

A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY: THE EXPERIENCE OF WOMEN VETERANS  
IN TRANSITION AND ADAPTATION TO HIGHER EDUCATION

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## DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to the women who have served in our armed forces. You did your duty for our country and now let us serve you. You have earned it, both as veterans and as women.

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS OR SYMBOLS

DSS	Disability Student Services
HUD-VASH Program	Housing and Urban Development – Veterans Affairs Supportive Housing Program
OEF	Operation Enduring Freedom
OIF	Operation Iraqi Freedom
OND	Operation New Dawn
Post-9/11 GI Bill	Post 9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Program
PTSD	Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder
MST	Military Sexual Trauma
SUD	Substance Use Disorder
SVO	Student Veteran Organization
WACS	Women’s Army Corps
WWII	Second World War

## ABSTRACT

A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY: THE EXPERIENCE OF WOMEN VETERANS  
IN TRANSITION AND ADAPTATION TO HIGHER EDUCATION

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The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the transition and adaptation of full-time, baccalaureate, degree-seeking female military students at colleges and universities in North Carolina that offer the Yellow Ribbon Program.

Schlossberg's Transition Theory (2011) was used as the theoretical framework to seek information regarding each woman veteran's experience. Individual interviews were conducted, a journal was kept, and a review of websites for institutions in North Carolina that offer the Yellow Ribbon Program was performed. Credibility, dependability, and transferability of the results were sought through member checks, peer debriefing, and external audits.

Conclusions showed most women veterans are non-traditional students that are not easily identified on campus. Some do not identify with being a veteran but do affiliate with men more than women. In addition, some women veterans seek educational opportunities in military towns due to familiarity and comfort. Many women veterans are anxious to earn their degrees and begin new careers. Therefore, the location and program delivery are important to them. Moreover, supportive staff, faculty, as well as the need for organizations and space is important to some of the woman.

## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

### **History of Women in the Military**

Women have served the United States of America in each and every military conflict throughout history of the country (Department of Veterans Affairs, 2011a). Women's roles varied depending on the conflict and time in history. Some women fought in the Revolutionary War and Civil War impersonating men, others were operators and nurses overseas during World War I (WWI), as well as members of the Women's Army Corps (WACS) that performed non-combat duties during World War Two (WWII) (Hughes, 2011). Women's military involvement was limited until the 1990s. The Persian Gulf War brought about new approaches to warfare as well as increased opportunities for women in the military based on their knowledge and abilities (Kasinof, 2013; Sherrow, 2007).

### **Opportunities for Women Today**

The new approaches to warfare and increased opportunities based on knowledge and abilities during the Persian Gulf War created even more opportunities for women of today to serve in combat based on their qualifications and abilities (New York Times, 2013). Despite concerns about women's strength, compassion, and dealing with the effects of combat, the United States armed forces no longer bans women from combat (Grossman, 2013). All military departments must set physical requirements for each position that are specific and the same regardless of gender. Military recruits are required to perform at the set levels to serve in a particular role (Grossman, 2013). Some enthusiasts believe this change in policy is long overdue and finally acknowledges

women's important place in the military throughout history as well as today (Mackenzie, 2012).

### **Increasing Number of Women in the Military and Veterans**

While the role of women in the military has officially changed, the number of women serving in the military continues to grow. In 1991, approximately 41,000 women took part in the Persian Gulf War; the largest deployment in the history of the U.S. armed forces at the time (Hughes, 2011). Women now comprise approximately 14% of the active-duty personnel in the U.S. military and approximately 11% of the troops involved in Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) and Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) (see Appendix A for Definition of Terms); this involves changes in roles and combat exposure (Department of Veterans Affairs, 2011a); Baechtold and De Sawal, 2009). An outcome of the increasing number of women serving in the military is a growing number of women veterans seeking to use the benefits and services earned through their service to our country (Department of Veterans Affairs, 2013b). As of September 30, 2013, the total number of veterans in the United States and Puerto Rico was 21,972,964 and 2,271,222 were women; about 10% of the total veteran population (Department of Veterans Affairs, 2013c). According to the Department of Veteran Affairs (VA) (2013), the projected population of women veterans will continue to increase by approximately one percent every five years. As a result, the number of women veterans is projected to be approximately twelve percent of the expected 19,604,276 total veterans in the year 2020 (Department of Veterans Affairs, 2014).



## **Understanding Women Veterans**

As the number of women veterans increases, so does the need for more knowledge and understanding about this special population. The National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics prepared a report for the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) (2013b) that compared women veterans to non-veteran women in age, marital status, family status, education, and quality of life indicators. The median age of female veterans is higher at 49. They tend to get married at a younger age, are more likely to be divorced, and appear to have more children under 18 years of age. In addition, fewer women veterans live in or at the poverty level and therefore have a higher income and are insured, as compared to non-veterans. Furthermore, a higher percentage of female veterans age 35 or older have earned a Bachelor's or an advanced degree. So, women veterans have attended more formal education and have obtained more degrees than women who did not serve in the military. In addition, when compared with their male veteran counterparts, a higher percentage of female veterans have completed some college, a Bachelor's degree, or an advanced degree.

### **Educational Benefits**

Some women veterans seek to use educational benefits they have earned in service to our country. The *Women Veterans Profile*, provided by the VA (2013b), indicated the percentage of women veterans attending college for the following age groups: 38.1 percent for 17-24, 34.4 percent for 25-34, 12.7 for 35-54, and 2.3 for 55 and up. The Post 9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Program (Post-9/11 GI Bill) is the program most women veterans use when they transition to institutions of higher education due to the specific requirements.

### **Post 9/11 GI Bill and the Yellow Ribbon Program**

We have learned from the preceding profile information that women veterans value education and some will pursue additional classes and degrees. The Post-9/11 GI Bill provides qualified veterans' thirty six months of full-time educational benefits that include tuition and fees, a stipend for books and supplies, as well as a housing allowance (Department of Veteran Affairs, 2013d). Women veterans also may be participating in the Yellow Ribbon Program if they attend one of the participating colleges and universities across the United States. The Yellow Ribbon Program involves an agreement between the Veterans Affairs (VA) and participating institutions to match a predetermined amount of funds for an agreed upon number of qualified veterans at each institution per year (Redden, 2009). This program is available to provide the opportunity for veterans to attend the college and university of their choice regardless of cost. It helps fill the gap for some of the out of state and private institutions within higher education (Redden, 2009).

### **Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder**

Women veterans value education, have earned educational benefits through their service, and some plan on pursuing additional classes and degrees. Therefore, it is important to know what conditions and behaviors have resulted for some women veterans due to their military experience. Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), Military Sexual Trauma (MST), and the use of substances as related to women veterans are all important topics that educators need to prepare for in serving these women (see Appendix A for expanded definitions of PTSD and MST).

There has been limited empirical research conducted specifically on women and PTSD; however, we do know that women are twice as likely as men to be diagnosed with PTSD (Street, Vogt, & Dutra, 2009).

### **Military Sexual Trauma**

As we learn more about women veterans and PTSD, we also must consider MST and its connection with women veterans as well. When it comes to MST, it is clear that more women in the military are reporting incidents of sexual assault or harassment (Grossman, 2013). Some military women are experiencing wrongful sexual contact, assault, harassment, and rape by other soldiers and officers (Kasinof, 2013). However, seeking justice against perpetrators for sexual trauma in the military is further complicated because many times it is bringing charges against someone in the same unit. (Simeone, 2014). The reported numbers have caught the attention of military leaders with Pentagon officials reporting there were slightly fewer than 1,400 reported cases of sexual harassment and 5,061 reported cases of sexual assault military-wide for the fiscal year ending September 30, 2013 (Simeone, 2014).

### **Connection to Substance Abuse, Dependency, Depression and Suicide**

The numbers of women veterans affected by MST is growing, therefore it is important to know there may be a connection for some women veterans between MST and substance abuse or dependency, depression and PTSD as a result of their experiences (Booth, Mengeling, Torner, & Sadler, 2011) (see Appendix A for expanded definitions of substance abuse or dependency and depression). There needs to be more empirical research conducted to pursue answers on what is unique about women veterans in relation to PTSD, MST, substance abuse or dependency, depression, and suicide.

### **Women Veterans in Higher Education**

While we know some women veterans suffer from conditions of PTSD, MST, and the use of substances are attending colleges and universities, they are not always identifiable. When women veterans seek higher education, they are not necessarily easy to recognize, because they do not always wear clothing or carry items that identifies their relation to the military (Sander, 2012). There is a need for further knowledge, insight, and understanding by those within higher education regarding women veterans to better serve this particular population. The few studies conducted on the transition of veterans to higher education included both genders, but suggested further research focused specifically on women (Livingston, 2009; Ly-Turnbull, 2010; Persky, 2010; Rumann, 2010).

Studies on women veterans that focus on topics other than trauma and the results of combat exposure are also needed. Furthermore, not all women veterans are deployed, deployed to the Middle East, or are affected by combat exposure, but we need to know how to understand and work with any women veteran regardless of the individual experience. This knowledge is essential to better facilitate advocacy, as well as the personal and academic achievement of this student population in colleges and universities (Ryan, Carlstom, Hughey & Harris, 2011).

### **Intentionality and Personal Approach**

How can educators better understand and help women veteran students as they adapt to higher education? Efforts to increase the success of women veterans involve being intentional and personal with programs and services such as mentoring, learning communities, counseling, and women veterans support groups (Baechtold, 2011). Some

all-women colleges are seeking to attract and recruit women veterans based on their institutional missions that focus on education and services exclusively for women (Sander, 2012). The Women's College Coalition is made up of 44 colleges and universities for women across the United States. They were founded early in the history of our country to provide women the opportunity to develop strong academic, social, and leadership skills in an environment focused on them as individuals. These institutions also provide women the opportunity to pursue degrees and careers historically dominated by men.

### **Awareness of Differences**

Now that we know the importance of intentionality and the personal approach in working with women veterans, it is essential for educational professionals to be aware of the differences in individual students. Administrators, faculty, and staff need to be aware of the different experiences women veterans have had compared to traditional college students. Women veterans have served their country, they have made personal career decisions, they have been away from home, and they have faced difficult situations and challenges based on their individual responsibilities and experiences during their military service. This makes them different from most traditional as well as some non-traditional students. Their military service sets them apart.

Many of these women veterans have dealt with gender identity issues during their military service. The military is dominated by men and women veterans have had to prove themselves repeatedly in relation to their abilities and knowledge. They were around men during their military service, work, and in social situations. Therefore, some of the women participants in this study are more comfortable interacting with men even

now that they are out of the military. This could provide challenges for some women veterans as they transition to higher education due to more women attending college across the United States. In addition, there are many female faculty, staff, and fellow students.

Self-identity is another challenge beyond gender identity that affects some women veterans as they transition from the military to higher education. Women veterans have lived and worked within the military environment for a number of years. They identify with wearing uniforms, discipline, regimen, and taking or giving orders. Higher education is an environment where the student must find her own way deciding on a degree and career as well as figuring out the process on her own. There is no rank, giving and taking of orders, and specified duties outlining daily routines. This type of environment may prove to be very frustrating for some women veterans.

Mental health issues are also challenges that face some women veterans in addition to self-identity development. Depression, suicide, PTSD, MST, as well as substance use and abuse are conditions some women veterans live with on a daily basis. While some traditional and other non-traditional students suffer from these same conditions, more is being learned about the relationship between serving in the military, combat exposure, and these mental illnesses in women veterans. Education professionals need to be knowledgeable of these conditions for all students, but especially aware of how women veterans may be affected in different ways and in higher numbers. There is a need for a supportive and nonthreatening environment for all women veterans, but especially for those suffering from poor mental health conditions (Baechtold & De Sawal, 2009).

Many of the limited number of studies pertaining specifically to women veterans focus on the stress and trauma women experience as a result of their deployment in the most recent military conflicts of Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) or Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF). As the involvement of more women in the military and their experiences with conflicts increase, so does the need for research regarding the effects these involvements have on their overall health, their transition to civilian life, as well as their adaption to higher education.

### **Background of the Study**

There have been a limited number of studies conducted on the transition and adaptation of student veterans to higher education examining either gender. Some qualitative inquiries focused on the first-time enrollment or re-enrollment of student veterans at specific community colleges (Wheeler, 2012; Rumann, 2010; Persky, 2010). Additional qualitative studies focused on the full-time enrollment of student veterans at three different universities (DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2008) and the re-enrollment of student veterans at a large, four-year public, land grant institution in the southeastern United States (Livington, 2009). Furthermore, a research study using a mixed-methods design focused on full-time and part-time women veterans seeking a degree at a mid-sized regional state university (Kurz, 2013).

Some of the results of these studies indicated need for a centralized, holistic, or streamlined approach to services for student veterans in regards to veteran services, offices specializing in financial aid, counseling, advising, disability services, and student organizations (DiRamio et al., 2008; Wheeler, 2012; Rumann, 2010). In addition, some results suggested the need for a student veteran orientation as well as specific faculty and

staff training in order for these individuals to have a true understanding of the student veteran population (DiRamio et al., 2008; Persky, 2010; Wheeler, 2012). Findings by Ly-Turnbull (2010) stress the importance of funding, support systems, as well as military training, values, and relationships to veteran students as contributions to veteran success in higher education. Some results of Kurz's (2013) analysis suggested the need for more accessibility for physically disabled veterans in addition to services for those veterans suffering from PTSD and other mental health problems. Five of the seven aforementioned studies, the majority of the participants being men, recommended future research on women veterans (DiRamio et al., 2008; Rumann, 2010; Persky, 2010; Livingston, 2009; Ly-Turnbull, 2010).

Despite the limited studies on student veterans, there is no easily identifiable information on targeted programs and services for women veterans. A review of websites for participating Yellow Ribbon Program colleges and universities in North Carolina indicates the existence of programs and services for student veterans is lacking or the on-line communication about them is missing (see Appendix B for the website search results). Only fourteen of the thirty-six institutions, identified in an internet search, have special programs and there are only fourteen clubs and organizations in existence between all of the institutions. Many of the websites only indicate financial benefits; with limited information in the areas of special programming, services, and organizations for student veterans, and more specifically, women veterans.

### **Central Phenomenon and Purpose Statement**



The central phenomenon for this study was the transition and adaptation of women veterans as full-time, baccalaureate degree-seeking students at colleges and universities.

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the transition and adaptation of full-time, baccalaureate, degree-seeking female veterans at colleges and universities that offer the Yellow Ribbon Program in the state of North Carolina (NC).

The Yellow Ribbon Program is a voluntary partnership between participating colleges and universities (Degree Granting Institutions) and the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) that makes additional educational funds available to veterans; the program does not affect the Post 9-11GI Bill entitlement for veterans. Institutions make their own decisions on the number of available spots as well as the amount of tuition and fees that will be contributed; the VA matches the set amount and the funds are forwarded directly to the colleges and universities (Department of Veterans Affairs, 2013d).

Program participation is limited to veterans or their beneficiaries with the maximum benefit rate based on service experience. Spouses are not eligible for this program. Veterans may be qualified for the Yellow Ribbon Program if they served three years of active duty after September 10, 2001, were honorably discharged from active duty due to a service disability, or served thirty continuous days after September 10, 2001. The eligibility of dependents for the Yellow Ribbon Program is based on the Post-9/11 GI Bill and the veteran's service meeting the established criteria (Department of Veterans Affairs, 2013d).

This study was designed to answer the following central question and sub-questions.

### **Research Questions**

1. What is the transition and adaptation experience like for women veterans who have left the military and are in higher education?
2. What aspects of women veterans' personal situations affect their transition and adaptation to higher education?
3. What kinds of support systems do women veteran describe experiencing and depending on during their transition and adaptation to higher education?
4. What do women veterans identify as strategies they use in their transition and adaptation to higher education?

### **Theoretical Framework**

An initial model regarding life transitions by Schlossberg (1981) suggests individuals experience multiple, non-sequential changes throughout their lives and reactions vary based on factors affecting the adaptation (role, affect, the source, timing, onset, duration, and amount of stress), pre and post transition environments (interpersonal support systems and physical setting), and specific characteristics of the individual (psychosocial competence, sex, age or life stage, health, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, values, and previous experience). Schlossberg's Transition Theory (2011) considers the need for understanding transitions (anticipated, unanticipated, nonevent) and how individuals cope and adapt to life-altering change. Individuals cope and adapt to transitions differently based on time, resources, and challenges that can be organized into the four main categories of situation, self, supports, and strategies. This is Schlossberg's (2011) 4 Ss System for Coping with Transitions.

Ryan, Carlstrom, Hughey, and Harris (2011) suggest Schlossberg's 4 Ss model (2011) regarding transition be used in advising and working with student veterans on college campuses. The approach provides the opportunity for college faculty and staff to assess each student veteran and to determine how to best advise them for success. It is important to know the motivation behind a student veteran's pursuit of higher education (personal plan, event, circumstance); how they feel about being a student in higher education versus their specific role in military life; if they see this venture in higher education as being temporary; and their current use and need of support systems. The 4 Ss model can be used by higher education professionals to provide a method and approach to obtain a baseline of information about student veterans in order to provide the support this unique population needs to succeed in college.

Schlossberg's Transition Theory (2011) has been used in qualitative studies about student veterans in college by Livingston (2009), Ly-Turnbull (2010), Rumann (2010), and Persky (2010). However, this research had participants of both genders and all of the previously mentioned researchers recommended studies on women student veterans be conducted due to the change in roles within the military, their ever-increasing numbers with the military, as well as to discover what unique characteristics and needs may exist to better understand this population. These studies did not consider the potential differences involving gender and the transition of student veterans to higher education. For this reason, Schlossberg's Transition Theory (2011) provided the opportunity to seek information regarding each women veteran's situation, self, supports, and strategies to discover what similarities and differences existed between individual veterans.

### **Limitations and Assumptions**

Limitations existed in the method of sampling, the number of participants, a lack of interest or participation by some women veteran students at the selected sites, as well as difficulty with the collection of the data. In addition, the original letter and flyer that described the research study was worded in such a way some individuals thought student women veterans had to be enrolled in the Yellow Ribbon Program to be study participants (see Appendix E for the letter and Appendix F for the flyer about the study). Information was sent out to all institution contacts to clarify this information, but this may have had an effect on the final number of participants in the study.

An assumption regarding the study was that reaching out to all colleges and universities participating in the Yellow Ribbon Program across one state would increase the pool of possible participants because of the partnership between these institutions and the VA to provide additional funding to assist veterans in pursuing higher education if the need exists. In addition, it was assumed that it would take intentional, clear, and consistent communication to establish effective rapport to gain gatekeepers' support at each college or university location. Creswell (2008) states, "a gatekeeper is an individual who has an official or unofficial role at the site, provides entrance to a site, helps researchers locate people, and assists in the identification of places to study" (p. 640). Furthermore, it was assumed study results would illuminate the need for special and separate services for women veterans on the college and university campuses

### **Chapter Summary**

Chapter one provided an introduction and background for the study that includes a brief snapshot of women throughout history in the military, the growth in the number of women who serve in the military, and the changes in the military that have brought about increased opportunities for women. In addition, information on the educational benefits

earned through military service and the need for further understanding of women veterans and their mental health was included. Furthermore, information was provided about the differences in women veterans, the need for intentional and personal approaches by those in higher education, and the need for more knowledge and understanding of this special student population.

The introduction and background information in Chapter One is followed by the problem statement for the study, the four research questions, and the theoretical framework, which provided guidance and direction for this study. In addition, limitations, and assumptions are provided.

Chapter 2 provides a review of the literature on women veterans and related topics needed to provide the foundation for the study. The volume of research on women veterans and related topics was minimal. Therefore, the literature was reported in categories that informed the study.

## CHAPTER TWO: A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

### **Introduction**

The percentage of women in the United States of America's military has unceasingly increased over the decades and their roles as well as their responsibilities continue to evolve. Many of these women veterans are planning to or have entered campuses of higher education to use the educational benefits they have earned through their military service. It is important that administrators, faculty, staff, and students on college and university campuses throughout the country have the knowledge and understanding about this special group of non-traditional students to make their educational experience a successful endeavor.

### **Categories of Research**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the transition and adaptation of full-time, baccalaureate, degree-seeking women veterans at colleges and universities in the state of North Carolina (NC) that offer the Yellow Ribbon Program (see Appendix B). The volume of research on the specific topic of transitions from the military to higher education was minimal; however, the existing literature as well as revealing and supportive works informed this study. The seven main categories represented in the review of literature are non-traditional students, changing roles, effects of combat exposure, mental and physical health, student veteran initiatives, the transition from the military to higher education, and supportive trends for student veterans. The initial topic explored in the review of literature is non-traditional students followed by changing roles. The research subtopics covered through the effects of combat are Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) post-deployment mental health, interpersonal trauma, sexual assault,

harassment, and Military Sexual Trauma (MST), and gender differences. The fourth main category within the review of literature, mental and physical health, is divided into the six sub-categories of PTSD and substance misuse, hazardous drinking, alcohol use, suicide and substance use, amputation and psychosocial adjustment. Homelessness is the fifth main category, followed by transition from the military to higher education as the sixth. The seventh main category represented in the review of literature is student veteran initiatives and it is organized into the subtopics of programs, preparation, and organizations. Supportive trends for student veterans complete the literature review represented by the subcategories of advisory councils and assessment, special services, and disabled student services.

Non-traditional students have been a growing population of students in higher education over the last two decades and women veterans are a sub-set of the non-traditional women population due to their age and life experiences. Shank, Winchell, and Myers (2001) conducted a study with the purpose of understanding the unique needs of non-traditional women students. They conducted their study on a mid-western campus with a sample that consisted of 197 non-traditional students representing both genders. Age was the determining factor for the selection of participants as they had to be 25 years old or over in age. The research questions sought answers about what degrees were wanted, important factors connected to college attendance, important services, and characteristics of distinct market for non-traditional women. Study participants were interviewed over a period of three years by the university's admissions staff. The K-means of clustering was used and three groups of non-traditional students developed from this process; Support Driven, Academics, and Caregivers. The Support Driven group

was the largest, 71% female, and identified services as needed for their success.

Academics, the second largest group, was 61% female and supported the notion that academics are the greatest concern for non-traditional students. The Caregivers was the last group, 92% women, and indicated the need for services and support focused on career and financial need.

More women were interested in degrees in business, a class format that was non-traditional and at times not usually available based on their work schedules. Shank et al. (2001) suggested each university should assess the needs of their non-traditional women students to discover what degrees they want, program delivery details, as well as what services they require. Shank et al. (2001) remark that this takes time and investment, but the growth in enrollment is worth it for the institution.

Parks, Evans, and Getch (2013) conducted a study that focused on another group of non-traditional students, baby boomers as they approach retirement age. This study took place at a large, mostly traditional university in the southeast. It looked at the experiences of seven participants from a special program for those 62 and over, with only one participant taking classes towards a degree. In this study, each participant experienced two semi-structured interviews. Through the following analysis, two themes were discovered: 1) concern about becoming a part of campus life, and 2) the veterans' motivations for returning to education. With regard to the first theme isolation, feeling like second-class students, and positive faculty interactions resulted from becoming part of campus life. For the theme regarding motivation, it was found that lifelong learning was the primary reason for returning to education.



In conclusion of their study, Parks et al. (2013) suggest colleges and universities need to explore policies and procedures for attracting and maintaining this segment of non-traditional students. They also indicate that developing programs, structures, and faculty training to support this student population would be more than appropriate.

Christian (1993) wrote an educational article about non-traditional women students and how women working in education could play an important part in the success of these students. While Christian's article is not empirical research, the content informs and supports the current study. Non-traditional students are a growing population of students on college campuses that are seeking degrees to develop themselves further for their careers. They usually come to school during a significant transition in their lives such as unemployment, children leaving home, or personal development. Also, some non-traditional students wear many hats as they are wives, mothers, bread winners, a community member, and more. Non-traditional students bring an element of maturity and experience to the classroom that is usually missing with traditional students. While they serve as role models for younger students, they require a number of support services to assist them in their success.

Christian (1993) suggests a number of ways women educators can support these non-traditional women as they pursue their degree by giving them a push when they need it, encouraging those thinking about pursuing a degree, using the personal touch by sharing a bit of your own story, providing praise, discussing options, and offering remedial courses. Christian (1993) also recommends institutions of higher education are still behind in recognizing and adjusting services for this population of students and that they would be rewarded by focusing some efforts on behalf of these students.

### **Changing Roles and Opportunities for Women**

The number of women and opportunities continue to grow for women in the military. However, the opportunities for women to serve in positions of leadership is still lacking in the Army. Major Jacqueline Escobar (2013) contributed an article that explained the current state of women leaders in Army with a focus on diverse decision-making groups. Studies have confirmed, groups with a more diverse representation, including more women, are regularly more successful. Escobar s, asserts, “Every year, talented women leave the military profession to seek opportunities where their gender is less of an impediment to success” (p. 78).

In September of 2011 there were 19.93% of women at the company grade, 13.82% at field grade, and a mere 6.05% at general grade. The Army has required those seeking senior level positions of leadership to have a certain amount of experience and combat is part of the requirement for three-star and four-star general positions. Since the opportunities for women to serve in combat have not been allowed or severely limited, it is exceedingly difficult for women to have the experiences needed to even be taken into consideration for senior leadership positions. Women are assigned to support units and are attached to combat units as needed for specific missions. In addition, there are still policies in place for dual-military families and single-parent households. These policies force, mostly women, to make decisions about remaining in the Army and having a marriage and family.

According to Escobar (2013), the military should be setting the example in the area of diversity throughout all levels of the organization not lagging so far behind. She concludes that every woman lost to professions that are more open to promoting

individuals based on ability is a loss for the Army and our country. Escobar (2013) suggests the need for policy changes in order to remove what she called the Kevlar Ceiling.

Lyle (2014) contributed an article on the Department of Defense webpage that covered the January 2013 decision to discontinue the 1994 Direct Ground Combat Definition and Assignment Rule and allow anyone, regardless of gender, the opportunity to serve in most military roles based on ability and qualifications. There still may be positions closed to women, but leaders will be required to present detailed information that presents valid reasoning for excluding women by January 2016. The goal for the military is to create a standard for most positions that is gender-neutral.

### **Effects of Combat Exposure**

The changes that have occurred in the military mean expanded opportunities for women and the possibility of more women in combat is very real. Therefore, it is important to know more about how women are affected by combat exposure. Street, Vogt, and Dutra (2009) propose that models focusing on deployment (war zone) and PTSD are male-centered and must be adapted to include female experiences. They reviewed the minimal literature on PTSD and the connected issues among women veterans. Street et al. (2009) focused on Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) and Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) and the issues males face in relation to combat exposure (see Appendix A for information on OIF and OEF). Sexual assault and harassment, interpersonal stressor exposure, pre - and post- military interpersonal trauma, homecoming adjustment, and a discussion of future direction were included. The challenge is to adapt models that focus on males in relation to Post- Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and combat trauma to include today's Operation Enduring Freedom

(OEF) and Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) women veterans. Street et al. suggests the need for research geared towards the prevention of trauma and challenges in mental health for both genders (2009).

Seelig, Jacobson, Smith, Hooper, Gackstetter, Ryan, Wells, Wadsworth, and Smith (2012) conducted a longitudinal quantitative study focused on the relationship between combat exposure and the mental health of three groups of military troops in deployments after September 11, 2001. Seelig et al. (2012) analyzed the survey responses from the Millennium Cohort questionnaire as part of a 7-year longitudinal study, baseline and one or two follow-ups, as well as military and demographic records to assess the 17,481 participants in regards to PTSD, depression, and anxiety disorders. The results of the study indicated combat exposure increased the likelihood of experiencing mental health symptoms of PTSD more so than depression or anxiety disorders. The probability of these symptoms also increased with prior combat, smoking, stress, poor sleep, drinking, pregnancy, and pre-and post-partum. In addition, results showed the exact opposite about education and National Reserves or Guard. Symptoms were less likely to occur with higher education and participation in the National Reserves or Guard. The prospect of all mental health issues, PTSD, depression and anxiety disorders increased significantly with the presence of prior combat exposure. The location of deployment also resulted in noticeable differences in women study participants. Mental health issues such as PTSD symptoms were more prevalent in women who served in Iraq, while PTSD or anxiety disorders were more likely in those deployed elsewhere. Seelig et al. (2012) concluded deployment experience of combat exposure, or lack thereof, directly affects the likelihood of mental health complications when compared directly with non-

deployed women. Therefore, those participants deployed without exposure to combat were also less likely to experience mental health problems.

