patterns and themes through the use of the TTC theoretical framework. During this cycle, patterns, as well as fuse (blended) codes, continued to be identified and revised, and new findings were amalgamated.

Cycle 4: Deeper theoretical coding. An important step in Stake's (1995) deductive data analysis process, is validation of themes in early and late stages of analysis to ensure they represent the entirety of the data. In this final cycle of coding, the researchers continued to memo, focusing on patterns, categorizations, and possible naturalistic generalizations. At the end of this cycle, the researchers were better informed of any conflicting results with respect to theme development (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2013; Watt, 2007). The final six themes were solidified from the nearly 50 codes extracted from the focus group transcripts and were aligned to the theoretical framework.

Trustworthiness

Multiple verification strategies ensured the findings were credible, transferable, dependable, and confirmable (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In order to address credibility, cross-case synthesis was utilized throughout the analysis of each transcript to examine whether the themes were cases of similar or different perspectives of the participants (Hayes, 1997). Miles et al. (2013) highlighted the flexibility of this approach when data collection occurs in a phased design. Thick, rich descriptions were utilized to ensure transferability, and participant saturation was found to be indicative of the larger student veteran population (Patton, 2015). Dependability was addressed by evaluating the manner in which the themes represented the whole of the focus group transcripts by the deductive data analysis technique employed (Stake, 1995). Finally, confirmability was established by validating themes in the early and late stages of data analysis (Miles et al., 2013). Dependability and confirmability were accomplished by involving multiple researchers during the data analysis process in order to evaluate and provide feedback on the identified themes, enabling the comparison of multiple feedback loops.

Ethical Considerations

The researchers conducting the study did not serve as instructors in the TSC, although the data were collected during the course. Students may have felt participation in the study was mandatory, as they were accustomed to following commands from their military career. However, the students were informed in writing and verbally that participation was optional and they could choose to opt out at any point with no penalty—all chose to participate.

Limitations

Several limitations of the study can be noted. The location of the institution at which the study was conducted is near multiple military installations and, as described in the institutional background, has a high percentage of military-connected students. Thus, while this could be considered a supportive environment for transitioning veterans, it was a limitation of the study because other institutions may not have a similar culture or access to community support resources. Additionally, while data were collected across multiple cohorts of students from three semesters, collection occurred at one point in time during the students' academic careers. A longitudinal approach would have provided a more in-depth understanding into the influence of the TSC on other longstanding transition issues participants may have experienced—such as maintaining relationships with course peers, integrating with non-military-connected students, and transitioning from higher education to the civilian workforce. Including only students in their first semester on campus may have been a limitation, due to the likelihood that many students will face academic adversity as they

move into progressively rigorous courses in subsequent semesters. Collecting information in succeeding semesters would allow for examination of the way in which students are putting the newly acquired skills and resources into practice.

Findings

Data analysis revealed six themes corresponding to the stages of the TTC as applied to the higher education environment for student veterans.

- Stage 1: Preparation, the theme of *eagerness for change* arose;
- Stage 2: Encounter, the theme of *transferable skills* was found;
- Stage 3: Adjustment, revealed the themes of *peer support and camaraderie* and *personal and academic development*;
- and Stage 4: Stabilization, the themes of *exposure to resources* and *intentions for involvement* emerged (see Table 1).

Table 1
Thriving Transition Cycle and Themes

Thriving Transition Cycle Stages	Themes
Stage 1: Preparation	Eagerness for Change
Stage 2: Encounter	Transferable Skills
Stage 3: Adjustment	Peer Support and Camaraderie; Personal and Academic Development
Stage 4: Stabilization	Exposure to Resources; Intentions for Involvement

Eagerness for Change

Eagerness for change emerged as a theme within the TTC stage of Preparation. Upon the decision to separate from the military, service members are required to access the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) offered by the U.S. Department of Defense. TAP was designed to ensure a smooth transition to civilian life and to specifically ameliorate issues of homelessness, unemployment, and a general sense of a loss of direction post-military for many veterans. One student noted that he received information through TAP about transitioning from the military prior to leaving his military service:

My [TAP] class was actually very, very helpful. They did split it between people who are going to higher education and just going to get a job. They made sure we had everything set up, so we absolutely knew how to apply for our GI Bill benefits.

Most students were appreciative of the opportunity to engage with TAP and receive guidance on how best to prepare for their separation from a readiness and planning perspective.

While reviews of TAP were generally positive, participants also shared ways their transition could have been more effective and efficient, specifically as it related to shifting to the higher education environment. One student indicated it would have been helpful to have gained an understanding of the ways in which organization and leadership skills acquired in the military could be of use in college. Another shared that, if one does not know the right questions to ask, they may not have access to the full scope of services offered through TAP:

I think a lot of time, they push TAP, but they don't let you know that there are additional modules that you can add. In my case, I did the small business entrepreneurship track, which was pretty nice and it helped with that, but I also did a

> higher education module. They assigned me a civilian who was a counselor who…stayed in contact with me, until I actually made it to the school here…Even though I was already out of the military.

The student explained that his counselor kept in contact with him once a month until he started at the university and continues to reach out periodically to check on his adjustment to his new role as a college student.

Students who shared a high level of eagerness for change initiated their own transition assistance beyond that which was offered through TAP prior to separating from the military. One individual shared:

> It was important to prepare myself for my own future. That was reaching out, talking to people, getting a feel for what was really going on when I was overseas. Via that networking process, looking into what I could do in regards to college and I got all those ducks in order well before I got out. I started a relocation plan, things of that nature.

The theme of eagerness for change demonstrated the variance in readiness, motivation, and positive planning experienced by student veterans in preparing for separation from the military. TAP experiences and transitional information provided by the military vary in quality, with some noting insufficient preparation; thus, higher education institutions must not assume student veterans have the information necessary to transition smoothly or confidently to civilian life.

Transferable Skills

Transferable skills arose as the theme associated with the stage of Encounter in the TTC. Most students indicated they were able to apply and relate the skills that contributed to their success in the military to the college environment. One student shared, "Organization skills, responsibility…knowing how to manage my time is one thing that I really carried over which helps me in school right now…[also] the training to keep your mouth shut when something irritates you." Another indicated the familiarity of college tasks from military tasks:

> In the Army, you had to present written products…and meet deadlines for various tasks or projects. Just like you would have for college. When something's due, it's due. Discipline. Showing up. Being at the right place at the right time and being prepared. Mentally and physically prepared to take on whatever might come at you.

Resourcefulness was also mentioned as one of the most important and useful transferable skills learned in the military. One student shared, "I'd say, being resourceful. There was a lot that, me as a young troop, knowing who to go to and what I'm looking for. Definitely apply that here in my first term." Many nodded in agreement when this sentiment was voiced.

Whereas most students were able to articulate their transferable skills from the military, others needed additional support and skill-building opportunities to be successful in college. One student noted, "They're not pitching the ball straight to you. Self-motivation and stuff like that really helps but I didn't get that [in the military]." Regrettably, some were quite frustrated with not feeling the same level of confidence, sense-making, meaningfulness, and engagement in college as in their military career, which can make progression through the stage of Encounter longer and increasingly distressing. Greater understanding of the ways in which skills from the military can be useful in their new role as college students may assist academic advisors, TSC instructors, and other faculty in increasing student veterans' confidence in their ability to achieve academic success.

Peer Support and Camaraderie

Within the TTC stage of Adjustment, peer support and camaraderie emerged as a theme due to the support system embedded in the TSC. Students appreciated the peer and instructor support, as it provided an environment in which they were able to explore their unique, shared experiences of leaving a career in the military and entering higher education. One student shared, "The idea of having all veterans in one class definitely does help. It makes it feel a little bit more like a team because…at least you have a lot of people with similar experiences in class with you." According to another:

> This class is a good resource because everybody in this room had to do something in regards to something—VA health, VA school benefits, somebody's done it…as a collective, we have a pretty good idea of where to get the right answers.