Limitations of the Seelig et al. (2012) study includes a non-representative sample, self-reported data, and the possibility of misclassifications of mental health issues. However, one strength of the study is the generalizability of findings to all branches of the military, as well as woman veterans.

### **Mental and Physical Health of Women Veterans**

With increased opportunities for women to serve in combat, it is essential to explore any possible connections between combat exposure and the mental and physical health of women veterans. Hassija, Jakupcak, Maguen, and Shipherd (2012) conducted a quantitative study involving a sample of women veterans surveyed about the effects of combat and interpersonal trauma exposure on mental health. Posttraumatic stress disorder symptoms (PTSS), depressive symptom severity (DSS) and alcohol misuse were the three health related outcomes used. Features of the research sample were as follows: 115 U.S. women veterans, Gulf I, OEF, OIF war veterans, and Veterans Affairs (VA) healthcare services recipients after returning from deployment. Demographic information included type of duty (active or reserve), conflict, military branch affiliation, age, ethnic background, marital status, and household income.

The data used in this study was a self-report questionnaire used by VA healthcare services upon entry of all veterans into care. The questionnaires obtain information and enable service providers the ability to evaluate veterans about interpersonal trauma (lifetime), childhood neglect, abuse (physical or sexual), and adult assault (sexual and physical).

Hassija, Jakupcak, Maguen, and Shipherd (2012) used regression to consider all independent variables in relation to PSS, DSS and alcohol misuse. Combat exposure was the only variable found to be statistically significant in elevating PSS, DSS, and alcohol misuse. Generalizability is limited due to sample size, specific location, self-reported assessment data, and the approach to adult sexual assault. However, the results of this research do indicate an effect of combat exposure on the mental health of women veterans. Therefore, the researchers suggest the importance of screening as part of administering care.

Mattocks, Haskell, Krebs, Justice, Yano, and Brandt (2012) report the number of women in the U.S. military to have grown to approximately 15%. Military personnel, regardless of gender, experience the traumatic experiences of combat such as injuries as well as sexual assault and harassment. Mattocks et al. (2012) involved 19 semi-structured participant interviews in a two phase study of 74 participants that focuses on the care, outcomes and costs regarding the health of OEF/OIF veterans. Results of the 19 interviews of women veterans recognized stressful military experiences and problems faced with reintegration (post-deployment) as the two main stressors. Subgroups of the stressors were combat-related experiences, MST, and separation of family (stressful military experiences) as well as leaving the war behind and disrupted relationship with family and friends (reintegration problems).

Mattocks, Haskell, Krebs, Justice, Yano, and Brandt (2012) were able to identify coping strategies in which participants handle stressors including eating disorders, spending on impulse, the misuse of prescription drugs as well as isolation and avoiding social support. Important themes regarding women veterans illuminated by the

researchers were feelings of being misunderstood, experiencing a lesser role and influence, and believing they are unworthy of treatment and care. Women veterans interviewed expressed life transition complications involving relationships, unemployment, and acceptance of civilian life routines. Additional study results revealed the importance of women veterans connecting to peers as well as the need for additional services in the areas of MST and counseling, childcare, and information on supportive colleges in meeting women veteran needs.

Limitations for Mattocks et al.'s (2012) study involve the population being enrolled in a particular VA healthcare program, variations in the continuum of time participants had returned from deployment, and interviews were conducted in one state with the majority of participants being from the guard or reserves. However, the research conducted by Mattocks et al. (2012) gives us more knowledge and understanding of the women veterans who served in OEF/OIF in regards to their challenges, how they deal with those trials, as well as insight in relation to intervention and prevention measures.

Maguen, Luxton, Skopp, and Madden (2012) bring awareness to professionals working with veterans about the differences between the genders in relation to combat exposure assessment. As part of the pre- and post- deployment process, the 7,251 study participants completed a screening between March 2006 and July 2009, 6,697 were men and 554 were women. Prior IRB approval was obtained by the researchers, but no informed consent was necessary due the use of archival data. The pre- and post-deployment assessment included inquiry items involving demographic and military information, combat exposure, MST, PTSD (Prins, Ouimette, Kimerling, Camerond,

Hugelshofer, & Shaw-Hegwer, 2003), depression symptoms, and the Alcohol Use Disorder Identification Test (AUDIT) for the assessment of alcohol use.

Data analyses of the study consisted of chi-square to explore gender as it relates to combat exposure, MST, and mental health. In addition, multiple regression analyses were completed with the dependent variables PTSD and depression symptoms as well as hazardous alcohol consumption (dependent variables) and the following independent variables: demographics, military, mental health screening scores, combat exposure, and MST. Results indicated higher scores for women in regards to MST and depression symptoms. Men were higher in combat exposure (to be expected) as well as hazardous alcohol consumption, but there were no differences in gender in regards to PTSD symptoms.

Limitations of the study included participants coming from one location, a single group of veterans, self-reported measures, possible biases among the soldiers (truthful or not), and the span of time out of the service in relation to the screening (short term, not further removed). Results indicate the need to broaden the scope of traumatic experiences in combat between men and women. Future research suggested longitudinal studies about gender and outcomes related to mental health.

### **Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and Substance Misuse**

One of the mental health conditions experienced by women veterans is Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Nunnink, Goldwaser, Heppner, Pittman, Nievergelt, and Baker (2010) completed a study on Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and substance misuse among Operation Enduring Freedom/Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) women veterans. The purpose of the quantitative study was to consider differences in



substance use in women veterans identified as having PTSD and not having PTSD. The participants for the inquiry were obtained by partnering with a study focusing on veterans seeking healthcare by enrolling in a VA medical center in 2006. Fifty or 11% of the participants were women. Each participant provided demographic information and responded to two questions about combat exposure and difficulties with alcohol. In addition, they completed a screen for alcohol problems, as well as the Drug Abuse Screening Test.

Research results indicated 31% of the participants tested positive for PTSD, 47% tested positive for high-risk drinking, and 6% tested positive for drug abuse. In addition, Nunnink et al., (2010) found a correlation between substance abuse and PTSD status; the higher the substance abuse score, the higher the probability of PTSD existence. The study results suggest a growing problem for OEF/OIF women veterans; the reality of a relationship between problematic drinking, substance misuse, and PTSD.

### **Hazardous Drinking**

Hazardous drinking is another condition some women veterans experience as a way of coping with combat exposure and/or mental health issues. Scott, Pietrzak, Mattocks, Southwick, Brandt, and Haskill (2013) conducted a study on hazardous drinking among OEF/OIF/Operation New Dawn (OND) veterans and the differences that exist between genders. The purpose of the study was to explore the hazardous drinking as well as the gender differences in risk and protective factors. Scott et al. (2013) proposed four different hypotheses for their research. They hypothesized males would be more prone to hazardous drinking as well as younger and unmarried members of both genders. Furthermore, Scott et al. (2013), theorized a connection between PTSD,

hazardous drinking, and male veterans as well as PTSD, traumatic events, and hazardous drinking in women veterans. The final hypothesis offered by Scott et al. (2013) was a lack of positive social support for both genders in relation to hazardous drinking.

Scott, et al., (2013) obtained their sample of 634 OEF/OIF/OND veterans from The Women Veterans Cohort Study (WVCS) which was a larger, longitudinal study looking at healthcare utilization, outcomes, and costs. Scott et al. (2013) sent letters to the same number of women and men veterans that participated in the WVCS. Interested individuals spoke to the researchers either in person or by phone. Each possible participant received information on the study, was checked for eligibility, and provided their consent.

Study participants completed a group of assessments that measured hazardous drinking, PTSD, depression, combat exposure, lifetime traumatic events, MST, social support, and freedom from interpersonal conflict. The analysis of the collective data sought significant outliers. The different variables were tested through the utilization of multivariate and bivariate analysis, separate t-tests and chi-square tests for comparison, as well as logistic regressions.

Study results indicated a significant difference in hazardous drinking between male and female veterans; 30.2% (83) verses 16.3% (52). Scott et al. (2013) conducted a multivariate analysis on men in relation to hazardous drinking found they are more likely to be younger, not married, and have less formal education. They also were found to have higher levels of combat exposure, PTSD symptoms, and assaultive trauma. The analysis also established that men experience lower levels of tangible emotional support as well as freedom from conflict. In comparison, the multivariate analysis on women

resulted in younger age, having increased PTSD symptoms, and lower levels of perceived tangible and emotional support. The results also indicated less freedom from conflict for women as well.

The results of the study by Scott et al. (2013) show hazardous drinking exists among both men and women OEF/OIF/OND veterans; especially those younger in age. In addition, gender differences were found in the connection between hazardous drinking and the levels of lifetime trauma, PTSD symptoms, and interpersonal conflict. This information may be important to consider in the treatment of both men and women veterans with alcohol abuse problems.

### **Alcohol Use and Mental Health**

It is important to explore the relationship between the use of alcohol and complications in mental health with women veterans. Creech & Borsari (2014) completed a study to provide more important information on women veterans and alcohol for primary health care providers. The purpose of the study was to consider the connection between alcohol and PTSD, depression, coping strategies, alcohol expectancies, and MST in these women. The study was advertised throughout the VA hospital, a medium sized facility located in New England; however, many of the women veteran participants were obtained through the communication about their upcoming healthcare appointments. The communication about the study took place between January 2010 and May 2012.

Ninety-three women veterans participated in the study after being told about the study, being screened for eligibility and providing consent. Each participant provided demographic information and completed multiple instruments measuring alcohol use

disorder, MST, trauma, coping for stressful situations, and comprehensive effects of alcohol. Creech & Borsari (2014) compared the information between abstainers and those having alcohol within the last month by performing t-tests and chi-squares for continuous and categorical outcomes. They also assessed the relationship between the variables through bivariate correlations. Creech & Borsari (2014) also sought to determine which construct was associated most with alcohol use through the use of hierarchical regression models using the scores for alcohol use as the dependent variable.

The study results indicate significant correlations between alcohol use measures and positive expectancies as well as evaluations. Creech & Borsari (2014) found PTSD symptoms and MST were not related to alcohol use measures; however, depression, positive evaluations, and avoidance coping were predictors of alcohol use. In addition, they discovered the interaction between avoidance coping and positive evaluations significantly positive. The findings of this research by Creech & Borsari (2014) suggest the need for attention to the use of alcohol in the treatment of women veterans as well as additional studies on the relationship of MST and alcohol use.

### **Suicide and Substance Use**

The possible connection between suicide and substance use with women veterans is important to consider. Chapman & Wu (2014) conducted a literature review that focused on women veterans' mental health, suicide, substance use, and their possible connection. They completed this review to highlight the limited research on women veterans concentrated in mental health as well as to illuminate the need for more research on this quick-growing population as a whole. Chapman & Wu accomplished their search

through the use of Google Scholar, PubMed, and PsychINFO; substance use, female veterans, and suicide were the terms used in the exploration.

A total of seventeen articles remained after the review of titles, abstracts, and bibliographies for the initial result of 308 articles. Nine of the research studies covered the topic of completed suicide among veterans and three studies on VA treated veterans and completed suicide without substance use being considered as a possible cause. Furthermore, the research resulted in five inquiries that focused on VA treated veterans and the connection between substance use and suicide, both attempted and completed.

Chapman & Wu (2014) found through their search, that a larger number of veterans, including women, have committed suicide when compared to nonveterans. There also was a connection found between completed suicide, past trauma, age (younger), and mental health disorders; substance use was not considered. In addition, mental illness diagnoses were found to be more prevalent in women veterans and those with a substance use disorder (SUD) were more likely to complete suicide than men with an SUD. Chapman & Wu discovered existing data that indicates the existence of an increased probability that women veterans may experience a link between substance use and suicidal tendencies. That probability may increase exponentially for women veterans with mental illness disorders. However, more studies are needed on women veterans substance use and suicide for further understanding.

### **Amputation and Psychosocial Adjustment**

In addition to seeking information about substance use and suicide in women veterans, it is also important to consider the adjustment individuals must go through when they lose a limb. Cater (2012) conducted a qualitative phenomenological study on the

psychosocial adjustment of six military women to traumatic amputation due to the absence of inquiry in this area. The study sought to gather important insight from six military women who knew this experience first-hand by loss of limb in combat (1 or more) or by a deployment while using a prosthetic device. The volunteer participants for this study were found through the use of technology (media and social media) and other individuals (snowball). They participated in segmented or complete, one-on-one, detailed, and recorded interviews via Skype (Call Recorder software) or V-Tel Teleconferencing (Quick Time movie or audio) with questions focused on background, military experience, being an amputee, change, and loss.

Cater (2012) validated the data through triangulation and the use of field notes, member checking, blogs, posted interviews, and published interviews. Transcriptions were analyzed for meaning through the use of units, clusters and themes. The three emergent themes were adjustment issues (physical disability), adjustment and coping skills (psychosocial), and protective factors. The participants discussed changes in self-image, future career views, how others perceive them, loss of self-defense ability, pain, courage, perseverance, and being wounded warriors (not disabled). Sample size, biases, one combat zone, singular race, and no face-to-face interviews were some possible limitations to this study. An additional potential limitation of this inquiry was the difference of volunteer participants from other amputees. A main discovery of this study was the resiliency and adaptation present in female veterans with traumatic limb loss.

### **Homelessness**

It is important to consider how combat exposure, substance abuse, mental health conditions, and suicide are connected for some women veterans. However, homeless is

an additional condition that affects women veterans. Hamilton, Poza, and Washington (2011) found a holistic approach should be implemented for understanding homelessness experiences of women veterans, taking risk factors and their traumatic experiences into consideration. The qualitative study used three focus groups consisting of 29 homeless women veterans who were recruited with the assistance of a homeless women veteran's coordinator in Los Angeles, California. The semi structured focus groups were conducted at an urban VA site where snacks and gift bags with personal items valued at \$25 were offered to each participant. The following nine primary causes that contribute towards homelessness for veteran women were found as a result of the study : 1) pre-military adversity, 2) military trauma and/or substance abuse, 3) interpersonal violence, 4) abuse, 5) and termination of intimate relationships (post-military), 6) mental illness, 7) substance abuse, 8) and/or medical uses (post-military), 9) and unemployment. Re-victimization, the various connected risk factors, and trauma-informed care are all part of the holistic approach towards understanding homelessness for veteran women.

Tsai, Rosenheck, and Kane (2014) sought to look at the differences between homeless male and female veterans over a 1-year period of time once referred and admitted to a particular housing program. They used the 43,853 homeless veterans as their sample; these veterans had been both referred to and admitted to the Housing and Urban Development – Veterans Affairs Supportive Housing (HUD-VASH) program. The initial homeless veteran sample was made up of 4,686 (10.69%) women veterans and 39,167 (89.31%) men veterans that had been admitted into the program. Tsai et al. (2014) hypothesized that women veterans; would be less likely to have an SUD and more

likely to have mood and anxiety disorders as well as children living with them. They also predicted women would have superior results in the 1-year period.

Tsai, Rosenheck, and Kane (2014) found their initial hypotheses pertaining to women veterans, SUDs, mood and anxiety disorders, and children to be true; however, the thought about women veterans experiencing more of these elements did not materialize. The results were basically the same between women and men veterans. Tsai et al. did discover that women veterans in the HUD-VASH program experienced advantages over their male counterparts by being accepted to the program more quickly and establishing effective professional relationships with case workers; therefore, resulting in more assistance with finding work. These results for women veterans may be directly related to their characteristics of age (younger), experience of hardship and imprisonment for shorter periods of time, and fewer problems with substances than male veterans. However, the authors suggested more research is needed on women veterans in relation to noncombat trauma, family-oriented services, and PTSD.

### **Transition from the Military to Higher Education**

#### **Veterans' Transitions to College**

Now that we have considered some of the challenges and conditions women veterans face, we must explore the transition to higher education. Wheeler (2012) conducted a qualitative case study focused on the changes Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) and Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) veterans experienced when they completed military deployments and focused on education at a community college. Schlossberg's (1981) Theory of Adult Transitions was applied in the study to help bring understanding to the transition process of veterans as first time college students. Non proportional quota and snowball sampling were used to obtain participants using semi-structured interviews



at a community college in upstate New York, which enrolled a significant number of veterans. The nine study participants were OEF/OIF veterans who had completed their military careers and were attending community college for the first time. The three themes of academic experience, personal connections, and benefit bureaucracy emerged through the interviews. The results suggested the following about working with veterans: 1) a need for creating a specific office to serve veterans and their needs (healthcare and academic advising), 2) transition programs to facilitate the move from military to civilian life (life skills), 3) family programs that lead to understanding of military experiences and a network of support, 4) the intentional creation of locations and methods of connection for veterans (social area and peer mentors), 5) veteran-specific orientation, 6) faculty/staff training, 7) opportunities for connection to campus, and 7) the demonstration of value towards the population (such as parking, study areas, events).

DiRamio, Ackerman, and Mitchell (2008) completed a qualitative, grounded theory study with 25 (6 women and 19 men) OEF/OIF veterans who were enrolled full-time at three different universities to gain insight and understanding of veterans' experiences for greater student success. Schlossberg's adult transition theory was again used as a theoretical framework to provide direction in the study on the transitions of student veterans (Schlossberg, Waters, & Goodman, 2006). Purposeful sampling was used to get participants for the semi-structured interviews. The inquiries and data analysis resulted in four main themes of joining the military, deployment, serving in a war zone, and moving from combat to classroom (Ackerman, DiRamio, & Mitchell, 2009). Results provided guidance for higher education professionals by offering the suggestions of using a holistic approach, a specific orientation, and designated contacts

for veterans instead of multiple offices and connections (financial aid, counseling, faculty, institutional research, academic advising, disabilities services, student organization). DiRamio et al. (2008) make a point to mention women veterans because of their increasing numbers and the subthemes of financial strain (fiscal situation, single parenthood, etc.) and sexual violence (harassment, assault, etc.) that emerged through the analysis of the interviews. The transition from military life and deployment is exceedingly difficult for some student veterans and this study sought to improve the work with this special population.

Rumann (2010) conducted a phenomenological study focused on veterans re-enrolled in two-year colleges following deployment. Participants were identified by purposeful sampling and two community colleges were selected as the sites due to number of educational options, flexibility, cost, and focus on adult-oriented education. Six veterans participated in a series of three semi-structured, recorded interviews (five men and one woman). Schlossberg's transition theory was the theoretical framework used to design interview questions focused on returning to college, self and situation assessments, support systems, and strategies. The interviews were transcribed, observations recorded, and the coding process resulted in the following four themes: negotiating the transition, interactions with others, changes in perspective and increased maturity, and re-situating personal identities. Prolonged engagement, persistent observation, member checking, and peer debriefing, were used by the researcher to provide credibility and reliability to the study. Limitations of the study were the low number of participants, finding participants, perceived bias the researcher's non-veteran, non-military background, and the lack of generalizability to other institutions and

veterans collectively. Suggestions for future research were to interview varied groups of veterans including not just re-enrolled, student veterans with disabilities, women veterans (growing number, scarcity of empirical studies, gender-related stressors), veterans at private institutions, those enrolled in for-profit institutions, and the use of Schlossberg's theory in regards to understanding the changes or transitions of college students.

Persky (2010) conducted a qualitative case study to further understand student veterans as well as the programs and services important for success. Three research questions were used in the study that focused on perceived needs of veterans, program and services, and improvement of the community college experience for veterans. The research site was a large community college with approximately 1,300 enrolled veterans. Criterion and chain sampling as well as sampling criteria (separate student, faculty, staff, and administrator criteria) were used to obtain and form five participant focus groups. Focus group sessions were conducted and multiple data collected through observations, field notes, documents, as well as a questionnaire. Participants were asked to complete the questionnaire before taking part in their particular focus group. The focus group recordings were transcribed and all data was organized through the use of the research questions. Analysis of the data resulted in five major themes related to veterans' point of view regarding the needs at the case institution: credit streamlining; streamlining of program and services; training for faculty, advisors and counselors; encountered difficulties; and what constitutes a veteran friendly campus. Recommendations for future inquiry were to include multiple institutions in studies as well as to examine the needs of women veterans (minority and majority students), and active duty military students who seek postsecondary education.

Livingston (2009) conducted a qualitative, grounded theory study that considered how student veterans dealt with academic and social transitions during re-enrollment. Livingston had a primary research question focused on student management of re-enrollment after the military as well as two secondary inquiries dedicated to academic and social transitions. Semi-structured interviews were led with 15 student veteran students and 2 administrative staff members; Schlossberg's adult transition theory was the theoretical framework for the study. A review of a variety of electronic resources, field notes, interview transcriptions as well as memos resulted in the five themes of military influence, invisibility, support, campus culture, and navigating re-enrollment. Study results suggested future research involving a more representative sample with special consideration for the study of women veterans due to their growing numbers and changing roles in the armed forces. In addition, the researcher suggests studies focused on activated, mobilized, or deployed student veterans; how veterans are received on campuses; student groups with affiliation to the Student Veterans America organization; quantitative studies on financing college; military educational benefits; as well as areas of campus support.

Ly-Turnbull (2010) conducted a qualitative study grounded in Ebaugh's (1988) role exiting theory to better understand the transitional experiences of student veterans and assist them as college students. Role exiting theory consists of the 4 stages of first doubt, seeking alternatives, turning points, and creating the ex-role. Potential participants were obtained through the recommendations of the Director of Veterans Affairs at the university. Twelve (3 female and 9 male) student veterans were interviewed using

questions that included the topics of the military life to civilian life transition, the pursuit of a college education, and available resources.

Interview transcriptions, documents for student veterans on obtaining a college education, interview notes, as well as memos were used in the data analyses. The researcher discovered funding for college; earning a college degree; the support of family; and maintaining the training, values, as well as military relationships are extremely important factors in regards to the transition of student veterans.

Recommendations for professional practice in regards to student veterans are developing a community for student veterans with intentionally identified space, as well as group and individualized services. Study limitations were sample size, lack of generalizability to other institutions and all veterans; more diversified sample recommended as well as future research focused on female veterans in regards to their changing role and experiences in the military.

### **Initiatives to Help Student Veterans**

Special initiatives offered by some colleges and universities are part of the transition to higher education for some student veterans. These special initiatives help them adapt to their new environment. Although not the product of empirical research, important information exists that informs professional practice with military and veteran students on college campuses. These special programs focused on the road to graduation, supportive communities, the assessment of needs, as well as organizations for those students with military or veteran status.

Whikehart (2010) wrote of a grant funded organization for student called Project Graduation on a community college campus. The organization promotes awareness and

assists in the achievement of military and veteran students on campus. The ultimate goal of Project Graduation is to increase the number of students that persist to degree completion. Project Graduation makes the connection to services, organizations, and peer leader programs much easier for military and veteran students. All aspects of the program contribute to the academic and social success of these students.

Nichols-Casebolt (2012) provided information on a program called the Green Zone (GZ). Virginia Commonwealth University chose to focus on creating a more veteran friendly institution with growth in military student enrollment increasing the challenges experienced in relation to benefits, academics, and campus culture. The GZ program, funded by the Aurora foundation, is designed to be a group of interested, supportive, and knowledgeable members of the campus community. It is similar to a program originated for LGBT students. Program participants post a GZ emblem where it is visible to others passing by their office locations so people know they are interested in the success of student veterans. Volunteers are recruited, trained, and supported with on-going communication and information. Military students anonymously assess the program through the program's website.

Francis and Kraus (2012) wrote of the University of Arizona's efforts to prepare for the enrollment or re-enrollment of Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) and Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) veterans returning to campus through the planning of a specific program. Personnel first surveyed veterans on campus to discover more about the characteristics of the population. The population was determined to be non-traditional and not likely to be as actively engaged beyond their academic responsibilities. The university revealed familiar practices used for students in general for this population were

not successful for the veteran population. Veterans wanted a specific veteran space for study, support, and social activities. They created a design for the desired space and asserted themselves with administrators due to changes in space and other support programs not being fast enough to meet their needs. After three years, the authors comment on the lessons learned from this student veterans experience on the University of Arizona's campus. Trust and communication is essential, and the amount, as well as the level of support needed for veterans is vast.

Summerlot, Green, and Parker (2009) focused on the student veteran organization (SVO) and the role this type of group plays in the successful transition of student veterans to college from the military. Student veterans throughout the different wars and military conflicts have faced challenges that may be unique to the particular time in history and the climate (WWII, Vietnam, Cold War).

SVOs are important for support, advocacy, providing a safe environment, supporting a military identify, and providing a social outlet. SVOs originate with student veterans, personnel, or sometimes with a one-time event. They vary in structure and purpose depending on the institution, membership, and some provide social and academic programs while others advocate for student veterans with the administration on important campus issues.

### **Supportive Trends for Student Veterans**

In addition to special initiatives, supportive trends also assist student veteran as they transition to higher education. Ford, Northrup, and Wiley (2009) bring awareness to the supportive efforts of the University of West Florida (UWF) for military students. The effort to make military students a priority begins with the President's Military

Community Advisory Council and the assessment of military students on campus to determine their needs. Military students experience unexpected deployments and they need to be able to withdraw and enroll with very few complications. UWF has collaborated with national organizations in regards to learning as much as possible about the military and to provide needed services and programs. In addition, UWF has made great strides in on-line education and in the development of programs and services through the student affairs' Military Connections Committee and the Student Disability Resource Center (SDRC). Efforts to promote the success of student veterans occur at every level at UWF as well as outside the university with local, state, and national partnerships.

Rumann and Hamrick (2009) recommended considerations for student affairs professionals regarding work with student veterans. Information about educational benefits throughout the different wars, the Selective Service System (SSS), and the transition to an all-volunteer force, as well as the War on Terror is provided. Challenges that include the increased use of National Guard and Reserve forces as well as unit activations, interrupted college enrollment, and extended tours were mentioned (see Appendix A for an expanded definition of the National Guard and Reserve forces). The need for a more personalized and tailored approach on campuses is needed to handle these service complications and more. It can no longer be the one person responsible for all the paperwork and everything else too. In addition, colleges and universities should be intentional in their outreach and enter into external partnerships designed to provide additional and enhanced services needed by student veterans. Finally, we need to learn from each other in regards to veteran students; about challenges and needs in the multiple



areas of programming and services. Higher education needs to be intentional and deliberate in its efforts.

Burnett and Segoria (2009) cover the essential component needed in the successful transition of student veterans with disabilities. Collaboration is necessary between the four entities of Disabled Student Services (DSS), Veterans Service Officer (VSO), the institution, and the community (see Appendix A for an expanded definition of DSS and VSO). Transitions to higher education from the military can be difficult for some students as the existence of a disability can make the transition extraordinarily more challenging. The term disabled is not accepted by many student veterans; therefore many will avoid disclosing any conditions. Colleges and universities will do well if they seek information from past and current students about working with veteran students with disabilities. Faculty and staff need training to better understand student veterans with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI), and conditions requiring classroom accommodations (see Appendix A for an expanded definition of PTSD and TBI). Collaboration and partnerships also need to go beyond the campus to the state and national level (Department of Education and the VA or DOD) to seek policy changes and seek assistance with difficult situations. The support needed for veteran students with disabilities can be established through the intentional establishment of essential collaborations and partnerships.

Church (2009) provides awareness about the increased enrollment of student veterans means growth in number of veteran students with disabilities. In addition, these students often do not disclose and seek accommodations. There are multiple types of physical and mental challenges suffered by some student veterans. However, a number

of mental health conditions including PTSD, TBI, and others are the injuries experienced most by military personnel of the current conflicts in the Middle East (Church, 2009). Student veterans with disabilities have many challenges and campus personnel should continue to work diligently with the identified students on needed programs and services.

### **Literature Summary**

It is important to summarize the information learned about women veterans through this review of literature. The literature review was composed of studies and informative articles focused on non-traditional students, changing roles in the military, women veterans and the effects of combat exposure, their health, and the relation between their health, combat exposure and the use of substances. In addition, the issues of amputation, homelessness, transition to higher education, helpful initiatives and supportive trends were included.

Women veterans are a special segment of non-traditional students on college and university campuses. So, it is important to consider non-traditional students as a group to see what traits might be shared amongst the group. However, it is equally essential to seek the unique trends because non-traditional students are not a homogeneous group. It is important to find out what degrees are desired, the reasons they are attending college, services that are important to them, as well as important characteristics that can assist in the recruitment of more non-traditional students.

They might be seeking degrees to because they are in a period of transition due to a lost job, children leaving, personal development, or for life-long learning. They may be totally focused on their academic pursuits, in need a many services, or specific services for their success. Regardless of the reasons for attending school they are and their

numbers are continuing to increase and they. Non-traditional students bring maturity and experience to the classrooms that benefits traditional students. However, it is easy for these students to feel isolated and not a part of things. It is important to assess the services needed for their success and to provide a more personal touch in supporting them. Sometimes they need a push, some encouragement, a discussion of existing options, and most importantly they need someone to advocate for them.

Women veterans are non-traditional students and some of these women come to colleges and universities having been exposed to combat and therefore experience health challenges. Results of the included studies indicated a connection between combat exposure and mental health warning signs for women; particularly those women that served in Iraq. PTSD is the mental health condition most likely to result due to combat exposure, then depression, followed by anxiety disorders. Previous combat exposure experienced by a woman increases the chances of all mental health problems as well as the misuse of alcohol.

Stress and how it affects the health of women veterans is also significant. It results in stressful military experiences, reintegration problems, MST, as well as being separated from family. Women find different ways to combat the stress they experience through eating spending, the misuse of drugs, and isolation. Men are more likely to turn to hazardous drinking to combat the stress from combat. However, hazardous drinking is a problem that exists for both genders, particularly at a younger age (Scott et al., 2013) and it is a growing problem amongst OEF/OIF women veterans (Nunnink et al., 2010). There were different results found in relation to alcohol and PTSD in particular. More

research is needed to seek knowledge and understanding regarding substance use, PTSD, MST, and other mental health issues as a whole.

Suicide and mental health disorders, as well as amputation are serious topics that must be explored regarding women veterans. When it comes to suicide, more veterans than non-veterans have committed this act and there is a relationship between suicide, past trauma, age, and mental health disorders (Chapman and Wu, 2014). There is an increased likelihood women (over men) will experience some type of mental diagnosis and this could exacerbate the relationship between substance use and suicidal inclinations. When it comes to traumatic limb loss, most women veterans are extremely resilient and adapt well to civilian life (Cater, 2012).

Homelessness is another condition some women veterans face that can be brought about due to either pre-military or post-military occurrences. The pre-military occurrences that could lead to homelessness for some veterans might be adversity, military trauma, substance abuse, interpersonal violence, abuse, or the ending of a relationship. Post-military occurrences that might cause homelessness for some veterans are mental illness, substance abuse, medical issues, unemployment, re-victimization, or trauma (Hamilton et al., 2011).

## CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

The population of women serving in the military, and therefore the number of women veterans continues to increase (Department of Veterans Affairs, 2007; Baechtold and De Sawal, 2009). As women leave the military, many use their educational benefits and transition into higher education (Department of Veteran Affairs, 2013d). They bring their individual experiences, problems, and challenges with them. Colleges and universities need to have the knowledge and understanding necessary to effectively work with these students as they transition into higher education.

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the transition and adaptation of women veterans who became full-time, baccalaureate, degree-seeking students at colleges and universities that offer the Yellow Ribbon Program in North Carolina. I used a phenomenological approach to understand the lived experiences of women veterans through the data analysis and interpretation process (Marshall and Rossman, 2011). I sought participants' experiences about their transition from military life to higher education through the reflections and accounts of their personal involvement. The results of this study allowed me to increase the base of knowledge and understanding needed by personnel at colleges and universities to work more effectively with this particular population of students.

### **Context of the Study**

The study was conducted with participants from four campuses that are a part of two private, church-affiliated institutions located in the southeastern United States. All four campuses are located near military installations or training facilities and offer

programs and curricula delivery geared toward both traditional and non-traditional students.

### **Institution A**

Institution A, originally a liberal arts college, is a private, church affiliated, co-educational university located near the southeastern coast of the United States. The singular campus is located in a large metropolitan area near a major military installation. The total university enrollment is approximately 2,400 students spread across the day, night, and graduate programs. University students are diverse in age, countries of origin, as well as state representation. The university offers bachelors' degrees in over 80 majors and concentrations as well as four master's degree programs. The institution is a NCAA Division III member that offers 20 intercollegiate sports.

### **Institution B/Three Campuses**

Institution B is a private institution that was founded with Christian heritage and in the liberal arts tradition. Formerly a two-year and four-year college, this university is known for its growth as well as its student-centered, transformative, and innovative educational approaches. The university serves students of all ages, offering bachelors and master's degrees in a variety of academic areas. The main campus of the university is located near metropolitan cities as well as military installations and training facilities. The institution has eight campuses within the southeastern region including one virtual campus for its Master's in Business Administration program. Each of these campuses is about 1 to 1 ½ hours apart and they have their own buildings, staffs, and faculty. Participants in the study represent three of the eight campuses of the university.

### **Role of the Researcher**

As a higher education professional with almost twenty years of experience, this researcher has held positions at four different institutions of higher learning. These institutions have varied in their affiliation with church and state, as well as in size, curricula, and mission. However, despite their differences these four colleges and universities have shared one major characteristic; their delivery of education and services to a large population of non-traditional students. While working with traditional college students between the ages of 18-22 was the main reason for entering the profession, I have been drawn by the challenge of working with non-traditional students as well. This ever-growing, diverse, population of students continuously creates the necessity for college and university professionals to consider alternative modes of delivery of educational programs and services. Higher education must change and evolve as students' needs change and evolve.

Most of the non-traditional students I have worked with over the years have varied in age, marital status, previous college, as well as life experiences. However, my eyes were opened to an additional group of non-traditional students when I encountered my first student veteran after the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001. This student was a 42 year retired Marine who entered the university as a freshman. He wanted to have the traditional college experience after having served in the military for over twenty years. I witnessed this student veteran struggle to navigate and adapt to higher education; a very different environment from what he had known in the military. I was moved by the struggles he faced and consequently became interested in learning more about this growing population of students as a whole.

This study is a result of my interest and curiosity in the student veteran population and their educational experience. After an initial investigation, I found the need for further exploration of women veterans in particular, and my inquiry has been focused on that specific population ever since. There was almost no research on the transition of women veterans to higher education. So, I entered into this exploration of women veterans in higher education with much anticipation. It was my role to find participants who were willing to tell their own stories about transition. I did not expect the level of affect and change I experienced as a result of this study.

I did enter this study with existing biases due to my previous work in education and what I thought I knew about the military. My biases consisted of my perception that military personnel choose enlistment over higher education. In addition, I thought women veterans as a whole are proud of their military service. Moreover, I believed there would be a desired separation in services for women veterans on campuses due to their military experiences. I also thought the majority of women in the military did not deploy and the individuals that did would be drawn to each other for support. Furthermore, I thought the transition from the military to higher education for women veterans would be a difficult one with many challenges along the way. However, in spite of my biases and preconceptions, I was able to create an environment of trust in order for participants to share their experiences openly and freely.

### **Research Design**

There are limited studies on women veterans. Many of these inquiries focus on the mental and physical health aspects and the effects of military experience as well as combat exposure. Further study was needed to understand the individual and collective experiences of women veterans as they transition from the military to higher education.



Therefore, I selected a qualitative, phenomenological approach in order to explore and seek meaning of the lived experiences of women veterans through the telling of their individual stories (Marshall & Rossman, 2011; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009).

### **Participant Selection**

Once approval was obtained from the Western Carolina University's Institutional Review Board, a sample of women veterans who were full-time, baccalaureate, degree-seeking students at colleges and universities that offered the Yellow Ribbon Program in North Carolina was purposefully selected to explore the central phenomenon (see Appendix B and C for information on the institutions contacted and not contacted).

The Yellow Ribbon Program involves an agreement between the federal government and participating institutions to match a predetermined amount of funds for an agreed upon number of qualified veterans at each institution per year (Redden, 2009). This program provides the opportunity for veterans to attend the institution of their choice regardless of cost. The Yellow Ribbon Program helps fill the financial gap that exists for some veterans with the cost of attending an out of state or private institution within higher education (Redden, 2009).

A search of college and university websites was conducted to identify the designated certifying official to contact to request their assistance in finding study participants (see Appendix D for information on the certifying officials). Each of the 39 campuses has a designated certifying official responsible for assisting veterans and other military-affiliated students with required documentation for benefits, including the Yellow Ribbon Program. However, the specific name and contact information for the certifying official is not always available on websites, so more staff in specific offices

were contacted initially for the study. The staff were contacted by email, letter, and then through follow-up communication that consisted of e-mail, phone calls, and site visits when necessary to obtain the support needed to find participants. See Table 1 for details about the study correspondence.

Table 1

*Detailed Information about Study Correspondence to Seek Participants*

Type of Correspondence	Amount
Yellow Ribbon Program Institutions Contacted	39
Email messages sent week prior to mailing	78
Letters and flyers mailed	78
Follow-up email messages (2 weeks after mailing)	78
Individual Responses Received from Professionals	24
Additional Personal Contacts Made	12
Interviews Resulting from Personal Contacts	5
Number of Institutions Represented in Responses	20
Private Institutions	16
State Institutions	4

These individuals were asked to identify and contact all potential participants that met the study criteria by email as well as in person when possible. Certifying officials were provided an electronic copy of a letter and flyer that offered details about the study so they were able to use this information in their communication (see Appendix E and F for the letter and flyer). Certifying officials were then asked to contact and describe the study to women veterans and inquire if they were willing to participate. Interested students had a choice to either work through the gatekeeper or to contact me directly to set up their interviews. The certifying officials then provided the names and contact

information for those students interested in participating in the study or had interested students contact me directly by phone or email. In addition, personal professional contacts were used to seek participants as well as snowball sampling. Additional participants were sought through snowball sampling (Smith et al., 2009). The process of obtaining study participants is further illustrated by Table 2. The decision to stop seeking additional participants for the study occurred when participants had no further contacts for me to pursue, and all other efforts to follow up with gatekeepers and personal professional contacts resulted in no added leads.

Table 2

*Process of Obtaining Study Participants*

Process	Number of Participants
Participant Interviews Resulting from Professional Correspondence	10
Participant Interviews Resulting from Other Participants	2
Institutions Represented by Participants	2
Campuses Represented by Participants	4

**Participants.** The participants in the study represented two different institutions, four campuses, and three different age groups. Nine of the participants were 25-30, two were 31-35, and one was 36-40. In addition, they represented four of the service branches of the United States military. Five were veterans of the Army, one of the Navy, two of the Air Force, and four of the Marine Corps. Furthermore, the participants had different experiences with deployment and previous education. Six or 50% of the twelve participants were deployed at least once during their military service, eleven out of the twelve participated in some previous college experience, and six or 50% of the women

were first generation college students. The mean of the participants' years of military service was 5.54 and the mean of the amount of time before they enrolled in college after the military was 24 months. See Table 3 for participant demographic information.

Table 3

*Some Participant Demographic Information*

Demographic Categories	Results			
Age	25-30 (9)	31-35 (2)	36-40 (1)	
Service Branch	Army (5)	Navy (1)	Air Force (2)	Marines (4)
Deployed	Yes (6)	No (6)		
Previous College Experience	Yes (11)	No (1)		
First Generation College Student	Yes (6)	No (6)		

Years in Service (Mean) 5.54

Months before Entering College (Mean) 24

## Data Collection

### Interviews

Once participants were identified for the study, each individual was contacted to schedule a specific date, time, and location for their interview. Once an individual's interview was scheduled, she was assigned a number in order to protect her anonymity. The assigned number was used to identify the participant for the remainder of the study. At the time of each interview, participants completed the Informed Consent Form as well as a Participant Information Form (see Appendix G and H for copies of the Informed

Consent Form and Participant Information Form). The Informed Consent Form provided me with the opportunity to explain the study, discuss their role as a participant, confirm their willingness to participate, as well as withdraw from the study at any time if they so wished. This form also provided me the opportunity to gain each participant's permission to use quotes from their interviews.

The questions that were a part of the Interview Protocol (see Appendix I) offered a framework of inquiry based on the theoretical framework of the study, which utilized Schlossberg's 4s Transition Model (2011). Semi-structured, one-on-one interviews were conducted using the Interview Protocol an initial, yet, adaptable framework for inquiry. And, although Marshall and Rossman (2011) state, "three in-depth interviews compose phenomenological inquiry" (p. 148), each participant in this study was interviewed only one time due to the demands, responsibilities, and availability of the participants. Recognizing the importance of the framework for phenomenological inquiry, every effort was made to collect information about each participant's past, present, and combined experiences through questions asked in the interviews. Interview sessions were audiotaped and brief notes resulted in journal entries (Creswell, 2008). Participants were interviewed at a site of their choice based on their location and schedule as illustrated in Table 4. Three of the interviews were conducted in campus library rooms, five in coffee houses in communities, one outside on university grounds, one each at a fast food and family restaurant, and one in an office. The participant interviews were digitally recorded and I transcribed each of the twelve interviews myself. All forms, digital recordings, interview transcripts, the journal, and other documents related to this study

were kept locked up or were password protected when not in use as to further protect the participants' anonymity.

Table 4

*Date, Length and Location of Participant Interviews*

Participant #	Date	Length	Type of Location
1	4/14/14	1:27:06	University Library Room
2	4/22/14	50:44	Restaurant
3	4/24/14	31:58	Outside on Campus
4	4/27/14	26:23	Fast Food Restaurant
5	4/29/14	56:44	University Library Room
6	5/2/14	38:32	University Library Room
7	5/13/14	47:13	Coffeehouse in Community
8	5/20/14	24:38	Coffeehouse in Community
9	6/3/14	65:39	Private Office
10	6/3/14	59:00	Coffeehouse in Community
11	6/4/14	45:40	Coffeehouse in Community
12	6/6/14	1:15:46	Coffeehouse in Community

**Observations and Documents**

The brief notes of observations and thoughts from each of the interviews were transferred into a journal of memos. This journal provided a method for me to record my detailed thoughts following each participant's interview as well as ideas and reflections on the study as a whole. In addition, I conducted a search and analyzed college and university websites for specific information on the personnel to contact, programs, and

services provided for veterans on each campus that offers the Yellow Ribbon Program (see Appendix D) in North Carolina.

### **Multiple Types of Data**

Multiple types of data were intentionally collected to establish triangulation. Individual one-on-one interviews were conducted, interviews were recorded and transcribed, a journal of notes and observations was kept, and the review of websites was conducted. In addition, participants engaged in member checks to confirm findings (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). Each participant was emailed a copy of their interview transcription. They were asked to review the document for accuracy and to suggest edits by sending a return email message. I received no feedback about the transcriptions from participants. Furthermore, peer debriefing was arranged to obtain the thoughts and reactions as related to data analysis on some of the interview transcriptions (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). Four professionals reviewed two interview transcriptions each and offered their thoughts and reflections on codes and themes (see Appendix J for an example of a peer review). As a final approach, an external audit was implemented. I asked two peer professionals, not involved in the study, to provide their written feedback on my project after reviewing the document (Creswell, 2008).

### **Data Analysis Procedures**

All data were organized and reviewed. I transcribed the 12 individual participant interviews word for word leaving room in both the left and right margins for words, phrases, and notes known as codes (Smith et al., 2009; Creswell, 2008). Data were reviewed repeatedly, line-by-line to develop an overall understanding of the participants' experience and perspectives through given codes and identifiers (Smith et al., 2009;

Creswell, 2008). Over 500 codes were created initially through this process. I then condensed those codes into families and then into four themes to establish further categorizing of the data. The themes were then explored to establish an overall understanding of the phenomenon (Marshall and Rossman, 2011). Content analysis was implemented to further analyze the data; the number of times each category appeared in the text was counted. The purpose of using content analysis for this study was to add reliability and validity to its findings (Silverman, 2011).

The data analysis process was a difficult and time-consuming venture. The repeated reading of the data and establishment of hundreds of codes ultimately resulted in four main themes. However, this process was conducted to help bring a better overall understanding of the phenomenon, the personal accounts of women veterans and their transitions to higher education.



## CHAPTER FOUR: RESEARCH FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

Findings of the study are the result of participant interviews, a website search for veteran specific programs and services, as well as a review of journal of memos containing observation notes from the interviews. The participant interviews were conducted with twelve full-time, baccalaureate degree-seeking women military students from two universities and four different campuses in North Carolina that offered the Yellow Ribbon Program. The phenomenological study sought to answer one central and a sub-set of questions about what the participants' transition from the military to higher education was like, what aspects of women veterans' personal situations affected their transition and adaptation to higher education, what support systems they experienced, as well as what strategies they used during their transition and adaptation to higher education. The participant interviews were interpreted through content analysis. In addition, I included participants' quotes that clearly illustrated the four themes that emerged from the data to provide further clarity and insight to their experiences.

### **Executive Summary**

Upon examination of the data from the twelve participants, four prominent themes emerged: 1) life as a college student, 2) defining identity, 3) military influence, and 4) family. Life as a college student was the most prominent theme within the participants' responses and was further divided into 11 subcategories: 1) differences in classmates, 2) earned benefits, 3) institution location, 4) importance of degrees, 5) professors' approach, 6) supportive staff, 7) class content and learning, 8) program type and delivery, 9) connection through clubs, 10) military credits, and finally a subcategory titled 11) wish I had known.

The second over-arching theme developed from the data was defining identity. Defining identity was comprised of the 7 subcategories covering the areas of 1) identity as a veteran, 2) identity with combat exposure and deployment, 3) identifying with other women veterans, 4) sights set on a career, 5) identity as a woman and with other women, 6) pride, and 7) confidence in self. Military influence was the third theme that emerged from the data with the 7 subcategories of 1) military time, 2) gained attributes, 3) transition out, 4) planned exit, 5) unplanned exit, 6) experienced diversity, and 7) military towns as comfort zones. Family was the fourth and final theme with the 2 subcategories of 1) the importance of a supportive family and 2) important family supporter. Study participants also provided suggestions for peers and schools. The four themes and subcategories are shown in Table 5.

Table 5

*Overall Themes and Sub-categories for the Study*

Themes	Sub-category Responses	Coded Responses	Participant
Life as a College Student	Differences in Classmates	23	12
	Earned Benefits	23	11
	Institution Location	18	12
	Importance of a Degree	18	8
	Professors' Approach	14	8
	Supportive Staff	9	7
	Class Content & Learning	9	8
	Wish I Had Known	8	9
	Program Type & Delivery	6	6
	Club Connection	5	5
	Military Credits	1	1
Defining Identity	Identity as a Veteran	29	12
	Sights Set on a Career	28	12
	Identity with Combat Exposure	14	4
	Identity with other Veterans	13	8
	Confidence in Self	9	8
	Identity as Woman &/with Women	4	3
	Pride	5	3
Military Influence	Military Towns as Comfort Zones	12	9
	Military Time	8	5
	Attributes Gained	7	7
	Experienced Diversity	7	7
	Transition Out	6	4
	Planned Exit	5	5
	Unplanned Exit	5	5
Family	Significance of Supportive Family	17	8
	Important Family Supporter	6	5

**Participant Profiles**

Twelve student women veterans agreed to be interviewed. All participants were enrolled full-time as baccalaureate degree-seeking students from two universities in North Carolina that offered the Yellow Ribbon program. The twelve study participants were the combined result of direct communication about the study with certifying officials from each institution and referrals from other participants or professional

colleagues. Interviews were set up through e-mail and phone calls with the participants. Contact with the participants was kept until the completion of their scheduled interview as well as the request for feedback on their interview transcription.

### **Participant 1**

Participant 1 served in the Army as a Chaplain's Assistant for 7 years. She was deployed two times to Iraq with each of her deployments lasting twelve and fifteen months. She suffers from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder or PTSD, Military Sexual Trauma or MST, as well as some physical ailments that require the use of a special chair in all of her classes. The PTSD symptoms she experiences limit her to day classes and she will not go out at night unaccompanied. She had hoped to stay in the military through the reserves after military leave and Estimated Time of Separation (ETS) leave; however she had to get out due to her health problems. Participant 1 is enrolled at Institution A and had previous college experience while she was in the military, both on base and online. She is a first generation college student studying Management and Human Resources. Participant 1 aspires to get her Master's degree in Occupational Health to work with veterans in programs like the Exceptional Family Member program, Army Community Service, or the Wounded Warrior program. She is married and her husband is still serving active duty in the Army. They have one child.

### **Participant 2**

Participant 2 served in the Marine Corps for five years as a C130 Airframe Mechanic. She never deployed while in the military and has no disabilities. Participant 2, a first generation college student, had previous college experience with seated and online classes. She is seeking her Bachelor's degree in Human Resource Management

from Institution B, Campus 1. However, once Participant 2 completes her Bachelor's degree, she aspires to immediately return to the Marine Corps as an officer. She would like to serve in the Marine Corps until her retirement. She is in a long term relationship with a boyfriend who is an active duty Marine. Participant 2 identifies herself as a Marine and not a veteran.

### **Participant 3**

Participant 3 was in the Army for 4.5 years and worked in logistics. She was deployed once to Afghanistan for a period of one year. Participant 3, a first generation college student, enrolled in classes almost immediately after leaving the military and works in the Veterans Services office on campus. She previously experienced seated college classes and is pursuing a degree in History from Institution A. Participant 3 seeks to obtain her teachers licenser to teach history to high school students, but would like to work on campus in Veterans Affairs as long as possible. She is a homeowner and wishes to remain in the area for the foreseeable future.

### **Participant 4**

Participant 4 served in the Army for four years and her military job responsibilities were logistics and budgeting. She was deployed once to Korea for a period of one year during her years of service. She suffers from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and has a trained dog that assists her. Participant 4 experienced a hospitalization in the middle of her freshman year and doctors were trying to regulate her medication. This episode has made things both in college and in everyday life difficult for her; she is working with a counselor. Participant 4 had no prior higher education experience and she is a first generation college student. Participant 4 is married, enrolled

at Institution A, and is pursuing a degree in Business Administration to seek a position in public relations.

### **Participant 5**

Participant 5 came to the United States from the Philippines at the age of 15 and joined the Army at 17; she is a naturalized citizen. Participant 5 served in the military longer than any other participant in the study; she served in the Army for twelve years. She was deployed a total of 4 times to Kosovo, Macedonia, Iraq, Kuwait, and Korea; the actual duration of each deployment varied between six and twelve months. Her initial deployment to Macedonia at the age 19 helped her develop her interest in humanitarian work. Participant 5 served as a Healthcare Specialist, EMT-B, RMA, and CPR Instructor in the Army. She initially wanted to remain in the military until retirement, but a back injury forced her out. She could no longer pick up her patients. As a result, Participant 5 is a disabled veteran currently under the care of Vocational Rehabilitation; therefore it is important she is located near both a VA and Vocational Rehabilitation services. She had both online and seated class experience and she is not a first generation college student. Participant 5's area of study at Institution A is Social Work and she plans to continue in school after graduation to pursue her Master's degree in Social Work at a different institution. She is a divorced, single-mother who is determined to be a good role-model for her daughter who currently lives apart from her. Education is extremely important to her. Participant 5, after obtaining her Bachelor's and Master's degrees in Social Work has set goals to work for the government to give back to veterans, soldiers, and their families. In addition, she aspires to work with the United Nations or some other world service organization.

**Participant 6**

Participant 6 served in the Air Force for a total of 5 ½ years as a mechanic and Technical Order Officer for the library. She was never deployed during her military service with the Air Force. Participant 6 has dreamed of becoming a librarian since childhood. When it was apparent her talents were not as a mechanic, she started planning on getting out of the military and pursuing her dream of becoming a librarian. Participant 6 is married and her husband is still in the military, so they looked at colleges and universities close to bases. She had some previous college experience in both online and seated classes before enrolling in Institution B, Campus 3. She is seeking a Bachelor's degree in English at Institution B and plans to continue her education at another pre-selected institution to obtain a Master's degree in Library Science. Participant 6 hopes to work as a librarian at Institution 2.

**Participant 7**

Participant 7's family is in Arizona and Hawaii. She and her five siblings were raised by their father and were expected to serve in the military. Her brother joined the Marine Corps and she planned on doing the same, but needed to help her father raise her brother's children. Participant 7 became solely responsible for raising her 6 nieces and nephews when her father passed away; that required two jobs. She eventually decided to follow in her family's military footsteps and join the Army at the age of 22. She served in the Army for 4 ½ years as a Water Treatment Specialist and was deployed once to Iraq for 11 months during her years of service. Participant 7 struggled with her weight and therefore her self-esteem as a paratrooper in the Army. Eventually she tired of having to prove herself and made the choice to leave the Army, though she had planned to stay in

for 10 years. When she left the military for good, Participant 7 again became responsible for her nieces and nephews; currently she has one niece living with her. She had previous educational experience before enrolling in Institution 1 with both online and seated classes. She is seeking her Bachelor's degree in Occupational Environment Management from Institution A and then plans to continue to obtain her Master's degree in Environmental Management. Participant 7 is extremely passionate about society taking care of its waste through business practices and regulations. Her desire is leading her to focus on regulatory management and environmental law.

### **Participant 8**

Participant 8 is married and has one daughter. She served in the Air Force for six years as a Medical Technician and was not deployed during her military service. She loved her job and appreciated her time in the service, but she planned on getting out, being with her family, and pursuing her degree. She has her Associate's degree in General Education and is pursuing her Bachelors of Science degree in Nursing from Institution A. Participant 8 would love to give back by working with the military as a civilian nurse. Her ideal area of nursing would be in labor and delivery or on base in one of the small clinics.

### **Participant 9**

Participant 9 attempted one year of college before enlisting in the Marine Corps for 4 years to work in aviation logistics. She was deployed once to Afghanistan for a period of 7 months, but it was non-combat in nature. Participant 9 is married to a Marine Corp veteran and her father is also a Marine Corps veteran. She had both online and seated college experience before enrolling at Institution B, Campus 2. However, she did



not do well before she enlisted or when she was in the Marine Corps working all day and taking night classes. Participant 9 has very strong opinions on online classes; she thought they were too easy and she worried if she was learning all the content she should know. This is the reason she only wants seated college classes. She is a full-time student seeking her Bachelor of Science degree in Criminal Justice and Criminology. However, she is not sure what career she will pursue once she has earned her degree. In addition, Participant 9 is currently pursuing her real estate license. She works at the same real estate agency as her mother.

### **Participant 10**

Participant 10 is the oldest woman veteran in the study; her age is 36-40. She also took the longest before beginning classes after leaving the military; 12 years. She is married to an active duty Marine and is the mother of 3 children whom she home schools. Participant 10 entered the Marine Corps out of high school and served for 4 years with the responsibilities of logistics and vehicle operator/instructor. She was deployed once for 3 months as part of a humanitarian mission in Indonesia. She had previous college experience with online and seated classes. Participant 10 is enrolled as a full-time student at Institution B, Campus 2 to earn a Bachelor's degree in Criminal Justice. After obtaining her degree, her goal is to attend basic law enforcement training through a police academy and work as a law enforcement officer. She did wonder if it was too late to start a new career nearing the age of 40, but she has decided the opportunity has not passed.

### **Participant 11**

Participant 11 entered the Navy immediately following high school and served for 6 years as a medical lab tech; she never deployed during her service. She is divorced and

has moved as many as three times. She is the only participant who has moved this much in recent years. She had previous college experience in both online and seated classes. Participant 11 is a first generation high school graduate and college student that will earn her Bachelor's degree in Accounting from Institution B, Campus 2 by next August. She aspires to become a Certified Public Accountant once obtaining her degree. Participant 11 is not sure if she will pursue a Master's degree as of yet. However, she does plan on moving to Austin, Texas for the affordable housing and the vegan population in that community.

### **Participant 12**

Participant 12 enlisted in the Marine Corps immediately after high school and served for four years. She actually entered the Marine Corps on a bet with her brother about making it through boot camp; she won the bet. She worked as a finance tech in banking and did not deploy during her years of service. She did experience college classes before enrolling at her current institution. She took online classes while she was in the service and attended a technical school back home to earn her Associate's degree in Early Childhood Education. Participant 12 is a married, full-time student, seeking a Bachelor's degree in Early Childhood Education from Institution B, Campus 2. She wants to earn her teachers licensure to qualify to teach younger children and get hired on base. Participant 12 has known from an early age that she wanted a career working with young children. Her ultimate career goal is to earn a Master's degree in Special Education to work with young children within that specialty.