Echoing previous statements, a participant made this analogy: "The fact that when I look to my left and I look to my right, we're all in this boat rowing together." The peer support and camaraderie that naturally arises in the TSC places students at ease with the new commitments and responsibilities they now shoulder.

Along with recognizing the commonalities of their peers, participants expressed a strong sentiment that military-connected students are more relatable than non-military-connected peers, which again added an extra level of comfort to the TSC. One noted:

> I find it really hard to relate to the other students because of what I've been through. They don't have children, and they don't have families…we're just in different places in our lives. I don't want to hang out with them or do anything with them. If I see them walking along, I don't really want to have a conversation with them because we don't have anything that we can talk about. If I see someone from here, we're like, "Hey, what's your major? That's a really good major." It's like, "How are your classes going? How are you adapting?"

The shared bond of the military and the ways in which student veterans connect with one another is an opportunity on which to capitalize in the higher education environment, particularly within the confines of the TSC.

While TSC instructors considered the external responsibilities of their non-traditional students, such as caring for children or other family members, one student shared his desire for group work to be required outside of class. He believed this opportunity would lead to a natural extension of relationships that can be developed beyond the structured course timeframe. "I'm in this class and I know everybody in this class, but as soon as the class is over, I go get on the shuttle. We're not working on projects outside, it's just the classes." The TSC not only fosters relationships of student veterans on campus, but also can deepen those relationships, which aids in the adjustment period of beginning college.

As some student veterans desired occasions to connect with peers outside of class, others wanted to collaborate with peers of the same major and those who shared similar academic interests. One student shared:

> I think as we move forward in our various degree programs, I've noticed this semester already, that when you find out you're in a class and you're around some people that are in your major, you bond together…by getting together, and sharing information, and collaborating, and things of that nature.

Another participant saw opportunities for upper-class students in similar majors to provide mentorship to new student veterans:

> If you can find someone in there that's the same major as you, they may be able to provide advice. Say, "Hey, maybe this is too much, or not enough. You may want to

look at a different structure, different options. It's better to take this course before you take that course, even though it's not a prerequisite." Those types of things. Just experience that they've gained by being a student.

This recommendation reinforces the notion that a ready-made community already exists for student veterans if they are connected to one another. Support systems that highlight ways to manage one's new role and personal development as a college student are important as these students begin to balance the values of a group and an individual in the higher education environment.

Personal and Academic Development

Personal and academic development also emerged as a theme in the stage of Adjustment. Student veterans clearly appreciated the TSC providing a support system, but they also welcomed the opportunity to begin separating from their military identity and exploring the freedom to pursue their own identity in the course. In order to do this successfully, students must decide how their military identity will fit into their new role as a civilian. While they enter college with shared military experiences, the self-exploration provided in the TSC benefits their understanding of themselves, which is necessary as they develop their identity and choose a career path (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). As one student shared, "The material that we got introduced to, it's been very helpful. A lot of things we didn't know about ourselves." In terms of specific academic development, students appreciated the opportunity to cultivate study skills. "It's helped me learn to become a student again. Learn how to study. All the little simple things that I can say that I forgot, or just haven't practiced in a long time."

As students began to appreciate the opportunity to pursue higher education, they embraced their new role as a college student. One individual stated:

I've tried to center my life right now, as much as possible, around being a student… that's not to be selfish…Most of us will only get one opportunity to do this. If we don't dedicate our time and resources toward this agenda, or goal, it could easily slip away.

Another noted the importance of feeling successful in her academic pursuits:

You always want to get a good grade. That's a little boost, but probably of greater importance is, are you really being challenged and are you really learning something that will add value to your life, or maybe to a larger group of people's lives as you move forward. I think if you can accomplish those things and have a little fun along the way, I would call that success.