### **Life as a College Student**

Participants in this study had a lot to say about both traditional and non-traditional classmates depending on their individual experiences (see Table 6). Those female

veterans in the process of taking classes in a more traditional, day class program, expressed some frustration with younger and more inexperienced students. They shared there was lack of respect and personal accountability shown by these more traditional peers towards one another, the professors, their academic work, and towards them as non-traditional students. In addition, some of these participants perceived these more traditional students as having a real sense of entitlement about their education.

Table 6

*Descriptors of Sub-categories for Life as a College Student Theme*

Sub-Categories	Descriptors	
Differences in Classmates	Traditional Students Lack of Respect Discipline and Respect Learn from Each Other	Offer Help Camaraderie Non-Military Majority Military
Earned Benefits	Thankful Most from Benefits Limitations	Planning Ahead Work Study Additional Aid
Institution Location	Degrees Offered Seated Classes	Family Responsibilities Care and Services
Importance of Degree	Lack of Transferable Skills Pursuit of Career	Role Model Better Themselves
Professors' Approach	Respectful Experienced Military Background	Varied Experiences Acknowledged Content Affect
Supportive Staff	Lifeline Independent Needed Support	Seamless Transition Heavy Work Load
Class Content and Learning	Important Obtaining Knowledge	Learning New Things Knowing Enough
Program Type and Delivery	One-Night-A-Week Seated Classes Age Requirement	Accelerated Program Night Classes
Club Connection	Try Something Different Not Offered by All	More Traditional Learning Opportunities
Military Credits	Academic Credits for Service	
Wish I Had Known	Independence Capable Better Understanding of Benefits Scholarships	Testing Out Class Schedules Study Abroad

## Differences in Classmates

Participants expressed a different perspective on veteran and non-traditional students. They related well with them due to their military commonalities and/or other background traits such as marriage, family, a full-time job, and a household to support. Participants mentioned how veteran and non-traditional students are more focused on what they want to do and accomplish. They are in school earning their degree because it is a means to an end; they have an end career goal in mind as well as stability.

**Traditional students.** Younger students can be hard to relate to and frustrating for some women veterans. Participant 1 said,

...I think that most of these young students...because they are between the ages of 18 and 21...because I'm a day student... it's like a movie to them...it's a movie...so they don't grasp it...some appreciate it, some just don't understand. I have one class that I don't speak in very much because even though the teacher's great, I feel like I can't reach most of those kids, I just don't want to talk to them...

Patience is hard for this veteran when it comes to younger students. She has had experiences they cannot comprehend, so she has a hard time communicating with them.

**Lack of respect.** Relating and communicating with younger students is hard for some veterans. Others struggle with the lack of respect they show the professors and their peers in class. Participant 4 stated,

I've had some issues with them being on the phone...some comments...stuff like that ...

Lack of respect in class is hard for veterans. It is particularly difficult for this participant who suffers from PTSD.

The lack of respect shown by younger students affects some women veterans. Others have difficulty with both the lack of respect and discipline of these classmates.

Participant 9 stated,

When I was in and I went to the night classes, they allowed children that just graduated of like military families to go and sit down...it was really hard...to have to be around people that were so undisciplined...and had absolutely zero respect...and I was terrified of having to deal with that again...cause I felt like I was going crazy...

This participant had a hard time with the behavior of some of her classmates. The absence of discipline and respect is trying for her. One of the reasons she selected her current program is the presence of an age restriction and most students work full time.

**Discipline and respect.** Discipline and respect are important for women veterans. Some women are intimidated and do not relate well with younger classmates initially. However, once they gain their confidence veterans realize they can learn from each other. Participant 12 revealed,

...then I look around and there are all these 18 and 19 year old kids...who look like they've got their stuff together...it's college...and I'm going oh my gosh...I'm in school, I'm older than all these people...and how am I going to relate to these people...how am I going to do group projects with 18 year olds that live at home...how's this going to work out...and for the first year of school I hung out with one other older student in the back of the class...it was me and her...we sat there the whole time...we didn't...it was like these kids annoy me...but by the second semester...the second year...it was like, okay, I can handle some of these girls...not these over here...they're too young and too immature...you start looking at them...I got this...I can help them...they can help me...they can help me see the younger side of things...get that experience.

**Learning from each other.** At first, this participant wondered how she would ever fit in and learn from her younger peers. However, over time they began to relate and learn from one another.

Then, as some of the classmates begin to benefit from their older, more experienced peers. Participant 12 stated,

...that was my first...very intimidating and then...and now I'm momma bear...we got this don't freak out over this project...we can get this done...and then here at Mount Olive, I don't feel like I'm a momma bear anymore...I feel like we're a group...we're all in this together, we're a family...we're gonna suffer together and we're gonna make it through together.

It took time for this participant to begin to relate and interact with her younger peers.

Now, they are truly peers that work together.

**Mutual respect.** Some women veterans like learning, interacting, and showing mutual respect for one another. Participant 3 said,

I don't really have an attitude towards any student...veteran or non...I'm just very non-judgmental of people...as long as people respect me...regardless of their age... regardless of what life they came from...ethnicity...it doesn't matter...honestly it's just about how they carry themselves...it's just about how they carry themselves...that's all it is with me... you can be 50, 18 it doesn't matter...if you can carry yourself in a way that I can respect then I will respect you...I don't know...

Mutual respect is important to this participant.

**Offers help.** Some women veterans become equal peers with their younger classmates over time. Other women feel they can help their peers. Participant 8 said,

It's been good...I feel like now I'm a senior and I can help them out...I've seen people with a lot of potential but they're young and they let distractions get in their way...I try to help them...

Participant 8 has gotten to know her younger classmates. They are inexperienced, so she offers her help.

**Comaraderie.** While some women veterans offer their assistance to younger classmates, there still remains a difference between the more traditional students and those that are not. Participant 10 stated,

Younger students, they came here for experience. Us older students, we already have that, we're here because we want to learn. The other students, they're here because they don't know if they're going to learn anything or not, but the night students are here to actually graduate and learn.

Participant 10 is sure of herself and why she is in school. Not all students know what they want to do. Many women veterans have clear educational and career goals and there is camaraderie amongst non-traditional students. They are in school to graduate.

I'm a night student...always have been because of jobs and stuff like that...I don't know about day students...but for night students...we're older individuals. They're only a couple of younger students in my class...younger generation...there are some gaps...but most of them are pretty mature...

This participant has a good experience with her peers in night classes. She and most of her peers are in school to learn and graduate.

**Non-military students.** Some women veterans are used to the military perspective. However, school provides the opportunity to interact and learn from individuals that are not connected to the military. Participant 12 revealed,

No, I'm it...I'm it...in my degree...like in my gen edu classes I'll see a couple more...a lot of males...I had a class where there were two other women veterans, but yeah...my degree program alone...I'm it as far as my little cohort I guess...I don't think that anyone else is even related to the military in my group...which I thought was kind of unusual...it's kind of neat because I have a lot of different perspectives on things and people...I have different input...

Interacting with others and learning different perspectives is valued by this participant. She is pleased to have this special opportunity.

**Majority military.** Some women veterans have the chance to go to school with classmates outside the military. Other women experience school with the majority of their classmates being connected to the military. Participant 10 stated,

Here the demographic...we're largely military here...so there are some that are not affiliated with the military...but still emerged...Jacksonville is a military



town...and if the students that are in our seated classes that are not in the military or veterans or married to one...even ones that are not, seem to have respect...

Participant 10 selected an institution and program that is made up of mostly military-affiliated people. Some classmates are not directly connected to the military, but they live in town and have respect for those who are connected.

Colleges and universities offer many types of programs, but some women attend classes only at night. Participant 7 said,

Being a night student and in the night program I really am only around ex-military people...I still feel like if we're taking a class (while still in the military)... but for meetings during the day time...you feel different...walking around campus I'm like I'm way older...I told my niece, when we came to campus the other day... they remind me of high school.

Participant 7 attends night classes with mostly military-affiliated peers. It is difficult for her to imagine herself as a day student.

Women veterans that attend classes with other military-affiliated students relate well with them. They understand the expectations of completing work on time.

Participant 2 said,

I see them as having the same demeanor about things as I do...do it, don't complain about it, get it over with. I always find that military people get their homework done...it may not be the best work you've ever seen...but it'll be done.

This participant is in classes with students that share her same familiar approach to things.

### **Earned Benefits**

The participants in this study were grateful for the educational benefits they earned through their military service. Some enlisted in the military in order to earn the benefits they needed financially to obtain a college education. Others who entered the military to avoid further education, discovered early on in their enlistment the military

was not for them and planned their exit to go to school. In addition, there were some participants that tried school before their enlistment and got out to try again or to finish what they had started before the military. Furthermore, there was one participant that left the military over a decade ago to start a family. She now is seeking her degree to start a career outside the home with the assistance of her husband's Post-9/11 GI Bill. She wanted to attend school, but not at the expense of her children and her family's financial stability. The educational benefits earned through the military enabled her to fulfill her educational dream.

**Thankful.** Most women veterans are thankful for the benefits they earned. Not all veterans use their benefits. Participant 6 revealed,

We're super grateful for all the benefits we currently have from the military; they really are a blessing to us and we're thankful for them. Of course we paid into it. There are people that don't use it. There are some that pass it on to their children. Certain Marines are eligible to do that.

This participant is appreciative for her benefits and is making the most of what she earned. Participant 5 is also grateful for her military benefits stating,

Everything is taken care of...my medical, financial, educational of course, everything from that aspect...

She loves that things are taken care of for her. She does not have to worry about how to cover school, her medical bills, and more.

Some women veterans have everything cared for. Other veterans see their benefits as giving them some income. Participant 6 stated,

Yes...it's great...it at least gives me a little bit of income.

This participant is thankful for the money the benefits provide her. However, as noted earlier, some veterans choose to not use them and make them available to their children instead.

**Most from benefits.** Benefits are a blessing when you know about them as well as how to use them. Some women veterans had to do a lot of research on their own to make the most of their benefits. Participant 12 revealed,

They [the military] spoke very little about educational benefits and Post-9/11...it was more about disabilities...resume writing...but not a lot about going to school...I had to do a lot of research on my own...looking up things, trying to make sure I understood it all...I sat down with the veterans' counselor at the school for days on end...I wanted to make sure I wasn't missing something...not a lot of people know what you are entitled to...so I wanted to make sure I knew...so I sat down with the county representative...in the community...I sat down with them, I sat down with the school...I wanted to make sure I wasn't missing something...I want to get the most out of it and not have to pay...so I wish there was more of the education side...this is how the GI Bill really works...things that you need to do...

Participant 12 conducted her own research and met with different officials to advocate for herself. She wanted to make sure she could get the most out of her benefits. Once this participant learned the details of her educational benefits she was relieved.

She said,

...having the GI Bill...having that and knowing I don't have to pay for school, or a big chunk of my school, getting a good foundation and knowing where I want to go...it's really helped because it's taken the pressure off...I chose to work full time...and go to school with the GI Bill...honestly you could not work at all and go to school with the GI Bill...they give you a housing allowance...everything you need...and they give you all your tuition paid...and you just go to school...

Benefits that cover school and other needs are a blessing for this participant. However, she is still worried about how she is going to pay for everything so she continues to work full time.

**Benefit limitations.** Women veterans are grateful for their benefits, but some still work full time. Some women worry because of the 36 month limitation on the Post-9/11 GI Bill. Participant 11 stated,

Yes, I have and it should...I think I might have to pay for the last class...because I took some classes in 2010 towards my major...so that's why I might run out...

Participant 11 hopes her benefits cover the entire cost of her education. However, she is aware that it might run out before she finishes her degree.

**Planning ahead.** Planning ahead is something some women veterans due about finishing their education. Some women seek information about additional assistance should they need it. Participant 8 explained,

I still have like 6 semesters left...it will definitely cover me getting my degree...but I also need to look into financial aid...so I have enough to finish...It's a great thing...it is, it is...it really is...

This participant is fairly certain her education will be covered entirely by her benefits.

However she is considering financial aid. Other women participate in work study to help them cover the costs. Participant 7 said,

...so then I found out about the work study program...I never knew about it...if I'd had known about it I would have been graduating last weekend... so I've been doing work study for about a year in June – but my hours are already up...for the Post 911 you only get so many hours you can do work study...

The work study program is something this veteran participates in to help offset costs of her education. She did not find out about it until later. She would rather have a full time job off campus.

**Work study.** Work study programs allow veterans the opportunity to earn money for their education. The program also provides veterans with the opportunity to work outside the military. Participant 3 explained,

Well, when I got out of the Army, I decided the first goal would be to use my Post 911 GI Bill, but I also wanted to be a work study student because I wanted that experience in learning how to be a civilian employee...I thought that was extremely important...and I think it's important for a lot of veterans because I think the work study program really offers a lot and they really help get you into the work force and understand how civilians work.

A work study position has provided this participant the opportunity to earn money and job experience. She planned on this being a part of her school experience.

**Additional aid.** The work study program provides women a way to earn money to help with school. Other women look towards additional funding options through scholarships and financial aid. Participant 2 stated,

I wish I had gone for more of the scholarships they had available...I mean, the GI Bill pays for everything now, but if I were to use more scholarships and more financial aid I wouldn't have had to use as much of my GI Bill. Since I'll be done with my bachelors soon I have the ability to go for my masters...

This participant wished she had looked into additional types of funding earlier. She is not sure she has gotten as much out of the GI Bill as she could have due to the limitation of 36 months and the academic choices she has made.

Some women veterans think they may have been able to get the most out of their GI Bill benefits by paring it with additional scholarships and aid. Benefits are not the same for all veterans. It depends on their length of service, marital status, and more.

Participant 1 explained,

There's the financial part...we have a bunch of veterans that have different kinds of benefits...veteran benefits, you have the GI Bill, Post 33, the Post 30, some people, if they didn't do at least 36 months of service they have a lesser percentage, so they have less months...we have to make sure that it's full time...12 credits, if you want to get your degree in time you have to do 15 credits spring and fall. So that's very important because you don't want to run out of money, because college is very expensive and you don't want to pay out of pocket.

Participant 1 and her husband are in a good situation. They are well cared for with their combined benefits.

### **Institution Location**

The importance of the specific location of the participants' college and university became clear as they described the reasons they selected their particular school. The responsibility of raising nieces and nephews in an established location was mentioned by one participant. Marriage or a relationship with a spouse or significant other still in the military was mentioned by most participants. In addition, VA needs, home ownership, and communities being military towns were mentioned as additional reasons why the location of their institution was so important. If they were in a relationship and living in an area near a military base, they wanted to attend a school with face-to-face classes in or near that area. Therefore, their choice of institution was limited, particularly in relation to being able to earn a bachelor's degree.

However, there was one participant who had a different experience in relation to their military spouse. She selected a particular degree program as well as a specific institution to fulfill her educational and career goals. Her husband then centered his military career decisions and location on his wife's educational choices.

In another situation, a participant did not choose her institution because of location; she based her decision on the number of academic credits she received from the university for her military service. The university that awarded her with the most academic credits towards her bachelor's degree was selected. She was the only participant that cared about credits enough to forego location. In fact, she sacrificed

being with her daughter and family to attend the university of her choice several states away; all based on academic credits.

Some participants in the study indicated the importance of the institution's location based on the need to be near VA services and facilities. Some of the participants had disabilities and received continuous care. These women veterans needed to remain in a specific location to access needed services and to use their military benefits. The need to be within a specific radius of VA services will exist for some of these women veterans for the remainder of their lives.

Furthermore, home ownership and life in a military town was mentioned about the importance of their college and university's location. Some of these participants established roots in the towns where they were stationed in the military. Some of these women veterans worked on base as civilians; it is a community they know and it is familiar. People in these communities are accustomed to the military and are supportive for the most part. Military towns or communities have a certain level of comfort for those who have served; therefore the need for some of these participants to settle and remain there exists.

Institutions located in convenient locations are essential for some women veterans. The less time they have to travel the better. Participant 9 explained,

It was the only school without having to travel for hours or moving my family. When I got out of the Army I had all my nieces and nephews, there were 6 of them. So I didn't want to move. It's cheaper to stay in the area with the size of my family.

She had the responsibility of rearing her sibling's children so she did not want to relocate. She needed a school within a small radius of home.

Having a college located within a short distance of home was needed by some veterans. The school also must have the programs and degrees are wanted by veterans.

Participant 11 explained,

I did...I looked at [another institution]...but you have to have an Associate's in Science if you're...you can't transfer with an Associate's in Applied Science...so I would have to have taken more classes if I had transferred there...I did look at that but you have to go like two nights a week...and it's a drive unless you go to extension, but the extension doesn't offer as many degree programs as this institution...like Middle Eastern Studies...Accounting...so...

This participant needed to pursue her Bachelor's degree in a specific program without having to take additional classes. She also did not want to drive too far or often.

Having an institution that offers the right degree program, a specific major, and is local is ideal situation for some veterans. Others only consider local colleges and universities in their search from the beginning. Participant 3 said,

You know, I didn't really [shop around for schools]...on [base]...I went to the education center and I saw a couple of schools, but this school just kind of reached out to me...they were more excited to get me to come over and so, pretty much from the very beginning I was like you know what, I'm going to give it a shot...

Participant 3 took advantage of local services to consider schools in the area. She felt good about one particular university and decided to try it.

**Degrees offered.** The selection of a college and university depends on the individual. Each person has particular reasons for deciding to go to a school. Others are searching for institutions based on the degrees offered. Participant 12 revealed,

...I'm more worried about my degree...so the courses were my main concern...so the only two I really looked at were Mount Olive and UNCW...they were the ones I had heard of so that was it...

Participant 12 was more concerned about her school offering a particular degree and the needed courses. It also was a plus for her that the school she selected was local.



Many women veterans attend community colleges, but that is not an option when they are seeking a Bachelor's degree. Participant 2 said,

[This school] was my first choice...I considered a community college but they don't offer a bachelor's degree so that wasn't really an option because I want to earn a bachelor's degree...I looked at [another school] but it was too far away...and [this school] worked with my GI Bill.

Earning a Bachelor's degree was the goal of this participant. She considered another school but location as well as acceptance of her benefits was important in her final decision.

**Seated classes.** A degree offering (and location) is the number one concern for certain veterans. However, for some women it is about the location, the degrees offered, as well as seated classes. Participant 9 stated,

...I needed it to be local since I wanted to sit down and I work all day every day...I knew Coastal was out of the question...I was close to getting my Associate's...so I needed to have a university where I could go and obtain my bachelor's...

Location, as well as the degree and seated classes were important to this participant. She works full time and she wanted to finish the Associate's degree she had started and earn her Bachelor's degree. In addition, she prefers seated classes.

**Family responsibilities.** Other women have the responsibility of children and their husbands work locally. Location is essential. Participant 8 stated,

My husband, he has a job on base and we have a child...so the location...going to another school would have been over an hour away...

So, location is vital for this participant. She cannot be far from home considering the responsibilities of her husband and child.

Being married and a mother make a conveniently located school necessary for some veterans. Other women veterans are limited to locations where their husbands are stationed. Participant 1 said,

It's actually kind of odd, Occupational Health. They have the program [in another town] ...which is kind of far...

This participant selected her school based on where her husband was stationed. She has medical conditions and is a mother as well, so going to school locally was the only choice for her.

Where a husband is stationed is the deciding factor for deciding where some veterans will pursue their degree. Other women make the decision to attend the same school as their husband. Participant 4 explained,

I looked at two schools...but in the looking at the booklets and online it (the school I attend) looked very interesting... My husband started going a little before me.

This participant chose to attend the same school as her husband.

**Location of care and services.** Some women veterans attend the same school as their husbands. However, other veterans select their institution based on where VA and Vocational Rehabilitation facilities are located. Participant 5 revealed,

I researched it before...this school...I didn't really look at Duke...UNC...maybe I should have ...but it's good, me being a veteran to be in [this town]...with the VA, Voc [Vocational] Rehab that's in Fort Bragg...it's better for me with my situation...

This veteran is disabled and requires certain services provided by the VA and Vocational Rehabilitation. She selected her institution based on its proximity to the services she needs.

## **Importance of a Degree**

The importance of a college education and obtaining a degree was shared by all participants, but for different reasons. Participants mentioned attaining transferable skills that would make them more employable in positions they aspire to hold; pursuing the decision of what to do; obtaining the needed degree to be a military officer; planning on further education; and getting a good paying job to support a family. One woman veteran mentioned the need to discover what she wanted to do with the rest of her life. She hoped education would help her determine the answer. However, most participants were focused, had planned their educational experiences, and had end goals in mind as a result of them earning their college degree.

**Lack of transferable skills.** Transferable skills are important to women trying to get jobs after the military. Many military responsibilities do not directly transfer to civilian jobs. Participant 1 said,

Most of my skills are not very transferable, unless I become a funeral director or I'm going to talk to someone who's about to lose their mind, they're really not. So it's nice to have the college transcripts where you can apply it to the degree and be useful for something.

This participant's military position responsibilities were not transferable for her career aspirations. She is glad to be pursuing a degree that will help further her goals.

**Pursue a career.** Some women have transferable skills when they leave the military, but others do not. They seek a degree to pursue their careers. Participant 2's statement is in line with Participant 1. She said,

When I was in the Marine Corps my job was a C130 airplane mechanic so there's not really a demand for that in the civilian world...in order to get a job that was actually worth having I needed to get an education.

Participant 2 worked on airplanes as a Marine. She does not want to be a mechanic for her career. Even after earning her Associates degree she was only able to get a minimum wage job. She knows a Bachelor's degree is essential for a career. Participant 2 stated,

When I first got out I worked at a Pacific Sunwear inside a mall and I started at \$7.25 an hour after being in the Marine Corps for 5 years and that was a MAJOR blow to my ego. It's frustrating cause that's the only thing I could get a job because I don't have any civilian world experience...so going to school...I had to do it...I had to. As soon as I got out of the Marine Corps I finished my Associate's Degree but that didn't help me at all ...

This participant is frustrated. She served in the Marine Corps for 5 years, but it does not mean anything in the civilian world. She has to earn her Bachelor's degrees in order to pursue her dream of becoming a Marine Corps officer.

Some women complete their military career, have a career in the home, and then pursue a degree to start a new career outside the home. Participant 10 said,

I was looking to get back into a career...the more motivated I was to better myself...positions I was interested in...competition...you need it [degree]...

This participant left the military and became a stay at home mom with three kids for several years. She is earning her degree in Criminal Justice to become a police officer.

**Role model.** A Bachelor's degree opens up many more doors for positions in the civilian world. Earning a degree is also important for setting a good example for younger family members. Participant 7 said,

...it's going to be harder to get a job without a degree these days – and for me to set the path for my nieces and nephews I need to do what I'm preaching – so I have to get my degree.

This veteran is raising her nieces and nephews. She is a role model for them so she needs to set a good example for them.

Obtaining a Bachelor's degree is important to some veterans so they can set a good example for younger family members. Earning a degree is also important for seeking a degree and bettering yourself. Participant 10 explained,

...you hear that old cliché that knowledge is power...it really is...if you can be well educated you don't have to depend...it's really good to have if you apply it in a career field or just to better yourself...

**Better themselves.** Some women aspire to earn a Bachelor's degree to better themselves. This participant wants to be the first person in her family to attend college and earn a degree. She wants to have a better future.

Seeking a better future is why some women pursue a Bachelor's degree. Some participants went into the military because they did not have what it takes right out of high school. Their military experience helped them mature enough to pursue a degree. Participant 9 revealed,

It showed me how important it is...it showed me...you see a lot of people that joined because they couldn't go to college...they didn't feel they were smart enough...like it was the only option...

This participant knew she had what it takes to go to college. She also knew she was not ready out of high school. The military helped her ready herself for college.

Some women plan on going to college before going into the military. They plan to attend college before enlisting, it just does not happen that way. Participant 5 stated,

...but even before that when I came in I said to myself I want to go to college before the military...

This participant intended to attend college in the Philippines. However, her family moved to the United States and she joined the military at age 17, therefore delaying her pursuit of college.

### **Professor's Approach**

Participants spoke of professors at their institutions being supportive for the most part. The women discussed how course subject, class size, and military experience affected the approach of some instructors. Some of the participants mentioned being thanked for their service while others commented on some instructors not seeming to care. In addition, the military knowledge and experience of professors varied; however both institutions where participants were students were located near military installations. Some instructors were themselves retired military.

**Respectful.** Faculty plays an important role in the collegiate experience for women veterans. How they approach and interact with veterans about their military experience is significant. Participant 11 shared,

I think all the faculty have been great...very respectful...I only had one incident where an instructor wasn't...but usually...the instructors don't try to judge you, even if your opinion is different from theirs...

This participant is pleased with the majority of her interactions with faculty. Most instructors have been respectful.

Positive and respectful interactions with faculty are important. Professors with a combination of knowledge and lived professional experience are valued.

Participant 10 explained,

I'm very happy with the professors that I've had...we have a lot that are chiefs on the [local] Police Department, and we have some that are retired...they are a good panel of people who not only bring the book knowledge but the experience too...caring about our learning...

Participant 10 appreciates learning from professors who have actual experience in what they are teaching and who value learning as much as she does.

**Experienced.** Learning from experienced instructors is important to some women veterans. They also appreciate learning from skilled professors that have effective methods of instruction. Participant 7 stated,

The only thing I've actually enjoyed are my professors...how much knowledge they have ...

This veteran had a difficult time at first. She valued having professors that knew how to help her understand the material.

**Military background.** Instructors with effective teaching methods are valued by women veterans. It also helps to have professors with a military background. Participant 5 shared,

...things like that and our professor...really great retired Colonel...he would make an example of the different deployments in the military into math...and he was great...

This participant appreciates having professors with military experience. They use familiar examples to help explain class material.

Instructors with military experience are valued. However, veterans do not expect instructors to acknowledge and thank them for their military service. Participant 8 said,

I think I'm respected just as much as...(long pause)...males...I've even had some professors thank me for my service...you don't really expect that...

Participant 8 was pleasantly surprised to be thanked for her service by her professor. She thought their location in a military town had a lot to do with it.

**Varied experiences.** Some women veterans are surprised when they are recognized for their service. However, the interactions with professors as a whole vary depending on the class. Participant 2 shared,

Some of the professors I've had find me very interesting...they want to talk to me about it...and...the older generation...the younger professors, they're kinda like

“hippies” and they seem very unconcerned with me...it went past the point of being a student ...I don’t know...it just felt different.

This participant has had varied experiences in the classroom depending on the professor and class. Some are interested in her while others see indifferent. Women veterans are treated differently by their various instructors.

**Acknowledged.** In addition, some veterans appreciate professors that acknowledge their service and understand their struggles with conditions. Participant 1 explained,

In the beginning however, the teacher...really justified my service...and he isn’t one of those people who’d want to join the military...you can tell...he’s not going to join the military any time soon...I don’t even know what his personal opinion is...I know that he respects me and I know that he admires my service and that means a lot to me...and he’s never degraded my service...and, he’s...used a lot of examples, and he’s talked a lot about the service...he’s smart...and he’s done this a lot with others in the class... it’s not just me...that’s helpful...when I was talking about that poem with the turret I was visibly stressed...I stood up in the back of the class...I purposefully sat in the back of that class...I stood up that day and my teacher came up to me and said you can leave if you need to and I said I need to stay because I need to get through this because this isn’t going to be the last time...it’s not the first time and it’s not going to be the last time...but that’s helpful that I know I’m not going to get in trouble for leaving...

This participant appreciates being acknowledged for her service. She also likes professors that have knowledge about and understand her behaviors that are a result of her medical conditions. Women veterans like professors that recognize their service and understand behavior caused by different conditions.

**Effect of content.** However, at least one participant wishes instructors gave more consideration to some class content and how it might affect them. Participant 1 stated,

...I wish the teachers, for a moment would look at the syllabus and let me know...that day is going to be one of those days...the military poem was going to trigger something...I could have come prepared with some Starbucks and some cigarettes...for some soldiers it’s really...just telling someone...Uncle Jack who was in Vietnam...I might need to call you later...tools that are very useful that we



use so it's not such a shock...I know it's not just literature...it's other classes that have to have something that would trigger it that you would just know...really feel they could do better on that...

This participant is affected by some class content due to her medical conditions. She would like faculty to give more consideration to students in their classes and how material might affect them. However, as with any student, issues need to be communicated with professors. They cannot help if they do not know. The student has the responsibility to communicate their difficulties and needs.