The TSC allowed for opportunities to develop skills to promote their academic success as they began to manage a new role, support system, and work structure outside the military setting. Beyond skills, however, students developed individual perspectives regarding higher education that contributed to their positive adjustment process and enhanced their motivation to persist.

Exposure to Resources

Exposure to resources arose as a theme associated with the final stage of Stabilization in the TTC. The integration of campus resources into the TSC curriculum, both general and those specifically designed for the military-connected population, assisted students in their transition and provided resources with which they may not engage until later in their academic careers. The exposure to the higher education environment through the TSC differed from other delivery models, such as orientation programs and print and web-based

content, as the course slowly familiarizes students to resources over a sustained period of time during the semester. This exposure helped students develop skills of discretion and environmental mastery as they began to stabilize in their new college student role. The TSC engages students in utilizing campus resources as a peer community, such as requiring all students to access the writing center in order to complete an assignment. One individual shared:

> I think they've done a really good job in laying out a lot of the resources that are available here at the university that we may stumble into or find out a year or two from now. They had a nice seminar over at the library. They had one of the professional librarians, I mean with a master's degree. They walked us through the electronic side of the library and I'm sure that everybody learned a few things in there.

Another shared more generally on the ways in which the university supported her educational goals: "I think there's enough resources here that you can get beyond the surface of a given topic and really become a subject matter expert…that you may not be able to get at some other institutions." All students valued the resources provided by the university and embedded in the course.

Additionally, the TSC provided an expansive view of the resources available to student veterans, with the integration of the Student Veteran Center as another source of support post-course. Most students believed the office would be a key resource as they progressed in their academic career. One noted:

> Veteran's Affairs really makes it almost like a turn-key type operation. If you go in there and you have the right attitude, you have your paperwork and documentation, it's a very smooth transition. I feel like the people there have really put out their hands to assist veterans.

Another stated, "The veteran's office has been a great resource for providing tips and advice on where to go…and generally they can field or answer most of the questions, but if they don't, they certainly know resources in the area." Connecting students to the Student Veteran Center created a bridge from orientation and the TSC to the continued support on which they can rely throughout their time at the institution. This bridge will serve as a stabilizing force as they continue to develop new relationships at the university and master the collegiate environment.

Intentions for Involvement

Intentions for involvement served as the final theme of the study, it related directly to the stage of Stabilization of the TTC. Both academic and social involvement have been shown to be correlated with college retention and persistence, as students who are not assimilated into classroom and institutional cultures are more likely to struggle academically and drop out (Tinto, 2012). The TSC is well-positioned to require student veterans to commit to a co-curricular involvement activity early in their college career to boost their likelihood for persistence and collegiate engagement. Yet, student involvement outside the classroom was perceived by participants as in cross-purposes to their academic endeavors. One individual remarked:

> I want to get good grades and then later on when I feel more comfortable, I will probably start reaching out. I know they do have a lot of clubs and we did have some clubs coming into our classes, but I'm not ready to take that step yet.

Another shared, "Once I'm comfortable [with coursework], I'll get involved with clubs." Student veterans held a false understanding that student involvement is merely a distraction

rather than an opportunity to build relationships with others and to demonstrate discretion, which are both important as they stabilize in their transition.

Additionally, student concerns about their ability to connect with the traditional-age population created a barrier for co-curricular involvement. One participant noted:

It's still a little hard, especially going into the demographic where I'm 30-years-old and a lot of my classmates are much younger…No matter what you can say, you're still trying to relate to an 18-year-old. No matter how you try, it's still difficult.

While this individual assumed it would be challenging to connect with his younger peers, students shared actual coursework interactions that reinforced their unease in relating to non-student veterans. One student commented:

Me and him were paired for a group project, and I think our relationship as part of that team is totally different from our relationship to the other students because we see them as a liability, whereas I see him as dependable…I know he can get this done, he knows I can get this done…Their understanding of a team is totally different.