Consideration of class content and its effects on them is important for some women veterans. However, for some it is even hard to get professors to seem interested in them. Participant 12 revealed,

I've had a few that have been very interested and want to hear. Like in speech class, they want you to talk about it. But, most of my gen eds[instructors of general education classes] they don't care, maybe because they have bigger classes.

This participant has had different experiences with professors depending on the type of class. She never knows what to expect because it depends on the class and the individual instructor.

### **Supportive Staff**

The importance of having supportive professional staff on each college and university campus was clearly indicated by most of the veterans. The participants in this study discussed how great the professionals are at their respective campuses. The women veterans find these individuals both knowledgeable and approachable. They are knowledgeable about the paperwork required by the government to obtain educational benefits. In addition, they know what needs to be done for the institution and they make

themselves accessible to students in person and through e-mail. These individuals are definitely a valued resource and support for the student participants.

**Lifeline.** Supportive staff members are the lifeline for women veterans. They are the individuals that have the needed knowledge about what is required and expected.

Participant 1 said,

The two staff members, my student advisors, anytime I have questions or need help with the VA and school, I can email them and they are fantastic. They are quick getting back to you and they make it easy. They've never been like you should know this; they are just always there to help out in every way.

Participant 1 depends on the two staff members at her school. They help answer her questions and if they do not know the answer they will find out.

**Independent.** Some women are independent and like take responsibility for themselves. The only reason they communicate with staff is when something is required. Even then, email is usually used instead of face-to-face communication. Participant 3 explained,

I'm very independent...so I find...I guess I have things figured out...more than some people...I don't know...I talk to the Financial Aid, Veteran lady...who takes care of all the GI Bill stuff...I talk to her a lot through email...but that's really it...

Participant 12 is independent and self-reliant. She does not need a lot of support. She has done what she has needed to do and confirmed it with staff. However, she has been responsible for most of what she has needed to do.

**Needed support.** The military did not provide a lot of detailed information about the GI Bill and how to use it. So, staff at their college has given them the needed support.

Participant 11 shared,

They did [the military]...the representative told us we could use our GI Bill...they didn't really go into depth about it...they were more concerned with what your

claiming from the military...I wouldn't say they really pushed it...I didn't know what I needed to do but when I signed up with my school, [the staff member] just guided me...we need to file this paperwork and you need to get me this information...

This participant relies on the staff at her institution to help her with required paperwork for her benefits. She did not receive much direction from the military so the school staff has provided the needed guidance.

Participant 10 added,

...my new academic advisor...is phenomenal...she's really good, I mean she really helps you clear things up...for the majority of us...but I've only had to meet with her once...that's fine...she's there when I need her...she calls back and she emails back and she's on top of it...she's very efficient...so she's great...

This participant does not need a lot of interaction with her academic advisor. However, she knows she is there if needed.

Not all students are successful their first year of college. Some students struggle and need assistance. Participant 7 shared,

...but I struggled my first year...my advisor is the counselor for all night students... ..

This participant had a rough first year and she needed support. The staff member was there for her.

**Seamless.** Some participants cannot believe how seamless and easy college staff makes their transition to education. These professionals know what they are doing and take much of the stress out of the process. Participant 9 stated,

Yes. I went, I filled out my application, I got an email that same day saying you can come in and meet with me tomorrow, they went over everything, they said these are all the things we see, this is how many credits you are going to have, we'll go ahead and pass it on...the next day I got another email from the student counselor and they said we got your stuff, we know how many credits you're going to have, come on in let's make a schedule...it was amazing...

This participant was taken care of by a knowledgeable and efficient staff member. She met with the veteran, explained everything, and took care of all the necessary paperwork to get her accepted and enrolled using her benefits.

**Heavy work load.** Support services are needed by some veterans. However, some staff members struggle under their caseload. Participant 7 stated,

I think my school has the services, they just don't have enough support...so it looks good on paper, it looks good when you talk about it on the web site and what not...but they don't have actual people making it happen...

This veteran needed more than what the staff at her school could provide. They did not have enough people to support the needs of the student veterans.

Sometimes there is not enough staff to provide the support needed. In addition, staff turnover occurs and service interruptions happen. Participant 5 said,

They're in the middle of changing...so I'm caught in that ...my counselor just left...so I've been bounced around...I'm on my third counselor right now...I've giving them time because I'm fully aware that I'm not the only person that they're handling...case...the case load is very heavy and if you don't have that patience you're not going to get anywhere...yelling at them...

This participant has experienced turnover in staff multiple times since starting school. She gets frustrated, but she knows she needs their help so she knows to be patience.

### **Class Content and Learning**

Participants in this study were motivated and concerned about learning. Two participants in particular mentioned the need to obtain as much knowledge as possible in order to excel in their careers. They were not as concerned about studying to get a certain grade on a test. These participants were focused on the content itself and what that meant towards their ability to obtain and maintain a job.

**Important.** Learning is important to veteran students. It is more than just completing a class for them. Participant 10 stated,

As a student now, verses when I was younger aimlessly putting along, I really want to [learn], especially now that I'm in classes that are major specific. I really want to glean as much as I can from the classes and I'm learning a lot. It's rewarding

This participant wants to learn as much as she can from every class she takes. Now that she is taking classes in her major she knows how important the content is towards her career.

**Obtaining knowledge.** Learning is also important to participant 9. She has taken classes before where she did not feel she was learning what she should. Participant 9 explained,

I did an online school...I just didn't feel I was learning anything...I didn't feel like everyone was making sure you were learning the things you were supposed to...that you wanted to know...

Obtaining knowledge is important to this participant. She did not want to just attend classes; she wanted to have something to show in the end.

**Learning new things and knowing enough.** Learning is important to veterans because they want to know they are prepared to begin their careers. They want to stretch and learn new things that could make a difference for them. Participant 2 revealed,

One of my biggest goals...to learn something I don't already know...everyone like...I'm majoring in human resources and everyone thinks you just talk to people, but there's much more to it than that...for instance I'm learning about labor laws. I'm also learning ways to help people find new jobs...I'm learning about unions...something I didn't know anything about.

Participant 2 continued,

I guess one problem that I'm noticing more as I'm getting towards the end of my undergraduate degree is have I learned what I really need to know...did I think

about things enough or did I just skim over things enough to just pass? I'm at the point where I do want a career...am I going to know what I should know?

This veteran is nearing the end of her program and graduation. She is worried about knowing enough. She needs reassurance that she has done everything she can do to learn what it is she needs to know to pursue her career.

### **Program Type and Delivery**

Most of the participants in this study attended night classes and/or were in a special program for adult students. Some mentioned being drawn to the special one-night-a week program for adults due to the age requirement (21 and over), only having to attend classes one night a week, and the fact they could maintain their full time job during the day and go to class at night. Moreover, most of the women veterans had previously experienced online classes and one participant in particular discussed her dislike for them and the importance of having seated classes. In addition, the institutions they attended offered degree programs of interest in their own communities; they did not have to drive a long way to attend class. Furthermore, some of the participants attended classes with a high percentage of veterans so they were very comfortable relating to their peers in school. Class discussions and work outside of class were enriched and simplified by the understanding classmates had with one another.

**One night a week.** Individuals select colleges for different reasons. Women veterans that are non-traditional students tend to select their institution for the programs offered as well as their delivery. Participant 7 stated,

I attend my university because I work full-time, 40 hours a week, and one thing the school offered me was the ability to go to school and still work that full-time job. Instead of every day worrying about being to class on time and having to work...as soon as I get off work I have homework to do. I have one night a week I go to class...that works out great with everything I have going on.

Working full time and going to school is difficult. Traditional programs do not offer the same flexibility as programs for non-traditional students. This participant is enrolled in a program at an institution that meets her needs.

Participant 11 echoed the same about her experience through the same institution. She said,

Well, I worked with three students that were going to the program...they were like you can go one night a week and so it fit with my schedule...

She learned about this program through peers at work. This particular type of program delivery is working well for her.

**Seated classes.** The one-night-a-week program delivery with seated classes is working well for Participant 11. She had bad experiences with online classes previously and insisted on finding a program that offered seated classes. Participant 11 shared,

Actually, classes from other schools I've taken online was horrible...but with this school...the teachers don't completely overload you...you can work at your own pace...they don't say everything is due in the same week...they say this is due Monday and this is due Thursday...so you can knock one out and keep going...I don't feel so overwhelmed...

Seated classes are important to this veteran. She seems content with the professors and classes at this school. She learned from past experiences and sought what she wanted for her college experience.

**Age requirement.** Participant 9 wanted the same experience with seated classes. She does not care for online classes either.

I thought online classes were too easy, just having something handed to you...I wanted to go and sit down [have seated classes]...I looked into this school and I loved the fact it had the one night a week, 21 and up to go...and I started doing that...

This participant loves the school she selected because she has seated classes. In addition, the one night a week approach with the age requirement met her desires.

**Accelerated program.** Some veterans are selective about schools due to past experiences. Others compare different schools to find the major, program, and delivery that best fits their needs. Participant 10 said,

I did shop around...this school...the deciding factor there was they have the accelerated program...with the degree...I'm in criminal justice...the field I want to go in...

Participant 10 is working hard to get her degree. She wants to move forward with her career. She is ready to make this happen.

**Night classes.** Most veterans are non-traditional students and seek to attend programs that best fit their wants and needs. Such as the times classes are offered.

Participant 7 stated,

...night students are night students for two reasons...they're at home parents and they have to wait for their spouse to come home or they have a full time job...or they're active duty and it's hard to be active duty because you may be on a job 'til 1am...

Night classes are important to this participant. They are what is best for her schedule and there are plenty of other students like her.

Participant 3 also prefers programs that offer night classes. She also likes the understanding professors. Participant 3 commented,

They offer the night program which is awesome because so many of the night professors...they work with students that have jobs...and they have veterans and they're very understanding of the fact that you haven't been to school in like 10 years...so they're just really supportive.

This participant's program is the one for her. She likes the night classes because she works. She also likes the professors that understand older, more experienced adults.



### **Club Connection**

Clubs and organizations were mentioned by a few of the participants. The two universities represented in this study are different regarding the existence of clubs and organizations. One institution only has clubs and organizations at one of its eight locations while the other university does have student clubs and organizations. So, one participant mentioned the need for clubs and organizations; all types not just for student veterans. Another women veteran saw clubs as an avenue to connect to others socially, away from the university. The difficulty in finding time when a group could meet in person was shared, but the possibility of having exchanges through social media was also expressed. The campus with existing student organizations does have a group for veterans; however, it was expressed improvement was needed. According to one participant, a lot needs to be done to better organize the group to better serve the needs of student veterans on that particular campus.

**Try something different.** Clubs and organizations can help veterans in their transition to college. Groups for veterans are great, but it helps to try new things and have different experiences. Participant 3 explained,

...You know, like getting into clubs like the veterans club. You know, and not just the veteran club. All the clubs around campus would be good...just the communication and diversity...You have the veterans and other students. The diversity is good and don't be so close-minded to one way. Try to open yourself up to new experiences and new opportunities. New life, friends and stuff like that. It's important to not lock yourself up in one way.

Participant 3 is involved in many things on campus. She knows what getting involved has done for her. She encourages others to try new things, have new experiences, and meet new people.

**Not offered by all.** Many campuses offer all kinds of opportunities through different organizations and programs. However, not all campuses and communities offer such options for women veterans. Participant 12 explained,

...it would be kinda neat to have a meeting or something...to have that connection...even to just know other people...have their phone number or a page [web]...something to communicate with...in the local area...I have a couple back home...women veterans...a couple different ones...Marine veterans...Facebook pages of people I associate with while I'm here...but it's nice to see other younger females...let's be honest...I don't have time in my life to go to meetings all the time...but Facebook is on my phone and it's a great way to communicate with other people...I don't know if that's something other people are interested in...but I like to be able to look and check in with other people...that are not necessarily in your program...that network...

Participant 12 is interested in having a group for women veterans. She would like to have a way of getting to know others in her area and at school. She is uncertain of how the group would be formed and what they would do. She just would like one to exist.

Participant 12 continued,

I just wish there was something...right now, I don't even know if there are any groups at all...any category...any business group, or any...even in our degree field...I thought there would have been an education group at this school...

Participant 12 is not limiting her desire for groups to women veterans. She would like to have different types of clubs. She especially is interested in having a group in her major.

**More traditional.** Some campuses have groups for veterans and some do not.

Those campuses that have clubs do not always offer the best experience for students.

Participant 7 explained,

...this is my last semester so I'm trying to join clubs and I even tried to join the environmental club but every time the meetings are scheduled by the day students...and they say let's meet at lunch time...and I'm at work...so I don't know...

Participant 7 is involved in the group for student veterans and she is trying to get involved in other clubs. However, groups on a more traditional campus can provide challenges for non-traditional students. It is hard to find a day and time that works with everyone's schedule.

**Leadership opportunities.** Certain individuals get involved in organizations to play an active role. They want to make things better. Participant 5 said,

The veterans club that they have here...meeting people...we need more people...I don't think we're advertised enough...at events you always see the same people...I've seen the same people over and over again...I'm running for the presidency right now...so we'll see...

Participant 5 is not willing to join an organization just to be a member. She has thoughts and ideas about what can be done to make the group better. She wants to be president, so she can make a difference.

### **Military Credits**

Only one participant chose her institution based on the number of credits she received from the university for her military service. She was the only participant that cared more about military credits than location of the institution. In fact, she sacrificed being with her daughter and family to attend the university of her choice several states away; all based on academic credits. Her rationale in making this decision was she had earned them through her duties in the military and she wanted to earn her bachelor's and then master's degrees. This participant was highly motivated to get her education so she could be reunited with her family and begin her next career.

**Academic credits for service.** College credits veterans receive for their military experience varies upon institution. This can be a determining factor for individuals when selecting a college or university. Participant 5 shared,

They have like an open house. Okay this is an estimate of the credits you would have. Or, they will tell you up front, we can only give you six credits, military credits.

Military credits were important to this participant. She is attending college far away from her family at an institution because it awarded her the most credits. She is willing to make that sacrifice.

### **Wish I Had Known**

There are always things we wish we had known when it comes to life. Women veterans have things they wish they had known before their transition to higher education. One participant spoke of not always being in control and letting go. She commented on how there are people to help with all the details of going to school.

Another woman veteran spoke of having the knowledge she could be successful in college. That she has what it takes from previous life experiences to achieve her goals. She could do this.

Three participants mentioned the difficulty with learning about and understanding military benefits. The VA is not always helpful because of the volume of work. Two of those veterans mentioned educational benefits in particular. They wish they had more understanding of all the different options available to them and which ones were best for them.

There was a veteran that wished she had attempted to test out of some classes. She also mentioned using online classes to her advantage. They allow her to work more at her own pace.

Furthermore, a participant discussed knowing how hard college would be. Not in the sense of school being beyond her abilities, but due to content and the Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder reactions she experienced.

**Independence.** Independence and taking responsibility for you is important for some women veterans. Some have difficulty in giving up some control and letting someone else help them. Participant 12 revealed,

...when you get out I felt like I needed to be independent and I could do this all on my own...it isn't out there...there's nothing out there for us...you have to know the information and you have to know where to go...knowing that there are certain individuals at every school...you don't even have to go to their school...you can go and talk to them...it's great knowledge...

Participant 12 wished she had known there was no way she could know it all. There are people trained to help meet the needs of veterans and all students.

**Capable.** Some individuals wish they had known it was not going to be as bad as they thought. That they had what it takes to be successful. Participant 11 explained,

Maybe that the transition wouldn't be so hard...I can do college...military teaching is very different...college is like this is what you need to do and you're responsible for getting it done...

This participant was not sure of her abilities. She was not certain she had what it would take to be successful in college.

**Better understanding of benefits.** Some individuals wish they had known they could succeed in college. Other participants would have liked to have known more about the benefits available to them through the VA. Participant 9 stated,

I wish they made it a little easier to find...I had to call the VA a lot more than I would have liked to...for a lot of 20 minutes holds...30 minute holds...to ask questions...I wish that not just the website and the information they give you...but even when we have briefs when we get out...to set you up...and they teach you...this is how you fill out an application for college which is self-explanatory...

There is a lot to know and understand about military benefits and this veteran wished she had received better service through the VA. The VA representatives are there to help, but there are so many in need that the wait times can be long.

Veterans turn to VA representatives for their knowledge and expertise on benefits.

Some women wished they had received a complete picture on all of the educational benefit options. Participant 8 commented,

They tell you about the Post 911 GI Bill...but I didn't know about the difference between that and the Montgomery Bill...you can either get \$1200 when you're finished (if you have time left with the Post 911) or with the Montgomery Bill you get another year of tuition, books, etc. They're not going to volunteer the information...you have to ask...and then decide which one best fits your situation in terms of school, etc. I wish I would have asked, it would have been worth more for me to get another year of school...

This participant wished she had known about other educational benefits besides the Post-9/11 GI Bill. She thinks there may have been a better option for her.

**Scholarships.** Some veterans wish they had known more about scholarships.

She would have researched a way to help pay for her education beyond the Post-911/GI Bill. Participant 2 shared,

I wish I had gone for more of the scholarships they had available...

Benefits and money are important to most veterans. This participant wished she had looked into additional scholarships from the beginning. The GI Bill only covers 36 months, so she is trying to figure out how she will cover the rest of her education.

**Testing out.** The number of classes needed for a degree is a concern for most women. Some are able to test out of some courses. Participant 7 said,

I think I should have CLEPed (College Level Examination Program) some English classes...maybe try to focus more on online classes...

Participant 7 would have liked to have tested out of some required classes. She would not have had so many courses to take. She also wished she had considered some alternate delivery classes such as courses online.

**Class schedules.** Testing out of certain courses and attempting alternative delivery classes were something one participant wished they had known. Another participant would have spread her general education courses throughout her four years. Participant 2 revealed,

...now I'm at the point that I'm doing 3 of my highest classes at the same time this semester because I don't have any other options – one class I have to take is my senior research project... and because I waited so long to take it, I have to take it online by myself this summer...it's the hardest class you take and I'm by myself. If I had of known I could have taken it last year and gotten it out of the way. I wished I had saved more of the general education...

Participant 2 would have liked to have known to spread her general education classes out and not take them all in the beginning. She thinks it would have been a better balance of course load and assignments.

**Study abroad.** Balancing general education classes throughout four years of study is something one participant wished she had known. Another participant would have saved some of her elective hours had she known about study abroad. Participant 5 explained,

...so I wish I would have known that it [Study Abroad] would be considered an elective ...if I had known that prior to coming to any school...I think I would be able to go international just with electives...I have so much school already...it doesn't really count for me...at least I should have known coming in here...I shouldn't have taken this class [because it counted as an elective – she doesn't have many/any electives left to take] I should have reserved it for international...I don't have any room for electives...

Participant 5 is interested in international business and wished she had known to save some of her elective hours to be able to study abroad. She is having a hard time getting this approved now under Vocational Rehabilitation.

Study abroad is something one participant wished she had known about.

Participant 1 would have liked to have known how hard some content would be due to her PTSD. She revealed,

How hard it was going to be...you get syllabi in classes...I wish the teachers would have told me when we were going to talk about war ...and the military and my career...I got a tip from the guy I sit by everyday...he said what he does...he reads the Spark notes for the poems, etc....maybe you should read that so you know what you're going to get involved in...and I was so grateful...we had these stories...it was like the 1950's and this family ended up getting kidnapped and executed...by some criminals...supposed to be actual, funny story...was not funny to me...they're talking about executing children... and I've seen and known...things have happened...I can picture it, I can see it, it's very real to me...

This participant wished she had been more prepared about how affected she would be by some of the content being covered in class. She has had a difficult time and might have been better prepared.

## **Defining Identity**

### **Identity as a Veteran**

Participants in this study responded differently about their identity as a veteran. Some of the women identified themselves as veterans and were proud of their service. Others did not share the same affiliation with the title based on their particular responsibilities while in the military; some were deployed while others were not (see Table 7). One participant spoke about how she felt like a veteran when she was in her home town, but not in the military town where she currently resides. Some of the participants mentioned the term veteran brought about connotations of older men that had served in the Vietnam War. So they could not equate themselves with that vision and therefore the term. One woman mentioned being proud of her veteran status. However,



this same woman was afraid to wear any emblem or put any identifiable markings on her car due to her fear of retaliation from men.

Table 7

*Descriptors of Sub-categories for Defining Identity Theme*

Sub-Categories	Descriptors	
Identity as a Veteran	Depends on Location Connection Older Men Marine	Positive Experience Not Unless Asked Proudly Affiliate
Identity with Combat Exposure	Military Sexual Trauma (MST) Trauma through Combat  Specific Duties Delayed Affect	Humanitarian Efforts Dis-service by Non- Deployment Spouse Experience
Identity with Other Veterans	Location and Population Identified and Labeled Duties Not Gender	Not Always Recognized Separate Services Campus vs. Veteran Affairs
Sights Set on a Career	Knew Early On Adult Mentor Learned to Love It Same Field More Opportunities Giving Back	Working on Base Returning to Military Certain and Specific More Education What to Do Career Confusion
Identity as Woman &/with Women	Relearned Interacting with Women	Body Image Answering to First Name
Pride	Not Asking for Help Role Change Non-Deployment Degree Necessary Lack of Confidence High Expectations	Prove to Others & Self Present Self Positive Attitude Lack of Motivation Effects of MST
Confidence in Self	Lack of Confidence High Expectations Prove to Others and Self Present Self	Positive Attitude Lack of Motivation Effects of MST

Participants varied in their affiliation with the term veteran, but there is no denying the connection they have with others who have served. One woman veteran described her desire to lose her veteran identity and to blend back into society. However, she is still drawn to others that have shared military experience. Some participants mentioned being able to identify other veterans by their clothes, hair, mannerisms, and words; men in particular. They have a common experience that connects them in ways those outside the military will never understand.

**Depends on location.** Identifying with being a veteran varies with each individual and their situation. Sometimes it depends on the location and the number of overall military personnel present. Participant 12 explained,

...in school I will because it's me and nobody else...I feel like I have to fill that role...but out in town I don't wear anything Marine Corps related, I don't wear anything that identifies me as being in the Marine Corps...I don't know why...everyone here's military...I don't think it's anything to brag about...but if I go on vacation and I'm looking for discounts I'm on it...I got that one pegged...if I see something that's cool I'll say yeah I participated...I don't usually identify myself...

Veteran status is not always seen as being special; particularly if you are in an area populated by those connected to the military. In addition, this woman chose not to wear anything identifying her as a veteran. However, she does like the military discounts.

So, depending on the location and situation, some women will reveal their military affiliation. However, for others, their military days are over and they would like to move on. Participant 9 said,

I feel like everyone's trying to get away from that and trying to blend in with society, it's not the label you where anymore...I feel like it's kinda...you don't want to draw attention to yourself and learn how to blend in again...

It is hard to tell if this woman had a bad military experience. She is of the opinion that people move on and want to be a part of the civilian world. They do not want to stand out.

**Connection.** However, veterans and military personnel have had similar experiences. There is a bond that exists between veterans and that connection draws individuals towards one another. Participant 9 continued,

If someone asks me or they ask if I'm married to a Marine I'll let them know I was in...and as much as you try to blend back in...you find that they're your comfort zone...they're easier to talk to, you open yourself up more...as much as it's a transition, you want to be back around the people you feel more comfortable around...

**Older men.** While there is a bond between veterans, women from current conflicts think of veterans as older men who were deployed and experienced combat. Participant 6 revealed,

Honestly, I know it sounds stupid, but I feel like veterans are only those that fought in the Vietnam War I'm not an old guy...I've never been deployed...when people ask me I tell them it wasn't that interesting and I had an everyday job...it was just in the military...so sometimes it does feel a little weird when someone approaches me as a veteran...like, I was in 5 ½ years...that's not a veteran...it's just how uneventful it was [for me] that makes it a little odd...

Women have different opinions about their military service and veteran status. This participant was not deployed and described her time as uninteresting and uneventful. She even described her experience as a job that happened to be in the military.

**Marine.** Every woman does not consider herself a veteran due to their individual circumstances or because of their particular branch. Participant 2 explained,

...Veteran? Not per se...I think of the 70 old man that served in Vietnam, walking in parades and still wearing their uniforms...I don't think of myself as a veteran. I think of myself...because of the service I was in...a Marine...Once a Marine Always a Marine...so whenever someone asks me if I'm in the military...I don't say I'm a veteran...I say I'm a Marine.

So, some women identify with other labels related to their military service. This participant identifies with being a Marine instead of a veteran.

**Positive experience.** Identifying oneself as a Marine or veteran may be connected to the individuals' military experience. If they have a positive experience they are more likely to affiliate with it. Participant 8 said,

Oh yeah...at first you think of someone being old...I loved it...I didn't have any bad experience...so I fully recommend it...it was a great experience...

So, this woman had a positive experience in the military and loved it. She has a connection with other veterans.

**Not unless asked.** Some love being a veteran and have nothing but good things to say. However, other women connect with veterans but do not volunteer their status unless asked. Participant 5 stated,

Yes, I don't bring it up unless they ask me...because I don't think that everyone wants to hear about war stories...you know.

Participant 5 was a medic and experienced a lot of trauma during her military service. She has an affiliation with veterans. However she does not want to share experiences.

**Proudly affiliate.** Individuals' reactions differ about trauma. Some do not want to relive what they experienced by sharing it with others. While other individuals do not want to forget what they experienced and they proudly affiliate with being a veteran.

Participant 3 stated,

Oh yea, absolutely...I was in the military for five years...I could never forget those years ...I went through so much with so many people...we went through so much...I had great NCOs, I had friends of mine that lost their lives during deployment...yes, I absolutely would say that I'm...I do.

Some women relate and respect other veterans for their sacrifice. Participant 3

continued,

...I can relate to them so easily because we come from the same background...some of them have been through more than me...I respect that...and I don't ever think that my time in the service was just as equal to theirs...I don't assume they experienced more than me but I respect those whom I feel have maybe given an arm or something like that...so I'm very respectful for the fact that I know that others have sacrificed more than me even though I am a veteran...

Relating to and respecting other veterans was important to this participant. She served in the military and had an experience she will never forget. However, she does not care about comparing stories to decide who sacrificed more. She seems humbled by her colleagues.

### **Identity with Combat Exposure and Deployment**

Half of the participants in this study did not deploy during their military service, so that left the experiences of the other six to explore deployment and combat exposure. Deployment or the lack of deployment affected how some of the participants felt about their military service and their affinity with being labeled a veteran. One woman veteran expressed she had done a dis-service by not deploying during her time in the military. Another participant added she could not affiliate with real veterans since she had not deployed.

Not all of the participants who deployed during their service were considered in combat. One participant was part of a peace-keeping mission, while others indicated working in logistics. However, there were some participants in this study that deployed and experienced combat exposure. One woman included more details about her exposure than all the other participants. She mentioned women being raped, what she and other women had to do to protect themselves from men, as well as witnessing the death of

another woman soldier. While her accounts were more detailed in nature, they still only provided a few specifics. In fact, the other participants that had deployed only alluded to their experiences and were also vague. One participant mentioned she would not talk about the trauma she had experienced. Another participant was visibly affected by her experiences and not capable of expressing her thoughts and feelings about what she had experienced. One participant mentioned women veterans do not talk about their traumatic experiences. They keep these experiences to themselves, therefore making it difficult to ascertain the suffering some of these women may be enduring as well as how to help them. However, overall, the women veterans that did deploy during their military service wanted their service to be recognized. One participant in particular mentioned that even though the official rules about women in combat were recently changed by the military, there have been women serving in combat for years.

**Military sexual trauma.** Military Sexual Trauma (MST) is a relatively new term. Some women who are affected by MST keep it to themselves. Participant 2 revealed,

Women veterans do not talk about MST and what it's done to them. What it's done to their confidence, what it's done to their self-esteem, what kind of pain they carry, and a lot of veterans I know we just dealt with it. I didn't know how bad it was until later, until I realized I'm a woman and I deserve better.

MST is not experienced exclusively during deployments and in combat; it can occur at any military location. Instances go unreported as does the suffering of some women [and men]. Participant 5 stated,

I think we need to be educated about it...not me specifically but women at the college...and it doesn't only apply to women because men get raped as well...and sexually assaulted...and with me...I was sexually harassed...not assaulted...in the military when I was 21 years old...but I knew how to stop it...not everyone

knows how to stop it...I think there should be either a campaign...needs to be done around here.

**Trauma through combat.** MST and problems associated with it is not always reported or discussed. However, not everyone that experienced MST was raped or assaulted. This is why more education about MST is needed. In addition, to MST, trauma experienced through combat is not readily shared by those that lived it.

Participant 5 shared,

Yea, Yea...I was medic in the military...I've seen a lot of trauma...I think I've handled that...you have to be resilient...I don't think I have PTSD [Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder]...well, I would say mild PTSD...because it really doesn't bother me...I don't have nightmares or stuff like that...but with my disability and being with the VA I have to be honest with them...I feel like I have to be honest...there are things like diversity and dealing with death, dealing with war...history for example...history of different wars...war in Afghanistan, Iraq, Korea...I did most of my papers on war...this is something that I know...I get a better grade of course...it's not just a flashback...it's more like I really don't want to discuss the trauma side of it...but to convey a message to my audience...my teacher...my classmates...that it is a reality but at the same time it should be a learning tool...we should use it as an instrument or tool for learning...when it comes to trauma I stay quiet...

This participant experienced a lot of trauma during her tours of duty as a medic. She is a disabled veteran and receives services. She is willing to write history papers on war, but excludes details about trauma.

**Specific duties.** Responsibilities play a role in how much trauma individual's experience. Medics and chaplain's assistants experienced the trauma from combat first hand. Participant 1 said,

I was a chaplain's assistant. So, basically I had to take care of the welfare of their mental state, we had to take care of the wounded, we had to honor the dead, so we were minister by presence in combat.

This participant lived a lot of trauma as part of her military duties. She faced trauma experienced by others as well as her own. Participant 1 explained,

...I had issues where they would put me on the farthest side where all the other females were away from my guys... guess what, we get home from missions and here I am walking by myself at night... and they know there's only about 5 females and hundreds of dudes... what do you think happens... they follow you... they're coming after you... that's basically what happened... so my soldiers, without chain of command knowing... said you're not safe walking around... we're gonna move some other guys, double-bunk and give you this small little trailer... or they'd have me sleep outside with another group of guys... we figured it out... I've slept in some weird places... I've slept on bunks with a bunch of dudes... they build a lock on the shower for me... that kind of leadership that created that atmosphere... he said to them she is your sister in arms you do not fuck with her.

Participant 1 continued,

...and even within my unit there were people who were raping female soldiers so having to be on guard for so many years... and it just wasn't when I was deployed... it wasn't just when I was deployed, it was when I was in the barracks, it was when I was in my unit... I didn't realize how bad it was until I was getting out of the military and at one point I had a PTSD dog...

This participant experienced a great deal of trauma of her own from combat exposure.

Problems with housing, MST, hygiene, and sleep deprivation were some of the things she endured. She is very forthcoming when it comes to her own experiences in the military and especially in combat. Participant 1 stated,

I'm a soldier... I was there, I experienced these things... so I have a purse and it's red... and it has patches of my service... and the friend that got killed... I knew a female soldier that died, she got killed, she got blown up and that's very difficult for me... because when I hear people... I get treated a certain way... when I feel people don't think women served in combat I feel even more upset... because no... she died... she got blown up... don't even tell me there's not women in combat... you know it's upsetting... very upsetting.

Participant 1 was the most open veteran when discussing her military experiences. She lived through a lot in the Middle East and she is proud of her service. I was moved by what she was willing to share.



**Delayed effects.** Some women experience delayed effects of combat exposure or trauma after they leave the military. Individuals are not always able to express what they are experiencing and feeling. Participant 4 said,

My GPA, tests were good before everything happened...hard to get back to regular...

This veteran was extremely quiet and had a difficult time talking about anything. She relied on her PTSD dog for support and comfort.

**Humanitarian efforts.** There are veterans that experience combat exposure and a great amount of trauma. However, not all deployments are during times of war and can be peace-keeping or humanitarian missions. Participant 5 revealed,

On my 19<sup>th</sup> birthday, I turned 19 in country in Macedonia... my first deployment in 2001 ...right after 9-11...we did a lot of humanitarian work over there...

Women do good work helping others as part of humanitarian deployments. Like this participant, they like helping others and they feel good about their service.

**Dis-service by non-deployment.** There are those that feel good about their military service. However, some women feel differently because they never deployed. Participant 11 explained.

Since I didn't deploy I feel like I did a dis-service, like I didn't live up to what I [was supposed to do]. I mean, I got medically separated. I do [feel this way] and some people are like... you should never feel like that, but I do.

This participant feels very strongly about not being deployed. She suggested she did not have a real experience in the military because she stayed in country. Participant 2 shared,

I've never been deployed... and that's one of the first questions people will ask you...so I feel like I have missed out on things because I didn't get to do that...so I don't have the same shared experience as other people have...so when it comes to that topic I don't have anything to say. It kind of dampers the pride a little bit...that I never got to do that...and that is usually the first thing people ask...

There is a little bit of a difference when military and civilian people ask that question...no, I've not been deployed and they move onto the next subject...

Another participant expressed her thoughts on not being deployed. Participant 12 said,

...so I saw the same stretch of road my whole enlistment...I don't think I got to travel...you know, see other things...I was very...here's my cubicle...here's my office...I don't know...

Some women served in the military without leaving the United States and they have mixed feelings about it. Some participants expressed they did not experience what they thought they would. In addition, they commented that others in society ask about deployment first, so non-deployment ends conversation.

**Spouses' experience.** Veterans worry about their own experiences related to deployment; however some individuals are concerned with spouses as well. Participant 12 explained,

...my ex-husband deployed twice...so I know the other end of it...of a deployment...so I know what it's like not to have that companion around...and what you need to do as a spouse...to fill in those roles and that kinda thing...

So, this participant never experienced deployment as an assignment or duty. However, she did live deployment as the wife of a deployed husband with all the worries and responsibilities that entails.

### **Identifying with Other Veterans**

Participants in this study had different reactions when asked about their affiliation with other women veterans. Some participants mentioned they get along with men better than they do with women; they do not know how to interact with other women. They discussed they were around men all the time in the military, including in their assigned jobs. One women veteran participant described what it was like to be a woman in the military. She said to envision a large all-male high school with only one classroom

comprised totally of women; that was the best way of illustrating the percentage of women in the military. Another participant said it is difficult to find other women with similar experiences, so she associates more with men. It is the related experiences that draw her to other veterans. One participant expressed she could be more of herself around men and did not like some of the behavior that occurs between women.

**Location and population.** Location and population affect the interactions between women veterans. Participant 12 said,

Yeah...but I also knew a lot more female veterans at home...that I could associate with...while here...I don't know...

This participant does not know many women veterans here in this military town. When at home, near a popular VA facility, she knows and associates more with other women veterans.

A smaller population of women veterans can make it difficult for them to find and befriend one other. In addition, individual military experiences make it difficult for some women veterans to find other women with similar experiences. Participant 1 shared,

...so I know a lot of women veterans haven't see and done what I've done and the ones that were there that couldn't hack it or who were whores and got pregnant or whatever...kind of washed them out...so I really like to talk to women veterans but it's kind of hard to find women who have experienced the same things...I have found them... they exist...but it's not...so I typically do go towards the male veterans.

There are fewer women veterans and so it is difficult for women veterans to find others with similar experiences. Due to this situation, some women veterans interact and affiliate with men more than women veterans.

**Identified and labeled.** Some women veterans affiliate and interact with men more than women veterans. In addition, women may have gender in common, but that is

where the similarities end. Women are identified and labeled differently. Participant 2 explained,

Female Marines get stereotyped a lot...a lot...when I was in the Marine Corps women got placed into 3 different categories...you were either a lesbian butch, a bitch to everybody, or you were a whore. Those were the three categories female Marines would fall into. So, for me personally...I always chose the bitch route.

Women veterans are stereotyped and labeled during their military service. This creates separation amongst women and from men.

**Duties not gender.** There is separation that occurs with some women related to their gender as well as their label within the military. However, there are women that do not like to be separated out. Participant 7 stated,

I hate when people try to single us out...we are all soldiers...we really are the same...we were on the front lines for a reason...we jumped out of planes...separate medical care is about it...

Again, this veteran associates her time in the service with duties she and others performed, not gender. To her it is about the individual responsibilities, the structure, and everyone working together to be successful. She does not agree with separating the genders.

Another participant does not see the need for separating men and women veterans. Participant 3 said,

I don't know... I didn't feel that I needed that...as a female myself...I didn't feel the need to segregate myself from other veterans based on my sexuality...it just depends on the female I guess...it depends on the veteran.

This participant commented that it depends on the individual about how they feel about separation by gender and whether they have an affiliation for one over another.

**Not always recognized.** Gender aside, the actual duties and experiences draw some veterans towards one another. However, women are not always recognized for

their service. People assume men are in the military or have served before women.

Participant 6 revealed,

...if I am with my husband...a lot of people recognize him...and I feel stupid...but I'm in the military too...it's not just him...so sometimes...it's like people don't assume that you're both in...

**Separate services.** The topic of having separate services for women veterans is interesting. I thought there would be a need for and desire for them. However, beyond physical and mental health needs there were not many comments on additional services.

Participant 8 said,

I don't think there are any specific needs besides health and counseling...those I don't expect from the college...the VA has those services, so they're already done...

Most veterans think of the VA for needs they have. There are not the same set of expectations for colleges and universities. This may be due to the type of institution and program they are enrolled in as a student.

**Campus versus veteran affairs.** Not all veterans can and do turn to the VA to meet all of their physical and mental needs. There are individuals that receive and rely on services on campus. Participant 4 said,

The one lady that was counseling me...she's actually gone...  
...I had spoken with one before, but I just don't feel comfortable talking...  
...There's someone...like I go to the doctor on Monday and everything...and talk to him and stuff...maybe be on a different medication and everything.

This participant had been meeting with a counselor on campus and that counselor left. She does not feel comfortable talking to just anyone and that is a void for her. She does have a medical doctor and hopefully she can get her medicine regulated and find a new counselor too. Some veterans do use medical services on the campus. However, there

are other veterans do not and who are also hesitant to seek services through the VA due to how they are treated as women. Participant 2 explained,

The one thing that I was going to say about the VA...I had a friend of mine (male) that got out...and we both went to the VA for things...and in comparing what happened (between female and male)...something that got stressed a lot more to me than him...and we spoke to the same person...they stressed to me a lot more...the mental health...they wanted to know if I had any mental issues...

Participant 2 continued,

...I felt strange that they treated me that way. As for school, I got a lot of suggestions...just went with it. When I was trying to get help from the VA for school...they were like do you want to go in to Admin or nursing? Very sexual (gender) related jobs...they didn't ask me if I wanted to be an auto mechanic or a machinist...

So, there are women veterans not seeking services on campuses and who are hesitant about returning to the VA due to how they were treated. It makes you wonder if there are large numbers of women veterans not seeking services at all.

Not everyone expects certain services to be offered by institutions; they expect them to be covered by the VA. In addition, even if the services are offered by campuses or the VA, they are not always used. However, having the staff and enough of them to work with student veterans is important. Participant 11 said,

No...I don't think so...they're doing a great job...I've never felt like, they should have this service...if they don't know they find out and get back to you...and it was a great idea, us having our own VA representative...not sharing between locations...campuses...

Most institutions have designated individuals to assist student veterans with their required paperwork. However, there are some veterans that have ideas about certain programs or services that could be offered. Participant 5 shared,

...just having our own corner...a place to have common...I don't know...just a place for veterans...that we can all talk...and share experiences...and stuff...

Participant 5 continued,

I think there should be a campaign...needs to be done around here. I know my professor...class on feminism...add more to the class ...hey this can happen to you and these are ways to report it...I think it needs to be advertised to everybody...let everyone know you do have somewhere to go...this is a safe place for you to go...a number for you to call...if you want it to be private you can call this number, you can go this hospital...you can have a social worker...a designated team...

Veterans have ideas about programs and services that could possibly be developed and implemented on campus. This is why assessing the needs of veterans is important.

Programming and service needs change as the students change.

### **Sights Set on a Certain Career**

Education was important to the participants in the study, and they all desired careers or furthering their education after obtaining their bachelor's degrees. Half of the women veteran participants were first-generation college students and one of those six was a first-generation high school graduate as well. It was important to them and the other six participants to use their earned educational benefits to better themselves, serve as role models, honor their parents, and /or establish stability for their families. As shown in Table 8, four of the participants were seeking degrees in Business, two in Criminal Justice, and two within Education. Furthermore, there was one participant studying in each of the areas of Social Work, English, Occupational Environment Management, and Nursing. It is interesting to note that five of the participants plan on furthering their education by pursuing their master's degrees and one is still considering the idea. However, one of the most interesting findings about the participants, their education, and chosen professions is four of the twelve women veterans sought to give back to military personnel, veterans, and family members through their varied areas of work.

Table 8

*Education Pursuits of Participants*

Degree Sought	Number of Participants
Business	4
Criminal Justice	2
Education	2
Social Work	1
English	1
Environmental Management	1
Nursing	1
Participants Planning on Graduate School	5
Participants Wanting to Give Back to Military Personnel & Families (through work)	5

**Knew early on.** Veterans have different reasons for pursuing a career. Some women have dreamt their entire lives, or since an early age, about working in one particular field. Participant 3 revealed,

I've always wanted to work with adolescence, teens...because I really feel that they need it... like the supervision, role model...and I would really like to become one of those...and I really think that working at a college would help me do that too because all the people that come here are pretty young... it's something I've always wanted to do...honestly forever because I've taken care of my own siblings....

Participant 3 continued,

After I graduate...depending...I plan on working here [university] as long as they'll have me...for at least another couple of years...but then I was hoping to search the schools around here to see if there's anything I like...

Some veterans know what they want to do from an early age. This participant has always wanted to work with young people. She is passionate about making a difference with them.



**Adult mentor.** Women veterans are passionate about what they want to do and how they want to do it. Sometimes they are introduced to a particular career by an adult mentor at an early age. Participant 10 shared,

I guess the first person that sparked that interest for me was a police officer that worked at my high school...an alternative high school...we had like 8 graduates...he knew everybody...he's the first one that helped me re-direct the path that I was on...

Mentors are wonderful people. They can introduce us to things we might not have considered. Some mentors have the innate gift to know our strengths and offer suggestions or at least some things to consider. At times they say nothing at all. They lead by example.

**Learned to love it.** Some women veterans have mentors that introduce them to a career. Others grew up around a particular place and learned that they loved it.

Participant 6 explained,

...for some reason I was like...I'm going to join the military...and then I won't have to worry about passing classes and stuff...of course I have technical school...but one of the things that brought me back to the idea of being a librarian was being a mechanic...I'm a terrible mechanic...I mean I can do the basics...troubleshooting...the schematics on a page meant nothing to me and I was really sad about that ...my higher ups were understanding ...they knew I tried to work hard...they gave me a lot of paperwork to do...one thing we have in the job...we have these technical manuals...they constantly change and need updating...the people that do the corrections knows there is something wrong...they would tell me what was not right and what needed to be changed ...everyone else hated it, but I loved dealing with the manuals...it was a really great job and when I was doing it I really loved it and I then realized I want to be a librarian when I get out.

Sometimes dreams are pushed aside or put on hold for a while. Maybe an individual forgets because of the reality of enlisting and not going to school. However, dreams have a way of resurfacing and this participant's dream did re-appear.

**Same field.** Some women mention dreams of a certain career since childhood.

While other participants look to continue in the same field they practiced while in the military. Participant 8 said,

I really loved my job when I was in the military...as a lab tech...but I knew I wanted to get out. I thought that maybe I wanted to be a teacher at first, but I changed my mind about working with children...

Careers do not have to change with earning a degree after the military. However, sometimes it is important to be open to new possibilities, even if they do not work out.

**More opportunities.** So, careers do not have to change. Maybe the woman veteran pursues a degree to provide more opportunities in her field. Participant 8 shared,

I have always wanted to go to labor and delivery...I would like to go to labor and delivery...I'd like to work on Fort Bragg as well, to give back...I love the military nursing system...as a civilian...

This participant thought about pursuing a different career after the military, but decided to stay in Nursing. She would like to work in a specific area and she wants to give back to people in the military.

**Giving back.** It is important for some veterans to give back to the military by working with veterans, military personnel and their families. Participant 5 revealed,

Eventually, after that [graduate school], I would go to Federal [the Government] or [the] Military (doesn't matter) to work with veterans; soldiers and family members. Basically back into the veteran community. Once I've set that up, and I'm stable and I've had that experience, I'm going to apply for the United Nations or a world help organization.

Participant 5 is serious about giving back and helping others. She has several goals for herself and she is set on making each one a reality. She wants to help veterans and their families here in the United States and then she wants work internationally.

Some individuals have career goals in a particular field and they want to give back. Maybe they aspire to work with certain service organizations for military personnel and then pursue their additional degrees for their long-term career. Participant 1 shared,

I really want to work, with veterans, and it's a number of different things, they have the Exceptional Family Member program, and they have the Army Community Service...basically anything in Army Community Service is going to help soldiers because you constantly have soldiers and their families in there. I would really like to work with the Wounded Warrior Program; any out of those would be great.

So, this veteran is making plans to work with veterans and their families until her husband is stationed in an area that offers her desired Master's program. She is equally passionate about both goals.

**Working on base.** Some individuals want to give back by working with organizations that provide programs and services for military personnel. Others want to fulfill their career goals by working on a military base as a civilian. Participant 12 revealed,

...but my biggest goal is working in kindergarten on base...right now that's kind of a short term goal...once I get on the base I really want to do special education within early childhood education...that's my big goal...that's another degree down the line...that extra one...and if I were to move from this base to the next...the system itself is the same...it transfers...they have the same curriculum...

This participant has several goals related to working with children, but the consistent component is working on base as a civilian. She even wants to pursue another degree in the future. I am sure that will be contingent on the programs and institutions located near the base where she works.

**Returning to the military.** It is important for some veterans to pursue their career goals by working on a military base as a civilian. However, other individuals seek to have another career by returning to the military. Participant 2 explained,

Ironically, as soon as I get done with my degree I'm planning on going back into the military...instead of going in as enlisted I want to go in as an officer...which I can't do until I have this degree.

Participant 2 did not have the military experience she expected as an enlisted woman. She is seeking the experience in the military she has always dreamt of by being accepted into officer candidate school. She is very determined to make it as a Marine Corps officer.

**Certain and specific.** Some participants are very sure of what they want to do for their careers. They know what they are interested in and are certain of what they want to be doing in their careers. Participant 7 stated,

I really want to land a job either working for NC DENER (NC Department of Environment and Natural Resources)...what I like about NCDENER...North Carolina uses the federal environment regulations as guidelines...but the problem is that they're so small...and we have so much area here in NC...you have all these pig farms and other stuff...it's hard to really put your foot down and say hey, this is what we need to do...so we can prevent stuff from happening like occurred with Duke...I would love to get my hands in there and be able to go to buildings and go through plans...

This participant is interested in the environment and knows what she wants to do. She even has direction on where she would like to work and with whom. She is exceptionally motivated and is willing to do what it takes for her career.

**More education.** The thought of additional education sometimes creates a barrier for individuals. They are not sure what they want to do or they are worried if they are capable. Participant 11 said,

...Accounting. I thought about a Ph.D. in Finance...I'm moving to Austin, TX...after I graduate and their Ph.D. program is very competitive...they only accept maybe 5 students a year...and you have to be in the top 90% of your class...I'm like...that's not me...I think I eventually would like to open up my own business...I don't know if it'll be my own CPA business...yeah, that Accounting degree is really going to help me manage my own business better...

So, this participant has a plan to open her own business, whether the additional degrees materializes or not. She is sure of her Accounting degree for now. She is moving to Austin, Texas after graduating, but all of her other plans still seem to be thoughts and ideas at this point.

**What to do.** Knowing an area of study is important. Most veterans know what they want to study when they leave the military. However, they do not necessarily know what they can and want to do with their degree. Participant 4 said,

I want to go into public relations...

This particular participant is just beginning school, so she has time to make decisions. Right now she says she is majoring in public relations.

**Career confusion.** College is a good place to explore and decide what you want to do. Some veterans know the area of study they want to pursue, but are confused about a specific career. Participant 9 shared,

...To find out exactly what it is I want to do...there are many different options and I look at it all the time...I don't think there's one thing in criminal justice that hasn't caught my interest...I've always just been interested in everything about it...so I think it's going to be really hard to choose something...

Participant 9 is working on her degree in criminal justice. She has multiple interests in this area. She seems uncertain about her career direction. She is even pursuing her license in real estate at the same time she is enrolled in college.

### **Identity as a Woman and With Other Women**

Some women veteran participants shared what it was like when she left the military and became a civilian woman again. One participant spoke of feeling like she was 18 all over again in terms of discovering her womanhood. Participants talked about their dress, hair, make-up, dressing provocatively and that it was difficult after wearing a uniform all the time. One participant explained she had to have someone teach her how to put on her make-up and how to fix her hair, because she did not have to worry about those things when she was in the military. Two participants spoke how next to impossible high heels were for them after wearing combat boots for multiple years. In addition, hats were mentioned more than once by the women veterans. They were used to wearing hats as part of their military uniform. One participant described it best when she said she feels like something is missing when she gets dressed to go out somewhere.

Dressing for school, church, or in a more provocative manner for a special occasion was also mentioned by participants. One participant shared how she wore her uniform two to three sizes too big as to not draw attention to herself while she was in the military. Now that she is home and a civilian, she has difficulty with panty hose, high heels, dresses, clothes that display cleavage, and more. These women served in the military where the male gender was the majority and where they worked hard to be seen as equal or at the least capable. Furthermore, some of these women experienced Military Sexual Trauma (MST) and are not comfortable gaining the attention of the opposite sex even now that they are no longer in the military.

In addition to the transition challenges in the physical appearance routines, the participants also deal with role changes. Depending on their rank and role in the military,

some participants had high level responsibilities as well as men serving under their command. It has been a tough adjustment for some as they left the military and returned home to their roles of wife, girlfriend, daughter, mother, aunt, and more. More than one participant mentioned having difficulty with being a military wife. One woman veteran shared when she was in the military, military wives were often times a topic of derogatory discussion and now she is one. This was a hard reality for her to accept; being one of them. However, being college students and working towards educational and career goals has helped these women veterans. Most of these participants are anxious to obtain their degrees and move on to the next chapter of their lives.

**Re-learned.** Women experience a difficult transition when they leave the military. All the things some individuals relate with being a woman had to be relearned.

Participant 1 explained,

I had spent 7 years wearing larger uniforms so that my figure would not be evident around male soldiers...I did not wear makeup, my hair was completely slicked back in a very professional bun...because I was in the 101<sup>st</sup> and I was military support...you do not take a woman seriously if she has a bunch of makeup on...if she cares more about her appearance than what she is doing at her job then she's probably not a very good soldier ...and that was my mentality... my husband who's in the military...he'll tell you he agrees with that...so I made sure my uniform and everything was straight...so when I got out...I almost feel like I'm 18 in that way...because I'm trying to figure out what my fashion sense is, what my identity is...I don't feel comfortable wearing cleavage... even though I spent weekends wearing jeans and a t-shirt it was very difficult...because now you know what fashion is...I literally went down to a mall...would you please do my makeup and make it look not too eccentric...and whatever she put on my face I bought it ...and I literally asked her to teach me...

Participant 1 continued,

...That's been a very big transition for me. I'm not only buying school clothes, but I'm buying clothes that would be appropriate for a church or induction ceremony that we're about to have for veterans. I'm buying dresses and stockings

and high heels. That's a big deal because you're almost becoming a woman again. For 7 years I was basically a man...treat me like a guy.

Learning how to become a civilian woman is difficult after serving in the military for years. This participant had to be taught how to put on her own make-up, style her hair, and dress in a manner appropriate for the occasion. She had to re-learn how to be a woman no longer in the military.

**Interacting with other women.** Some women veterans re-learn the stereotypical customs related to women in the civilian world. In addition, interacting and having conversations with women is not easy after serving in the male-dominated military.

Participant 2 revealed,

It's harder for me dealing with other females...I find for myself it's easier for me to get along with guys...partly because I was in the Marine Corps...there are so few women in the Marine Corps that you are just always around men...in the shop that I worked in, I was the only woman for over 4 years...so there usually wasn't someone else. When I see females...I don't know how to act...let's talk to this guy over here (laughter).

Comfort is important. It is hard to imagine what it is like for this participant. There are more women attending college than men. So to come from an environment where men are the majority to one where women outnumber the men must be extremely uncomfortable.

**Body image.** Body size and weight is a difficult subject for many women.

Women in the military, particularly paratroopers, are scrutinized for their build due to their specific duties. Participant 7 explained,

...my body size...not only did I have being a minority on my back but I was a female paratrooper...and then I'm thick...I can't help it if my hip bones are bigger than the average white girl...or Hispanic girl...I got tired of always having to prove myself...



This participant left the military over her size and weight. The military has its own set of standards and so does civilian society. This veteran may face similar or different struggles as a civilian.

**Answering to first name.** Weight and size are difficulties some women veterans face. In addition, veterans must adapt to being called by their given name again. They must re-learn their affiliation with their first name. Participant 8 explained,

...the only thing that was different was my name...I was used to being called by my last name for so long...this is not my name...every now and then my friends from the military won't know me or know who I'm talking about...it's weird to be called by my name [first name]...

A name seems so simple. Being called by our first name is something we take for granted. This participant expressed how difficult this was for her. It was almost like she had become a different person. She is no longer identified by her last name or by wearing a hat.

Women veterans must adapt to being know by their first name. Roles also change. Participant 6 said,

I'm in ...but I'm not...sometimes when I'm around other military wives I'm like ...yea, I'm one of them now...

This participant experienced both she and her husband in the military. She now must adjust to life as a civilian. She is a civilian, but still lives a military life with her husband. She is lives a dual existence and that makes the transition difficult.

## **Pride**

Pride is a topic that surfaced for a few of the participants. One woman veteran spoke of how others do not seek help when they need it. They might need an answer to a question or assistance with a problem, but they do not reach out to others.

Another participant spoke about herself on that same issue. She is very proud and if she can accomplish something on her own she will. She will not bring someone in unless it is necessary.

One women veteran spoke the most of pride. She mentioned how she used to be in a position of authority with men serving under her command. She sees herself being unimportant in the civilian world. In addition, she never deployed and struggles with what she did not experience and how that differs from others. Furthermore, she is frustrated with having to get a degree after her years of military service. She earned good money as a Marine, but struggled to get a minimum wage job.

**Not asking for help.** Another participant spoke of other veterans and how some will not file for disabilities. They do not want to admit they have problems and need treatment.

Pride is not a problem with some veterans. However, there are those that will not admit they need help. Participant 5 said,

Oh yes...Yea...Definitely. Me, I don't know...I'll ask...that's not a problem for me...if I don't know I'll ask...but I know a lot of people...men...they are not going to come forward, so...

Participant 1 added,

Very poor attitude to have...I don't need the VA...it's just men and some women like to feel like we don't need help...we can lead soldiers, go into combat, do all of these things ...especially retirees, especially Marines, especially combat arms...we're not disabled, we don't need to file for disability...we are not the definition of disabled people, we are completely abled people...very poor stigma to have because almost everyone who serves and whose been deployed...you've probably seen or done something to your body...you deserve it.

Some individuals that have served in the military do not want to admit they might need help. They have problems asking for assistance. They have been conditioned to hide

weakness and to work through whatever they are experiencing on their own. They do not want to be labeled as disabled.

Seeking help is difficult for some veterans. However, admitting the need and seeking assistance for military service conditions is different for some. Participant 3 stated,

No. I'm a very proud person...so I don't like to...like if I can do something on my own or if I can figure something out on my own without bringing someone else in I will...and I never felt the need to bring in any of my professors or anyone into my business...I've always been able to perform in the classroom and do well...I know that everyone's different and if I felt I was having issues because of my military service I would definitely seek help, but I don't feel that I need that...so...

There are many situations where individuals will not ask for assistance. They have learned to be self-reliant and will work things out on their own. However, it is not easy for individuals to know they have military related problems. They may not know they need help. This participant commented she would reach out for assistance if needed.

**Role change.** Seeking assistance depends on the problem for some veterans. Receiving help for military related difficulties could be different for some. Other problems stem from a change in role, responsibilities, and perception in the civilian world. Participant 2 said,

. . .I mean, when I was in my shop, towards the end of my service I had 30 guys that were junior to me that I was in charge of...so from going to being the boss in the military world to the civilian world...being at the very bottom...it kind of takes a toll on your pride a little bit...