Related to the concept of camaraderie, these concerns in the Stabilization stage highlighted the potential difficulty student veterans perceived in connecting to students outside the TSC, as they shared a lack of trust for non-student veterans. TSC instructors must be mindful of these concerns when communicating to student veterans the importance and tangible benefits of campus involvement in order to promote their successful transition and to help them in learning the art of discretion.

Discussion and Implications for Practice

Through the use of the TTC (Harris et al., 2012), study findings establish the need to provide a purposeful transition process for student veterans to the higher education environment. While their experiences in the TSC were overwhelmingly positive, which is consistent with other research on transition courses (McMenamin & Kurzynski, 2016), the TSC provides only a semester-long course experience to help move students through the transition stages of Preparation, Encounter, Adjustment, and Stabilization. One course alone cannot serve as the end-all retention tool for any group of students; thus, a shared effort must occur among academic advisors, staff of the Student Veteran Center, TSC instructors, and other faculty. Several recommendations result from these findings.

Create a Foundation for Peer Interaction

Due to the camaraderie and team culture of the military environment, many student veterans develop a sense of belonging on campus when they can relate to their peers, particularly during the initial transition to higher education (Blackwell-Starnes, 2018; DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011; Jenner, 2016; McMenamin & Kurzynski, 2016; Ryan et al., 2011; Whiteman et al., 2013). Participants echoed the importance of peer support and highlighted the challenges in working with non-veteran and traditional-age students, as well as the importance of creating connections with those of similar majors. Instructors of veteran TSCs may find it beneficial to create student groups intentionally based on academic major to provide opportunities to build relationships and to promote networking that may extend into future courses. This purposeful effort to encourage peer connections may result in an expansion of student veterans' ease with the higher education environment but they also need to be mindful about connecting with non-veterans who may have different perspectives, generational differences, and/or life experiences. Discussing ways to manage frustrations and

to effectively communicate with non-veterans can reduce ongoing stress and promote success in the classroom and future workplace.

The Peer Advising for Veteran Education (PAVE) program developed at the University of Michigan and disseminated to 40 partner universities is a current model for promoting future success among student veterans (Kees et al., 2017). PAVE relies on an opt-out peer advising model providing first-year student veterans with an upperclassman peer advisor from their academic major to provide outreach, support, and resource linkage. Other examples of peer support that can be embedded into transition courses include integrating the campus student veteran organization into the class. Additionally, the national non-profit Student Veterans of America has resources to help student veteran groups establish effective peer support services.

Identify Transferable Skills

While many of the cultural aspects of higher education and the military are divergent, students have identified ways to use their military training in the classroom, such as with organizational and time management skills. The TSC instructors' understanding of military training and culture allows transferable skills to be identified on an individual basis. The TSC could use resources similar to those available in the military to prepare students for the transition, such as assessments related to one's motivation, leadership, and support needs. In considering and building upon the similarities between the "profession of arms" and the "profession of student," culture shock and poor transitional experiences may be mediated or lessened.

Promote Co-Curricular Engagement

Engagement in co-curricular opportunities and support services often do not occur for student veterans and other adult learners unless within the classroom setting because they are typically more career-focused than traditionally-aged students (Kappell et al., 2017). Findings from this study, as well as previous research, demonstrate that student veterans are less likely to understand the value or have the time to commit to co-curricular engagement in college due to competing responsibilities (Kappell et al., 2017; Kim & Cole, 2013). TCS instructors can encourage students to realize the tangible benefits of networking with others in similar situations, as well as obtaining access to resources about which they may have been unaware, to contribute to their sense of belonging on campus—an elusive yet critical piece of the retention puzzle. In order to facilitate this, TSC instructors could include a panel of student veterans involved on campus who share their stories to demonstrate and explain the value of involvement and to dispel the myth that involvement is a deterrent, rather than a contributor, to success in college. Instructors also could require students to meet in supportive spaces on campus to become familiar with available resources and the benefits of utilizing these spaces for collaborating, studying, and seeking support from peers.