This participant is struggling with her role in the civilian world. She is used to giving orders and being responsible for others. Her rank meant something. She is frustrated at the difference.

**Non-deployment.** A change in role and responsibilities can be frustrating.

Regret over not having similar experience as others can be as well. Participant 2 said,

I've never been deployed...and that's one of the first questions people will ask you...so I feel like I have missed out on things because I didn't get to do that... so I don't have the same shared experience as other people have...so when it comes to that topic I don't have anything to say. It kind of dampers the pride a little bit...that I never got to do that...

This participant struggles with not having experienced deployment during her military service. She does not have the shared experiences with other veterans and that is bothersome.

**Degree necessary.** Not having shared experiences of deployment is bothersome for this veteran. It has also been difficult for her to return from military service and work for minimum wage. She had no choice but to pursue a degree. Participant 2 revealed,

When I first got out I worked at a Pacific Sunwear inside a mall and I started at \$7.25 an hour after being in the Marine Corps for 5 years and that was a MAJOR blow to my ego. It's frustrating cause that's the only thing I could get a job because I don't have any civilian world experience...so going to school...I had to do it...

This participant has a difficult time accepting the fact she has no transferable skills in the civilian world. She held rank and responsibility in the military that was respected and needed. She is seeking to return to the Marines as an officer to get that back.

### **Confidence in Self**

Self-esteem and confidence are essential in proving oneself to others and most importantly to the individual herself. Women veterans worry about college and if they can be successful once they leave the military. They have had to prove themselves concerning their knowledge and physical abilities as a woman to men.

Women veterans have their confidence tested when they enter the civilian world and education. Some embrace it because they know they can compete. Others have a

lapse in motivation when faced with challenges, while some participants' motivation provides the boost they need to face trying times.

Military Sexual Trauma (MST) affects the self-esteem and confidence of those afflicted. The affects can be immediate, but they also can become evident later in life. Many suffer in silence, not wanting the stigma attached to the condition.

**Lack of confidence.** Attending college can be intimidating for some individuals. Some women are not as confident in their abilities at first. Participant 11 said,

...but I thought it would be more difficult...I thought it was going to be like, you're going to make it or you're not and chances are you're not...when I started going it was doable and I wish I had known...a while ago...

We can make things harder than are in reality. Attending college was like that for this participant. Her self-esteem was low and she lacked confidence initially, but gained momentum as she progressed.

**High expectations.** While some veterans' self-esteem and confidence levels are low, others know who they are and what they are capable of doing. They are willing to give their all in everything they do. Participant 10 said,

...just my own expectations for myself...because I have high expectations for myself...I know that I can do...whatever if I apply myself...even it's not my area of expertise or if I don't enjoy it I'm still going to apply myself...because I can always say I did the best I could do...

This participant expects a lot of herself. She knows that she does not need to worry about anyone else but her. As long as she meets her own expectations by doing her best she is good. That is all she can expect of herself.

**Prove to others and self.** Some women set high expectations and only worry about what they have set for themselves. Others have to prove themselves to other people as well. Participant 9 explained,

...I've worked hard to show people that I can do it...I don't want to go back to any other thing...so for the rest of my life I'll be more blunt...

Participant 9 has proven herself to others. Through that experience she has established confidence and respect for herself. She is not about to lose what she has gained.

Having to prove yourself continuously is tiring. Some women veterans make decisions in their best interest to remove themselves from those situations. Participant 7 stated,

I got tired of always having to prove myself...I made my E5 fast, in 3 years...I was on track...every mission I got I did it to the max...

Participant 7 knew she was capable and gave her all in the military. She was proud of herself and her work. She moved through the ranks quickly. Her size and weight were an issue for the military, not her. She made the choice to leave and get on with her life.

Women make important choices to advocate for themselves.

**Present self.** When a woman knows herself and her capabilities she projects this to others. She is respected. Participant 5 explained,

...because in the military you're surrounded by men all the time, in my job I was the only woman...but it's the way you present yourself for these men to respect you...and I never had any problems with my military career...

Some women leave the military having self-respect as well as the earned respect of others. This participant is an example of someone who has made the transition from the military and is approaching life in the same manner.

**Positive attitude.** Living your life with confidence and self-respect is possible in any situation. It is important to approach all things with a positive, can-do attitude.

Participant 3 explained,

...I always thought that I was on the same level as everyone else...it didn't matter if I came from the military or not...I think if you act like you know what you're

doing...you know where you are, you've been there before...even if you haven't it's very important in helping yourself...confidence is very important in any road you go down...

She continued,

...I think it's about your confidence and your willingness to go out there...obviously the confidence is the biggest thing...and if you lack that it's maybe going to be harder...because people look at you and think you know she's kind of nice...but she doesn't seem like she knows what she wants...

This participant was sure of herself and she knows how important that is life. She approaches new challenges like she has been there before. She has experiences that provide the confidence she needs to be successful.

**Lack of motivation.** Past experiences help women face new challenges like they have been there before. Sometimes the confidence is there, but motivation is lacking for an individual. Participant 2 shared,

It's a struggle...because I'm so close that every day I just want to get up and quit...I don't need this job...I need to finish school in case what I want to do doesn't work out.

Participant 2 wants to go back into the Marine Corps as an officer. She has to earn her degree before she can qualify for officer candidate school. So, what she is doing now is not her end goal and it is hard for her remain motivated to keep going.

**Effects of military sexual trauma.** Motivation is needed to accomplish tasks. It is scarce at times for some women when they are not enthusiastic about what they must do. However, some women experience low self-esteem and lack confidence as well as motivation due to MST. Participant 1 explained,

...women veterans do not talk about MST...and what it's done to them...what it's done to their confidence...what it's done to their self-esteem...what kind of pain they carry... and a lot of veterans I know...we just dealt with it...I didn't know how bad it was until later...until I realized I'm a woman, I deserve better...

Participant 1 knows first-hand about MST and what it does to a person. Many with MST go undiagnosed and suffer in silence. This participant advocates for herself and seeks the needed services to assist her.

### **Military Influence**

#### **Military Time**

Most of the participants in this study are ready to get on with their lives. The majority started school almost immediately or within a few short months of leaving the military. Most of the women veterans know what they want to do with their education and careers after earning their degrees (see Table 9). So, for some, they cannot finish fast enough. One participant thought it might be too late for her to become a police officer. However, she came to the realization it was not too late. She experienced an urgency to realize her dream before turning 40. In civilian life the age of 40 is considered relatively young.



Table 9

*Descriptors of Sub-categories for Military Influence Theme*

Sub-Categories	Descriptors	
Military Time	Sense of Urgency Age	
Attributes Gained	Discipline Punctuality and Organization Accountability Respect for Authority Prioritization	Exposure to Diversity Self-Respect Accomplishment Competitiveness
Transition Out	Small School Personal Approach Large Groups Finding Balance Angst	Abrupt Planned Medical Complications Frustrating Challenging Military
Career	Unorganized Process Smooth	Culture Shock
Planned Exit	Change in Life Plans Opt Out Ready to Move On	Back-Up Plan Preparing for life After Military
Unplanned Exit	Personal Struggles Health Problems	
Experienced Diversity	Different Ways and Situations Small Town Ways Experience Abroad	College Exchange Open-Mindedness Melting Pot
Military Towns as Comfort Zones	Home Access Care Establish New Roots Stereotypes Tuition	Understands Military Familiar & Comfortable Indifference Inability to Settle

**Sense of urgency.** However, the perception of age and time is different for those that experienced military life. Participant 10 was anxious to have a career outside the home. She revealed,

... I feel like I have a sense of urgency, because I am going into a new career field and approaching 40. As a woman in a male-dominated work environment, I want to get at it.

Some veterans believe it is too late for them to have careers outside the military. They want to make things happen yesterday. So, when veterans are focused to an end result, they want to get there quickly.

**Age.** Participant 7 was responsible for raising her nieces and nephews. She needed to earn her degree to so she could support them financially and serve as a role model. She was worried about being older [per military time] and needing a degree to get a job. She said,

I was getting old [laughter]... I was about to be thirty...I wasn't getting any younger...it's going to be harder to get a job without a degree these days...and for me to set the path for my nieces and nephews I need to do what I'm preaching...so I have to get my degree.

Participant 7 made the decision to pursue her degree. She knew a degree was essential to get a job that paid enough to support her and her sibling's children. She also had the added responsibility of setting a good example for her nieces and nephews. They look up to her as their surrogate parent and she had to practice what she preached.

Participant 2 did not have any children to support. However, she wanted to attend officer candidate school and return to the Marine Corps. She stated,

Due to my age this is pretty much my last chance to get in the military as an officer...so if I don't make it this next time then I'll be too old to do it...

Participant 2 was focused on what she had to do to complete her degree and move on to officer candidate school. She desired to become an officer and she was experiencing anxiety due to the anticipation.

### **Gained Attributes**

Most participants spoke of what the military had taught or instilled in them. They mentioned attributes such as determination, patience, and being goal-oriented. They continued with the qualities of being punctual; just get it done, organization, accountability, independence, and being self-disciplined. The women veterans also offered the military taught them about diversity, the importance of education, as well as you cannot fail. Some of the participants shared they had these characteristics before entering the military. However they gave the military credit for the further development of these qualities. Other participants said they did not have these qualities before their service and acknowledged the military for their development.

**Discipline.** Participant 9 attended school before entering the military. Her experience was a challenging one. She said,

I knew I didn't have the discipline that I needed to start school right away and I felt like the service gave it to me. I didn't want to feel like that was the only thing I could do. I knew I could do more and the military helped me learn that I could do it.

The veteran learned discipline through her service. She also discovered the military was not the only thing she could do. She developed the confidence needed to go back to school and succeed.

**Punctuality and organization.** Discipline and self-confidence were learned by participant 9, while participant 12 credits the military for instilling the attributes of punctuality, organization, and being school-oriented in her. She shared,

...so being punctual...people would show up late for class and that used to drive me bananas...and being organized...I have binders and folders all labeled and organized and then I get to class and these girls got one massive pile in their backpack and they're trying to search through papers...I was not very organized before the Marine Corps...for sure...but now...

Punctuality and organization are essential in the military. They are a part of life when women leave and re-enter the civilian world. Some veterans experience frustration with others that do not value and exhibit the same behavior. In addition, the military provides women the opportunity to grow and mature. They learn a lot about themselves and experience changes through their development during their service

**Accountability.** Participant 12 commented further on the personal accountability that was instilled in her during military service. She said,

...but I think being able to hold yourself accountable for everything you do...so turning in that homework on time...and being on time for class and showing up to every class...it's accountability in yourself and you learn a lot more...

Being personally accountable is an attribute learned by many veterans during their military service. The military is a disciplined way of life. Someone is always watching and individuals are expected to behave with certain decorum. This behavior becomes a way of life for most military personnel and they no longer need someone else to tell them what they should do. They know and hold themselves accountable.

**Respect for authority.** While participant 12 commented on the multiple qualities learned and enhanced through her military experience, participant 10 described having respect for those in authority as well as having self-respect. She explained,

...but I also respect those who hold authority over me and I know that comes largely from the Marine Corps...just my own expectations for myself...because I have high expectations for myself...I know that I can do...whatever if I apply myself...

Following orders or instructions can be difficult if you question what you are being told to do. The military instills following orders and showing respect for those in authority. Personnel persevere by following orders and completing assigned tasks. Respect for authority is also demonstrates self-respect. When individuals respect authority they respect themselves. They have high expectations for themselves.

**Prioritization.** Participant 10 shared her value of authority and self-respect. Participant 8 liked her job in the military and she credits her time in the service for instilling patience, focus, prioritization, setting goals, and demonstrating integrity. She said,

Just knowing how to prioritize, how to meet goals, stick to what you say, do it with integrity...I actually learned patience and focus...I never got tired of my job [in the military] even though I was doing the same thing every day...

This veteran enjoyed her time in the military. She did not mind the repetition in her work. In fact, she learned patience and focus through the required replication. Freedom can be found in repetition because it is free from making decisions. However, some learn to prioritize, set goals, and act with integrity no matter the task.

**Exposure to diversity.** The military provides opportunities to develop respect for authority, self-respect, as well as personal development, through the exposure to different people and places. Participant 6 stated,

Just get in there and do it...being able to go with different people...learn about different parts of the world...being able to connect more with a variety of people...it's kind of hard, because I can't imagine what it would have been like not being in the military...every experience you have can help you to learn and grow depending on how you take it...coming in more mature and more focused...

Military experiences are different for each individual. However, all personnel meet people and experience places different from their norm. These opportunities help in the

growth and development of women during their time of service. Most leave the military more mature and focused.

**Self-respect.** The military can expose personnel to different people and places to help them gain perspective on how to present themselves and be respected. Participant 5 revealed,

It's helped me a lot...a lot...because not only your perspective of life changes, the way you approach things are different, the comparison between civilian life and military life is completely different...

The military is dominated by males and women experience life from a different perspective. The roles vary, but women learn to present themselves in a manner that deserves respect. They are tested, but when they know how to handle themselves and the situation, problems dissipate.

**Accomplishment.** Knowing how to present yourself and be respected by others are elements instilled by the military. Participant 3 shares how the military introduced the need to accomplish things in an organized and timely manner. She shared,

...it's given me this feeling of needing to accomplish...the military does that to you...you feel like you have to accomplish and you can't fail...so it's definitely affected me in that way... it's also affected me in organization and time management...I would say that in the military you definitely need to be organized...you definitely need to manage your time...

Organization and time management becomes a way of life for women in the military. So does accomplishing tasks without fail. When some women leave the military these attributes are a permanent part of them and how they approach life.

**Competitiveness.** Organization, time management, and accomplishing tasks definitely help when competing with others. A little competition brings out the best in some women according to Participant 2. She explained,

...so if I'm competing with another girl and we have the same everything...physical education scores, SAT test scores, same job, same awards...but I've been to school for 3 months and she's never been...I'm going to get picked over her...and when it comes to me competing with guys...if I can't beat them physically, I'm going to beat them intelligently...by going to school...that's going to get me ahead of them in that aspect...

Having a competitive edge was important to Participant 2. She liked how pursuing and earning a degree would provide an advantage.

A competitive edge through the earning of a degree is important. So is learning how to protect you. Participant 2 said,

I always felt I could take care of myself. I thank the Marine Corps for that... there's hardly a time in my life when I'm scared of anything ...I learned martial arts in the Marine Corps...I mean, I'm not afraid of much of anything.

Having the confidence and ability to take care of oneself is an accomplishment. This participant obtained these skills through her service in the Marines. She acknowledges that as well as the Marine Corps.

### **Transition Out**

The responses were varied from the participants when asked about their transition out of the military to education. It was difficult for some of them to separate their transition to civilian life from their transition to higher education and the lines between the two often became blurred. However, for some veterans the transition from the military was an easy one because they had planned ahead and had a lot of support. Some of them attended all of their military transitional meetings, had their questions answered, and sought assistance from the VA and university staffs. However, those women that experienced their military careers being cut short, had a much more difficult transition out of military life. This was not something they expected to happen, so for some it took longer to adjust. Some participants question if they ever will adjust or adapt to life out

of the military. One participant provided an explanation of what it is like for those having their military careers end unexpectedly. She said that when someone retires from the military they receive formal recognition with a ceremony. However, when someone leaves the military suddenly or unexpectedly, paperwork is signed one minute and then you are just out. There is no time to adjust. Individuals are jarred into being a civilian again.

**Small school.** Some veterans transition from the military into higher education and purposefully select a small school. Small schools provide a more personal approach with an emphasis on helping the student as an individual. Participant 6 shares,

It helps a lot being at a small school, everyone is so attentive and they help you out with everything. I felt like a lost ball in the high weeds when I first got here.

There are many different colleges and universities to choose from in the United States.

There is such a thing as institution fit and veterans need to select the school that best mirrors their goals and needs.

**Personal approach.** The personal approach is effective for certain schools and it can be equally important to help individuals understand and know how to use important information. Participant 12 said,

When you get out you go through a week long class...and that's supposed to prepare you to get out...it covers a lot...they talk about resumes...but they can only teach so much about a resume to a general population...you really need to sit down with someone to transfer your military stuff over to the field you're trying to get into...you can transfer a lot of it over but is it really going to be useful to you in the field you're trying to go into...and then they talk a lot about your disability rating...how to get your disability pay and all that...but that's a onetime deal and you're done...the GI Bill...you need to spell it out every time you take a class...I didn't know anything about it, so...yeah, that was rough...

Veterans experience different transition programs depending on their military branch.

The Marine Corps offers a week long class for large groups of people at one time. They



provide a lot of different information during that week and educational benefits are only one of many components covered.

**Large groups.** Sometimes focusing on the individual is not possible and information is provided collectively to a large group. Personal interests and needs are not always met. Participant 12 continued,

It was auditorium seating...a good 200 people in there maybe...and there were probably 10 females at the most in there...a lot of the schooling that they did talk about was motorcycles...and things like that...they would come in and talk to you...and they would talk to you and you were like...that's okay but now that I've heard from 10 different schools where I can go to learn about cars...and mechanics [laughter]...what about like a regular school?

Veterans are not all the same. Some of them embrace the formal transition process provided by the military. However, this approach does not meet everyone's needs and interests.

**Finding balance.** Transitions can be challenging when information is limited and multiple changes occur. Changes in relationships and relocating are stressful. At times finding balance in life takes priority over pursuing a degree. Participant 11 said,

...I moved back down here...then I just started going...my first couple of semesters, in 2012, I took a class here and there...so, and I was still trying to balance it with life...now, I just go and I'm in a routine...

Transitions involving moves and changes in relationships can be challenging. Even if a veteran wants to earn a degree, the desire to attend school may be missing. However, going to school and creating normalcy can bring balance to life as well.

**Angst.** Finding balance, setting priorities, and adapting to a new environment can be difficult. Some choices are easier than others and can cause great angst. Participant 10 explained,

When I got out of the Marine Corps, I remember that transition being very difficult...it was a totally different environment...I chose to get out of the Marine Corps...I was in the position where I had to either re-enlist or get out...it was a very difficult decision for me but ultimately we chose for me to get out...we wanted to start a family...

Veterans make difficult choices in life and some result in challenging experiences that illustrate the difference in environments. The civilian world differs from the military in so many ways. Some veterans have a hard time adjusting to their new lives.

**Unorganized processes.** Some veterans experience difficulty during their transition. Problems can occur due to the difference in environments or because of unorganized processes. Participant 9 shared,

Not at all...very unorganized...I requested out...they told me what paperwork I needed...I completed it and submitted it...then it took them 2 weeks to kick it back and tell me it's not the right stuff, you need to do this instead and it includes these other forms...so I did that, submitted them again and waited while people took their time with it... they are not structured at all when it comes to... getting out...

Processes can be confusing and frustrating. At times it seems as if you are going in circles and nothing will ever work out. Bureaucracy and policies are intended to provide order, yet create chaos for some individuals.

**Smooth transition.** There are always at least two sides to a story. While one veteran may experience a difficult transition from the military to college another may enjoy an easy shift. Participant 8 said,

It was easy...when you get back to college...I feel good...I'm ready...you're so much older than the younger ones, but you know what...for me going to school originally when I was 18...it's such a big difference...now I'm 30, I'm a mother, I know what I'm going to do...I have to get my life stable for me, my husband and my daughter...

Some veterans experience a smooth transition to college. They are mature, confident, and they are pursuing a degree for a good job and a career. Some have the responsibilities of family and all want a better life.

**Abrupt end.** Not all veterans get a smooth and easy transition. Sometimes the decision to leave the military is made and life as they have known it comes to an abrupt end. Participant 6 said,

Mine was different than most people...normally they have the...financial, what schools you can go to, civilian clothes...I didn't go through that...I had a different exit...so, it was honorable...nothing bad...I did the voluntary separation to get on out because...I met Brandon and we didn't want to be separated...that was one of the things that kind of made it more drastic...all of the sudden I was out and then I went home...

Not all transitions are the same. While some veterans experience easy transitions, others' military careers come to an abrupt end. Even when a choice is made to pursue other priorities in life, it is not easy to leave.

**Planned ending.** While some veterans experience an abrupt and challenging end to their military career others plan ahead and create a smooth transition for themselves. Participant 3 explained,

I found it to be very easy because I was on top of everything...I can't speak for anyone else, but I can see why...I think it's very messy, very hard and it's because you have to be on top of your paperwork...and not just your military paperwork...your home paperwork, your school paperwork...you've got to be on top of your life...and I feel like most people are used to that military...telling them how to do things and just starting to do things on your own without being told what to do can be overwhelming for a lot of people...it was a little overwhelming for me but the way I went about it...I can't mess this up, this is my life now, I have to take responsibility for my life...

This veteran had planned on getting out and took the necessary steps to be organized and responsible for her transition. A positive attitude and confident approach allowed her to take control of her life.

**Medical complications.** While some veterans plan and approach their transition with confidence, others experience unforeseen medical complications that affect their lives. Participant 4 said,

My first semester I was actually doing really well...then I had my hospitalization...

She continued,

Like I've been having an issue with being on the computer because of my eyes and everything...getting out of hospital...they had me on one medication and then they put me on another one...I've been trying to get back to normal...

Health complications can happen to anyone. Life can be normal one minute and completely changed in an instant. Veterans with health problems experience challenges in every aspect of their lives.

**Frustration.** While some veterans experience complications due to their health, others deal with frustration caused by those around them. Participant 2 shared,

I don't think I had that much trouble in transitioning...if anything I found myself getting frustrated with the people around me...Instead of me having problems...I guess I'm pretty good with doing what I'm told...I mean, I get an assignment I do it...if I get it wrong, it's wrong and I fix it...whereas, I found myself getting frustrated with other people in my class that would dwell on simple things instead of seeing the big picture of what was going on...

The transition to a changed environment where approaches and behavior differ is difficult. Some veterans find it hard to understand and relate to their peers in school.

**Challenging military career.** Some veterans experience a transition made difficult due to the difference in environment and peers. Other veterans have difficulty with their transition due to challenging military experiences. Participant 1 revealed,

...I didn't realize how bad it was until I was getting out of the military and at one point I had a PTSD dog when I was transitioning out...It was very difficult when I first got to campus...and I don't want to take night classes...I don't want to walk at night to my car...even though I know this campus is safe, I still...it's not

going to happen. It's been difficult in class. They'll talk about the military and the economics...you know I had to read a WWII poem that a soldier that died in a turret of a plane and them having to wash his body out...and I really didn't want to even talk about it... and everyone else is talking about tone and symbolism and I finally I had to say something...a kid thought it was so disrespectful for them to wash his body out of the turret and I had to explain to him that when they were getting shot at that the caliber of the bullet...it's not one piece of a body...it's pieces and that's very difficult...that's been very difficult .

This participant's life was complicated due to lasting effects from her military experience. Some veterans suffer from PTSD, MST, and other medical conditions that affect every aspect of their lives. They want to feel safe but fear inhibits their day to day routine. Walking on campus, the time classes are offered, class content and more cannot be taken for granted.

**Culture shock.** The transition from military life to higher education is easy for some and hard for others. It is still a transition and a change from what they are used to. Some veterans adapt better and more quickly than others, but it is still a different way of life. Participant 10 explains,

...as far as the transition from the military to the civilian sector...it's a culture shock initially...even the most lackadaisical Marine is in shock...it's just something you have to go through...

So, most veterans experience culture shock as they transition from the military to higher education. However, the change creates an awareness and appreciation for their military experience that may not have been possible without it.

### **Planned Exit**

Some of the participants in the study planned on getting out of the military. Several veterans discovered the military was not for them and began planning their exit months in advance, obtaining additional transferable skills and/or researching schools.

However, even though these women decided they would not re-enlist, they fulfilled their commitment in order to earn their educational benefits.

One participant discovered she was not a good mechanic and even though they gave her the responsibility of working with service manuals, she requested out when the military was down-sizing. She wanted to attend school. Furthermore, there was a veteran who had planned to stay in the Marines, but got married and made the decision to get out. She and her husband wanted to start a family. There was a dichotomy that existed about the exit of this participant, because she planned on remaining in the military. Therefore, her decision to leave was not a planned one initially; it came about due to a change in her life priorities.

**Change in life plans.** So, even planned exits from the military were difficult for at least one veteran. Participant 10 said,

When I got out of the Marine Corps, I remember that transition being very difficult; it was a totally different environment. I chose to get out of the Marine Corps; I was in the position where I had to either re-enlist or get out. It was a very difficult decision for me...

Life happens and best made plans go awry. Participant 10 went into the Marine Corps with plans on remaining in the military for years. She did not plan on meeting, falling in love, and marrying her husband, but she did. This veteran was forced to make the choice of re-enlisting or leaving to start a family, consequently she began planning her exit.

Some participants enter the military with the intent to remain, some even for their entire careers. However, things do not always happen as planned. The military is not for everyone and discover this after completing part of their commitment. Participant 11 said,

I didn't know...when I joined the military I was like...I'm not going to go to anymore school...and then I knew half-way through my enlistment I was going to get out...that's actually why I took lab school... I knew when I got out...I would most likely have a guaranteed job...so, half-way through I knew I was getting out...

This veteran thought she was done with school. She joined the military and knew she would be enlisted for years. However, after completing part of her commitment, she knew she would not re-enlist and began planning her exit. She was intentional in obtaining transferable skills to help her get employed after the military.

Not all individuals fulfill their military commitment. Some leave because they fall in love. They make plans and exit the military to pursue relationships. Participant 6 shared,

I had a different exit...so, it was honorable...nothing bad...I did the voluntary separation to get on out because...I met [my husband] and we didn't want to be separated...that was one of the things that kind of made it more drastic...all of the sudden I was out and then I went home.

This participant made plans and voluntarily separated from the military to create a life with the one she loved. She was not willing to a part from her husband. There are individuals that serve in the military for years and plan on it for life. However, changes occur and they face the reality of leaving the military.

**Opt out.** Some individuals join the military and discover it is not for them. Instead of fulfilling their entire commitment they opt out early because they are ready to go to school. Participant 9 shared,

I actually opted out early...because I wanted to be able to start school...I wasn't going to re-enlist...I had my plans and I knew I wanted to go to college. I felt ready...

Attending school is not the goal for all individuals when they enter the military.

However, education can become an attractive alternative when the military does not turn out to be the best choice.

**Ready to move on.** Life in the military is not for everyone, but some individuals are fond of the time they spent in the service. They enjoy their time, but they are ready to get out and pursue new careers. Participant 8 stated,

I really loved my job when I was in the military...as a lab tech...but I knew I wanted to get out. I thought that maybe I wanted to be a teacher at first, but I changed my mind about working with children...

This veteran loved what she did in the military, but she was ready to move on. She wanted to leave to seek her calling outside the military.

**Preparing for life after the military.** Preparing for life beyond the military is important for all individuals. It should be started before the military career is over.

Participant 3 explained,

Before you actually make the decision to get out you need to have a support system set in place...and that's what I made sure I had...because once you get that support system set in place...then you can start the process of the application paperwork.

This veteran did not wait to begin planning her future. She took steps to develop a network of support before she left the military. She had the needed recommendations, conducted research on schools, made necessary contacts, and knew what was required for a seamless transition to college.

Some participants think know what they want to do and enter the military thinking they will make a career of it. However, over time they realize the military is not what they really want to do. They do not intend on re-enlisting, but fulfill their commitment and prepare for their civilian future. Participant 12 revealed,



Yes. Originally I was going to stay in...this sounds cool...but after 6 months, this is a really great start...and a good base...but this is not what I want to do...I like working with kids...I don't want to work with adult children [laughter]...I want to work with real children...I knew that was not my role...my place to be, but I enjoyed it while I was there...

This participant knew from an early age that she wanted to work with children. The time she spent in the military helped her realize what her future career should be. It made next steps clear.

### **Unplanned Exit**

While some participants in the study planned their exit from the military, others experienced military careers cut short. A few participants suffered injuries during their service and became disabled veterans. They had intended on remaining in the military for their careers. In addition, one participant was a paratrooper and struggled with her weight the entire time she was in the service. She tired of having to continuously prove herself, so she exited the military even though she had planned on serving for ten years. Furthermore, there was the participant who had planned to remain in the military, but left to start a family when she married another Marine. She spoke of how hard that decision was for her. She loves the Marines and loves being a Marine.