Extend Support Services beyond Course Completion

TSC instructors should incorporate academic and social programmatic offerings by the campus Student Veteran Center in the course when relevant. Programming during the time of the course and incentivizing student participation would guarantee involvement and may serve as a bridge to available supports upon course completion, as the transition experience varies greatly and is dependent upon several variables. While the duration of the course is one semester, some students may need additional support through the remainder of their first year

and throughout their academic career. Mechanisms should be established to allow this support to continue with the course instructors or with peer and professional staff members dedicated to the success of student veterans, which may include providing safe spaces and symbols of inclusion on campus (McMenamin & Kurzynski, 2016; Strange & Banning, 2001). Additionally, specific and identified support personnel and opportunities should be created and marketed upon completion of the TSC. Providing additional courses or counseling services that continue to focus on the transitional needs of these students ensures support is available as long as required for this population to reach their educational and career goals (Bissell, 2015; Kappell et al., 2017).

Recommendations for Future Research

Research on the military to college transition for student veterans has advanced substantially over the previous decade. Yet, specific to understanding the value of TSCs and the ways in which academic success is facilitated for student veterans, longitudinal research designs are needed to provide guidance on the future direction of these courses. Additionally, participants interviewed in this study were not asked specifically about mental health challenges as they related to transitioning to campus, but the high proportion of veterans with documented mental health needs warrants additional focus within transition courses to develop targeted programming (Elliott et al., 2011; Kranke et al., 2016; McMenamin & Kurzynski, 2016; Tanielian & Jaycox, 2008; Young, 2016; Zoli et al., 2015). Future studies could examine TSC curriculum to determine whether coping strategies for anxiety and stress can be added as a learning outcome for the course and whether they are associated with student success and resilience. Additionally, the integration of self-advocacy lessons could be explored to determine if individuals in these courses improve their help-seeking behaviors and if it assists in de-stigmatizing mental health diagnoses and treatment (Kranke et al., 2016).

Furthermore, as research continues to emerge on student veteran retention and factors related to their attrition, a risk factor assessment may provide direction for services to be embedded into the course structure. Young (2016) developed and validated a psychometric scale to assist student affairs and veteran-serving professionals in understanding the ways in which veterans are acclimating to the higher education environment through measuring their college adjustment and wellness. These types of instruments, and continued research on their efficacy, can help in establishing determinants of academic success for these individuals.

Also, research focused on the unique reasons student veterans do not persist in higher education is needed in order to discern trends and develop appropriate measures to address them. Exit interviews with those who do not persist may help student affairs practitioners and faculty understand ways to assist this growing population in reaching their goal of a college degree and future success in the civilian world. Last, the intersectional nature of student veteran identity should be explored, as the diversity within the population is expansive (DiRamio et al., 2015; Jenner, 2016; National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics, 2017; Wurster et al., 2013). Seeking to understand each student's circumstances and experiences is necessary to effectively serve them, to contribute to their personal and professional development, and to connect them with appropriate resources.

Conclusion

Through a holistic single-case study design grounded by the TTC (Harris et al., 2012), the themes of eagerness for change, transferable skills, peer support and camaraderie, personal and academic development, exposure to resources, and intentions for involvement

aided in a greater understanding of the student veteran transition to college. This study begins to fill the gap in literature highlighted by Barry et al. (2014), who noted the need for current evidence-based research on the higher education experiences of student veterans. The themes from the focus groups support the supposition that student veterans benefit from opportunities to normalize their unique struggles and to develop effective academic and personal strategies that translate to meeting their educational and career goals (Bissell, 2015; Blackwell-Starnes, 2018; Burnett & Segura, 2009; Callahan & Jarrat, 2014; Coll & Weiss, 2015; Kappell et al., 2017; Kees et al., 2017; O'Herrin, 2011; Schiavone & Gentry, 2014). These findings can be of value for veteran service offices, as well as other campus-based support services, designed to ensure student veterans begin their college transition in a positive and productive manner.

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