**Personal struggles.** Some individuals planned on remaining in the military for several years, but personal struggles to meet requirements proved too much. Participant 7 shared,

...I have always been my family's support...since my dad died I physically got all my sister's kids...even when I was sending money from afar...but now I'm the one up front, in your face...that's taking care of you...but now I'm doing something for myself...I decided to get out... I made that decision...rather than starving myself and getting skinny...I decided to get out...I decided to go to college...I'll do this and I'm going to get a really good job...I'll be happy and nobody can judge me because I'll be doing it...and the only way you can fire me is if I wasn't doing a good job...but I made that choice...so, I had a transition

with the kids...how to cut back, no more traveling...it's been a struggle...it's a struggle now...

The veteran had wanted to remain in the military for years; however her struggle with the physical requirement changed things. She made the decision to leave the military even though it made life difficult. She was responsible for her sister's kids, but she had to be happy.

**Health problems.** One participant made the choice to leave the military to be happy and free from physical requirements. Another veteran left due to an injury the kept her from performing her responsibilities as a medic. Participant 5 said,

They wouldn't let me stay in because I couldn't pick up my patients anymore...or anything like that because of my back...and that's why I'm not in nursing.

This participant planned on staying in the military, but had her career cut short with an injury. She also wanted to stay in the medical field beyond the military, but was physically unable to do so.

Unplanned exits from the military due to injury affect people in different ways. Some accept their circumstances and move on while others struggle with the abrupt change and lack of recognition. Participant 1 revealed,

...I joined the reserves and I was hoping to stay in the military in the reserves but then I had the health problems and had to get out...but I didn't get to finish...I thought when I got pregnant I'm going to make staff sergeant and then I didn't get to...a lot of times when you get out to the military it's hard...people who retire get a ceremony...but when you just ETS you sign your duty and you just leave...

This veteran desired to remain in the military, but her injuries forced her out. She was not ready to be out of the military and the abrupt end to her career has not settled well with her. She struggles with no longer being in the military as well as the lack of recognition for her years of service.

## **Experienced Diversity**

Diversity is a topic that several veterans mentioned when discussing their experiences. Their interactions and experiences are different, yet emphasize the importance of diversity in their lives. One veteran said she has interacted with diverse groups of people in class, at the day care, department store, and in the military. She said the military can be very diverse, yet not so much, due to the structure and being set in its ways. This veteran also mentioned how people segment themselves into certain communities out in town.

Another veteran described visiting third world countries and witnessing the work ethic of people there. In addition, keeping an open mind and listening to others was added to the diversity discussion. We do not need to agree with everything someone else says, but we need to keep an open mind and listen without judgment.

Furthermore, a veteran described the military as a big melting pot and people work together despite their differences. People come from their home towns where they have been raised a certain way and learn there are differences. In addition, it is important for individuals to challenge themselves to go beyond their comfort zones and try something new.

**Different ways and situations.** Diversity is experienced in many different ways and in varying situations. Participant 12 explained,

Well, for example...the diversity in class...some of them only see one type of diversity and they're very blinded to the outside...now I've worked at base, I've worked out in town...I've worked at home...so I've had a lot experience in different day care centers...in terms of diversity...at home I worked in Kohl's Department store in their corporate center day care and they bring a lot of people from other countries to work with them...you have a lot of different beliefs and cultures in there...that you don't see here...and I also have the military side of being on base...a lot of culture there...very diverse...but also very much the same...very structured, very set in place...and then you come out into town

here...not quite as diverse...you almost have your groups...you have this day care pretty much serves this group of people...not intentionally...but by pricing and by their location...

This participant experienced diversity in different aspects of her life, including the military. However, she also mentioned the lack of diversity that exists in the military, as well as communities in town.

**Small town ways.** Some veterans experience diversity throughout different aspect of their lives. However, others come from small towns where everyone is raised to think and behave a certain way. Participant 6 said,

...and another thing with the military...I was around different groups of people...I grew up in the same, tiny little town my whole life...and then I left it and you have all of these expectations...from the same tiny little community in Georgia where everyone had the same ideals...you kind of assume everyone is the same as you and then you find that they're not...people are completely different...

This participant did not experience a diverse up-bringing in her home town. It was an eye-opening experience for her when she discovered different people and views. It challenged her to think beyond what she had always known.

**Experience abroad.** Some veterans are challenged by the diversity that exists in the military, small towns, and communities here in the United States. However, others learn to appreciate difference through experiences abroad. Participant 10 stated,

...you think about visiting third world countries...a lot of Americans have not had the ability to do that...it's just a very enlightening experience...I think we should be able to do that regularly...to bring us back to what we had...

Having the opportunity to go abroad and visit other countries provides a chance to be thankful for the similarities as well as celebrate the differences. It also provides knowledge, understanding, and appreciation for what we have.

**College exchange program.** Learning about and celebrating differences by going abroad or being stationed overseas is a gift. However, a lot can be learned about other cultures through college exchange programs and international students as well.

Participant 1 shared,

...and even in this college there's a huge exchange program...there's a lot of international students...that's been very helpful...I've already served with people and in places all over the world... that's very helpful...

The experience of being overseas and working with and among different types of people creates an advantage for veterans.

**Open-mindedness.** These experiences help veterans be more open-minded and less judgmental. Participant 9 explained,

...I feel like that makes it easier too when you go into a classroom...you're not a judgmental...you're not as...it helps with diversity also...it opens up your mind a lot...you're much more open-minded...it's really about taking the time to open your mind to another person...you might not agree with it...but you don't have to open your mouth and say that...

Having an open mind and being less judgmental help veterans in college. They are more willing to listen to others and respect the opinions of others.

**Melting pot.** The military is made up of different types of people from all walks of life. Yet, despite their differences they have a common bond. Participant 7 said,

One thing I love about the military...we're a big melting pot and we work together no matter what differences we had at home.

Having a common goal and bond creates a strong group. Even though the military is comprised of a group of very diverse people, they work as one.

The military and college is about having new experiences. Stretching beyond what is comfortable to meet new people and try original things is important to everyone's development. Participant 3 said,

...all the clubs around campus would be good...just that communication and diversity...you have the veterans and the other students...the diversity is good and don't be so close-minded to one way...try to open yourself up to new experiences and new opportunities...new life...friends and stuff like that...it's important to not lock yourself up in one way.

Being open to meeting new people and trying different things is important to us as individuals. We must be willing to experience the discomfort that comes with difference.

### **Military Towns as Comfort Zones**

The search for a college can be an extensive process. However, some individuals narrow their search and choose the institution based on its location in town. Participant 12 revealed,

There were a couple I looked at...because I knew they had a campus here in town...

This participant only considered two schools due to their location in town. She wanted to be near home and not have to drive a long way.

**Home.** Colleges are selected by some for their proximity to home and what is familiar. There are people that get out of the military and leave the area where they were stationed. However, there are plenty of military personnel and veterans that stay in the area that has become home. Participant 12 continued,

I thought people used to leave the area...but a lot of people stay here...so, they get jobs on base...

This veteran has experienced people settling in town. They get jobs on base, but are forced to seek services like day care out in the community. It helps to have a network of informed people to make someone feel at home.

**Access care.** Military towns usually consist of military installations and VA medical facilities and services. Veterans that need services find it convenient to be located where they can access needed care. Participant 12 explained,

I can't get anything on base...medically... but there's a facility right outside base...that I go to...with this job I'm in, within the Marine Corps family...I have benefits...I know a lot of the benefits just by working there...and part of...and being on base it's all right there....if they can't help me they know someone that can help me...I wouldn't even know where to start out in town here...

Veterans in need of care tend to settle in areas located near VA medical facilities. They do not travel far to have their needs met whether they are educational, inpatient or outpatient care.

**Establish new roots.** Some veterans are in need of care and services so they settle in towns located near VA facilities. Others want to remain in areas familiar to them. However, other veterans have the desire to go and establish roots elsewhere.

Participant 11 said,

I'm moving there [to a specific city out west] for the ability to buy a home, land is really cheap, and there is a big vegan population.

This participant has plans to leave the military community upon graduation and settle in a different state. She wants to go where property is affordable and where people practice her vegan way of life.

**Stereotypical.** In military towns the population is largely military personnel, their families, and people accepting of the military way of life. In addition, life in a military town includes opportunity for stereotypes and generalizations. Some people embrace that life while others want to settle somewhere different. Participant 10 explained,

...one thing I would say about a military town...it's very easy for folks to become stereotypical...about the military...so that's always a possibility...you'll hear somebody...stereotype Marines into this category, or they're wives...when they're on deployment...what can happen...they can be very stereotypical...but you don't run into that a whole lot because there are so many military people here...

This participant knows her community and embraces it. She is the wife of Marine, so this is her home. She understands there are challenges to living in her town, but she has accepted them.

**Tuition.** There are challenges to living in a military community. However there are many that call these communities home and they want to remain there. Sometimes going to school and paying in-state tuition can be troublesome for some veterans.

Participant 9 shared,

...but I feel like if you've been somewhere for a few years and that's become your home, and you want to stay even though it's not where you're from, that should count for something...you've been there enough...I would have thought there would be some differences with military personnel...I was from here so I didn't have that issue...but she wasn't so she's had to pick up everything...and leave her family and leave her home so she can get an education...because they wouldn't allow her to do it here [pay in-state tuition].

Some veterans have to leave their homes and families to pursue degrees at schools where they were from originally. If education means that much to a veteran, she will leave and go pursue a degree elsewhere and then return.

**Understanding the military.** Even though some veterans have to leave their homes to pursue a degree in their original state of residence, they come back. They return because people in military towns are knowledgeable and understand the military.

Participant 8 shared,

...I guess this is such a military town...there is an understanding and they realize...

Women veterans do not always experience respect. However, this participant received appreciation and respect from people in school and in the community.



**Familiar and comfortable.** Receiving appreciation and being respected and receiving appreciation are important to a veteran. They also like to be in a place that is familiar and comfortable. Participant 6 explained,

My perfect ending would be getting a job back here actually...I know it probably won't happen...but I really do like this environment and I'm one of those people that's not really big on change...so if I can be somewhere I already know...and I really do like the area...and we've bought a house, we've settled down...so I could stay here that would make me very happy...

This participant does not like change and would like to remain in the area. She and her husband have bought a house and would like to stay settled.

Military towns are places where veterans like to settle. They are familiar and comfortable. Schools within military towns are attractive to veterans for similar reasons.

Participant 3 stated,

I really liked this school...I like the privacy, it's a really good school...and it seems very private...and I feel safe here...I don't feel like everything...I feel protected...I don't know how to explain it...it's a really good school and they care about the students.

Participant 3 continued,

...but then I was hoping to search the schools around here to see if there's anything I like...because I have a house here and I love it here...I know most people are like...seriously...this city...but it's really grown on me...

Participant 3 loves her community. She established roots there by purchasing a home and going to school town. She feels safe, protected, and cared about.

**Indifference.** While some embrace living in military communities, others experience indifference. There are so many connections to the military that it is no longer special and becomes everyday life. Participant 2 said,

...they really don't want to hear about it...especially in a town like where I live...where there are so many people that were in the military...everyone knows

someone who's in the military and they really don't want to hear about another person in the military...

So, not everyone finds military towns endearing. They do not bring up their experience in the military because they do not think people care.

**Inability to settle.** Some veterans would love to settle down. However, with an active duty spouse, moving is a distinct possibility and must be anticipated. It is the military way of life until they are both veterans. Participant 1 explained,

We just got stationed here so, which just gives me enough time to finish my bachelor's, but then we could move so I wouldn't start my master's here, so I have to be mindful of that.

This participant knows her time in town is limited. She wants to make plans for the future, but she knows she can only plan so far out.

## **Family**

### **The Significance of Supportive Family**

Participants talked about their family support systems (see Table 10). Some of them had much support from their families, while others were the support for their needy families. Many of the women veterans spoke of supportive husbands and boyfriends. One participant's husband gave her part of his educational benefits so she could go back to school. Another woman veteran said that her husband chose his base assignment on where she wanted to attend school. Still another participant's boyfriend was her sole supporter as she sought to get back into the Marine Corps as an officer. Siblings, in-laws, and children were mentioned by participants as being supportive of them and their educational pursuits.

Table 10

*Descriptors of Sub-categories for Family Theme*

Sub-Categories	Descriptors	
Significance of Supportive Family	Layers of Support Mothers Husbands and More In-Laws	Parents Self-Support Friends Boyfriend
Important Family Supporter	Matriarch Single-Mother Younger Siblings	

**Layers of support.** Participant 9 had several supportive family members, so she had layers of support during the pursuit of her education that included her mother, father, and husband. She revealed,

My husband was in [the military] and we worked together. He got out before me and he went to school some and worked, so he had already been through it. So, he helped make it so much easier when I went through it. My dad's a retired Marine and my mom is my biggest support; always right there behind me telling me to make it happen. Whatever I decide to do; go to school, do this or do that.

In this particular situation, the participant's mother was her strongest source of support. Whatever decisions she made in life, her mother encouraged her. In addition, this woman veteran had family members with military experience and therefore had an enhanced connection with them through common knowledge and understanding. This type of relationship provided additional support for this participant.

**Mother.** While participant 9 had multiple supportive family members, participant 12 discussed her mother's role in encouraging her to go to school when she got out of the military, she seemed somewhat ambivalent. However, she expressed appreciation for her mother's role in pushing her to use her educational benefits.

My mom...she was my biggest supporter...maybe. She didn't want me to get out and have this GI Bill sitting there...and not use it. She goes, you need to get out and you need to use it. Whether you use it this year or next year, you will use it within these two years. She put pressure on me and I probably would have put it off a little longer.

This quote exemplifies the need some women veterans have for someone to serve as their motivator or source of encouragement. Perhaps they lack the motivation, self-discipline, or drive to reach for their goals.

**Husband and more.** Sometimes individuals need someone else to instill the sense of urgency needed to begin the pursuit of a worthwhile endeavor. Participant 10 discussed sources of support from both her immediate family and beyond. She mentioned her husband, their three children, a church family, her family, as well as her peers in college.

I would have to say my husband...obviously...when he's here...he has to be understanding that a lot of my time...I told you I have 3 kids and I home school them...so they're a priority...so my evenings and my nights are largely focused on writing papers and he is pretty supportive of that...you know, my kids have to be supportive too...and they are...and then there's people in the community I depend on ...because we are military...our husbands aren't here... so when my husband's deployed...like right now he's away for a month and a half...so I have to have people lined up to go to school...and I have my church family...they're really, really supportive...my community, my church family, my family...I'd say one that I missed are my peers from school...we are very supportive of each other...that's a big one.

Participant 10 had many sources of support in pursuit of her degree. Some women veterans have the need for support beyond their immediate family. This veteran was a wife, mother, home-school teacher, daughter, church member and student with many responsibilities. In order for her to succeed as a college student she had to depend on others. In essence, the pursuit of college and this degree would not have been possible without the support of others.

**In-laws.** Participant 8 had another example of strong family support when she talked about how grateful she was to get home to family and not just to her husband and daughter. When a military career ends there is less money to live on due to a pay reduction. So, she was appreciative that she and her husband could live with her parents for a year until they got themselves financially established and moved out.

...I had my family most of all...because I needed to get in my comfort zone...let me get back home with family so I know that I'll be good to go...I'll have...not necessarily a baby sitter, but I have someone to watch my daughter and my husband can go to work...it was easier because when I got out, it was a big pay difference...I stayed at my in-laws for a year...I was working, I had their support...

Living with relatives is one way that helps some women veterans for a while after leaving the military in order to establish themselves with a job and a place to live.

**Parents.** Participant 6 not only stayed with her parents due to financial reasons, but also because she did not want to be alone while her husband was away training for several months.

My family and my husband...I feel like I have the greatest family on earth...some people would go on leave and never visit their family and I would be like why?...this was one of the things that made it harder when I went away...actually when I got out, we were in Alaska and my husband had to go cross train and there was no way I was staying in Alaska by myself...so I ended up staying with my parents for 5 months and that made for an interesting transition...for anyone...it's interesting...all I had was a tiny room...but at least they did and they stuck it out and let me stay there...the whole family was very helpful...

Life for some women veterans can be a lonely existence if they are married to someone still serving in the military. Therefore, when spouses are deployed or assigned duties that take them away for a period of time, some women veterans turn to family to help so they are not alone.

**Self-support.** Most of the participants in this study mentioned their families in relation to their supportiveness. However, participant 3 was one of the few woman veterans that did not mention her family at all. She mentioned the support she received from those within the military as well as what she provided for herself in the process.

Well...I would say the fact that my chain of command let me do what I needed to do without ever interfering, with support... I would say this college was a support with the fact that they helped me in knowing what I needed to do to come here ...The ACAP Center...where I did my ACAPing in the Army to get out...they were definitely supportive in letting me know everything I needed in order to process out...on time and as clean as possible...and then of course myself...I would have to...I helped myself...the fact that I was willing to trust in others and got done what needed to be done...

Not all women veterans have family or choose not to turn to them for support. Instead they seek support through known sources made available to them. In addition, some women veterans are their own sources of support in making decisions and accomplishing what needs to be done.

**Friends.** Participant 4, who struggled with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, mentioned friends first when asked about support. She then talked about her family as well.

I have friends...they want to know if I'm getting better and everything...with my family they haven't really said anything about college...but they said they're kinda proud of me.

The importance of friends and the support they provide are important to some women veterans in a time of need. Family may not be available or have the understanding to provide the necessary support to their woman veteran.

**Boyfriend.** Participant 2 spoke of her boyfriend, who is in the Marine Corps, as her main source of support in her transition to higher education.

With my boyfriend...he was still in the Marine Corps...he was always saying you could do this, you could do this...I'm here to help you do it...he's willing to not even have me work and just help me out there...let me go to school full time... but I wasn't willing to do that...that was my choice. If it wasn't for him...my motivation for going to school wouldn't have been there.

As other participants have shared, family is not the only source of support. Boyfriends provide the encouragement and help needed by some women veterans to go after their educational goals.

**Husband.** Participant 1 declared her husband as her main foundation of support with school and in everyday life.

First, my husband...he's working on his masters...we are very good support [for each other] because of the experiences we have had...some of them very similar ...so he's my number one supporter. He physically is my supporter too...he helps me around the house so that I can handle the physical demands of going to school.

Some women veterans with disabilities need both emotional and physical support from their spouses to attend college and more.

### **Important Family Supporter**

While some participants had supportive family members, others were the supporter of their families. One veteran was a single mother and made career and school decisions to ensure her daughter's stability. In addition, a veteran was responsible for rearing her nieces and nephews before, during, and after her military experience. She made education, career, and location decisions based on the children. Even though these participants were the supporters of their families, a few admitted they had support along the way. Support was essential or they could not have served in the military.

Participant 8 was ready to leave the military, earn her degree, and get to work to support her family. She shared,

I have to get my life stable for my daughter and my husband. I want to do what I have to do and get out of here.

Participant 8 had served in the military and was ready to get out and move forward with her plans. She knew what degree she wanted and was focused on finishing so she could get a job. She wanted to support her family as they had supported her.

**Matriarch.** While participant 8 received the support of family in the military, participant 7 was essentially the matriarch after her mother left. She helped her father care for her sibling's children before entering the military. She was responsible for her nieces and nephews upon leaving the military. She said,

When I got out of the Army I had all my nieces and nephews – there were 6 of them – so I didn't want to move – it's cheaper to stay in the Fayetteville area with the size of my family.

Some veterans delay aspirations to help with family responsibilities when the unforeseen happens. Parents leave or suffer from illness; siblings need help raising children, and extended family is far away or unable to take on responsibility. So, some of these veterans help their families when necessary.

**Single mother.** Participant 5 was also responsible for a child. She was a single, divorced mother whose family lived far away. She wanted to be a role model for her daughter by going to school and pursuing her dreams. She revealed,

My driving force behind all of that is that I have a daughter...so I go to college...I hope that she follows that...like my mom went to college...my dad went to college...I want that to continue to her...and I don't want her to stop...my mom didn't go to college so I won't go...I have to set that example for her...

Participant 5 pursued her degree because of her supportive family; they agreed to care for her daughter. She attended the university that provided the most military credits, expediting earning her degree. She said,



I have a very supportive family...I think that is what it is...a very supportive family...I guess another thing is my whole family went to college...they know how it feels to be...I have no support here basically...I have no family...I mean relatives...that's what I mean by that...I have a couple of friends but they PCF'd by the time I got here.

Participant 5 continues,

I have to sacrifice from family to pursue my education...they're far...the closest one I have is 5 hours away in Washington DC – my best friend is about 3 hours away in VA Beach, I had a best friend here but he TCF'd...that's how I found out about this school when I was researching...he [her friend] was going...he TCF'd before I got here...I have zero support from family here...My daughter is in Vegas...I have my house there...her stability versus... having my daughter here...for me to be successful...

Participant 5 spoke of her sacrifice of being away from her family. She mentioned this was what she had to do to provide stability for her daughter. However, this veteran did not mention the sacrifice her family was making for her. They are the ones keeping her house and daughter so she can pursue her education. Participant 5 also speaks of graduate school in Washington, D.C. and working abroad. She is receiving a lot of support to follow her dreams.

**Younger siblings.** Participant 3 supported younger siblings, but did not have the backing of family like participant 5. She aspires to teach children as a result of her experience with siblings. She said,

...like I said, not little kids...like pre-teens, teenagers...it's something I've always wanted to do...honestly forever because I've taken care of my own siblings...even to this day...they're younger...

Participant 3 was responsible for her siblings and developed a passion for younger children because of it. She hopes to work with veterans on campus for a while.

However, she wants to teach history to younger children once she earns her degree.

### **Participant Suggestions for Peers and Schools**

Participants were asked if they had any suggestions for colleges and universities in regard to serving women veterans (see Table 11). One participant said schools could be more intentional in providing information to women veterans. There needs to be more information about Bachelor's degrees and programs beyond trade schools and community colleges.

Table 11

*Participant Suggestions for Peers and Schools*

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Participant Suggestions

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More Diverse School Information

Don't Wait

Get Out and Meet People

Attend Transition Meetings

Another woman veteran mentioned individuals should not wait to go to school. They should go ahead and enroll in college because a degree is essential. The transition from the military is hard enough without moving forward towards your next career.

Individuals seeking to pursue a college degree need to take responsibility for themselves and not wait for the military to provide all the information. Attend transition meetings pertinent to the specific military branch and learn about educational benefits. Research and understand educational benefits and talk with trained professional staff from the military and institutions about the required paperwork.

**More Diverse School Information**

The military offers information on different educational programs and institutions. There is no way to provide information that is pertinent or of interest to everyone.

Participant 12 said,

...it's all very...motorcycles and trucks and cars and...like where are the regular schools...just one would be great...here are the schools...a lot of people in the military don't have that college experience...they don't know anything about it...here is some student life information, here's some student organization information, athletics you can participate in...I don't know...a different perspective...not just here are a bunch of mechanic jobs...

This participant's suggestion provides valuable information for institutions in close proximity to military installations. Make more information about your school available to the military and find a way to be part of the formal transition process.

### **Don't Wait**

It would be good for institutions to find ways to be involved in the formal transitions process with the military. Another participant's suggest to her peers is not put school off. Participant 10 shared,

I would suggest not putting it off...number one...to do it...to just do it...because we have one life...you only have so much time...it's such an important facet of who you are...you're influenced so much by the people you meet and what you choose for your life, and the knowledge...you hear that old cliché that knowledge is power...it really is...if you can be well educated you don't have to depend...it's really good to have if you apply it in a career field or just to better yourself...

Participant 10 suggests not putting off getting your education. It is a privilege and the degree is needed to help with your new career.

It is important to be responsible for yourself. Do your own research on schools and meet knowledgeable people that can help you. In addition, do not put school off.

Participant 2 said,

Don't wait. DO NOT WAIT. As soon as you get out go...I mean, it's easier to just start it up ...you already used to being...you have to do this...you have to do that... If you take a break between there...you start to get really relaxed...you'll start letting the normal, everyday life get in the way of everything. You'll be like...I'll do it next semester...and then the next semester you'll be like I'll do it next semester... and someday you'll be a 70 year old lady and say I should have gotten my education.

So, participant 2 suggests you do not put off enrolling in school and pursuing your education.

### **Get Out and Meet People**

In addition, researching schools is a suggestion of another participant. Do more than use the computer, get out and meet people. Participant 9 stated,

Do your research...not just online...go in and talk to people...there's a lot of paperwork, there's a lot of stuff that goes into it...there's a lot of...mostly on the military side...but it's overwhelming...find a place that offers what you want...go talk to students...ask the how they enjoy it...but look for who's going to make it easy on you too...who's going to help you with the paperwork...help you understand it...

This participant suggests her peers research schools online and in person. She suggests seeking out people to help you and answer your questions.

Researching schools and meeting those people who can help you is suggested.

Another participant says you should attend all of your transition meetings. Participant 7 emphasized that attendance at transition meetings is essential to a better transition, stating,

Go to all of their ACAPing [transition process out of military]...actually go to all the meetings...

### **Attend Transition Meetings**

Attending transition meetings is important and according to another participant, so is looking at colleges and developing a support system. On this note, Participant 3 said,

Well, the advice I would give them...the first thing I did was to begin looking at colleges...before you actually make the decision to get out you need to have a support system set in place...and that's what I made sure I had...

Participant 3 suggests her peers research schools and assemble a group of support people.

Veterans need to be personally responsible for knowing about benefits and paperwork.

However, certain individuals and officials can assist in the process.

## CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION, CONCLUSION, AND IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE AND RESEARCH

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the transition and adaptation of women veterans who became full-time, baccalaureate, degree-seeking students at colleges and universities that offer the Yellow Ribbon Program in North Carolina. In addition, the research was conducted to add to the body of the limited qualitative research available on women veterans and their transition and adaptation to higher education after military service. Furthermore, this inquiry on women veterans sought to inform the knowledge and practice of higher education professionals working with this particular population of students. The results of this study allowed me to increase the base of knowledge and understanding needed by personnel at colleges and universities to develop more effective methods of working with this particular population of students.

The volume of research on the specific topic of transitions of women from the military to higher education was minimal. However, the existing literature and supportive works helped inform the design of this study. The literature review for this study included seven categories of research that covered the existing studies and information on women veterans.

Different types and sizes of higher education institutions from various locations were represented in previous studies. Participants were a mixture of re-enrolled, first-time enrolled, and interrupted enrollment depending on the particular study. Mostly men were represented, although a minimal number of women were included. In addition, there were some shared recommendations for practice represented in more than one study. Some of the results indicated the need for an office that provides the programs and

services for veterans (DiRamio et al., 2008; Persky, 2010). Moreover, the intentional establishment of a method for peer connections was mentioned (DiRamio et al., 2008). However, a minimal number of women participants were included in the existing research. So, this qualitative study attempted to fill a gap in the overall literature that exists about women veterans and their transition to higher education.

This study was designed to explore women veterans' transition and adaptation to higher education. Interview data, a journal of notes and observations, as well as website information were used to seek understanding of the lived experiences reported by the 12 women veterans who participated (Creswell, 2008).

Schlossberg's Transition Theory (2011) was used in developing this study. It helped in considering the transition or change women veterans experienced as they left the military and entered higher education. Schlossberg provides the opportunity to consider change and if it is expected or not, how it affects the life of the individual, as well as how a person manages the change. Schlossberg's 4Ss System for Coping with Transitions, the central research question, followed by the three sub-questions is used to organize the discussion of the research findings through a theoretical lens.

1. What is the transition and adaptation experience like for women veterans who have left the military and are in higher education?
2. What aspects of women veterans' personal situations affect their transition and adaptation to higher education?
3. What kinds of support systems do women veteran describe experiencing and depending on during their adaptation to higher education?

4. What do women veterans identify as strategies they use in their adaptation to higher education?

This chapter concludes with the findings and limitations of the study, the implications for practice for those working within higher education, the overall meaning of this research on the transition and adaptation of women veterans, and well as suggestions for future research.

### **Schlossberg's 4 Ss System for Coping with Transitions**

Schlossberg's (2011) 4 Ss System for Coping with Transitions provided a contextual framework for examining the transition experiences of women veterans. Information regarding each woman veteran's situation, self, supports, and strategies was examined through the study. In addition, the 4Ss System provided the look for commonalities and differences among the study participant experiences. The questions for the semi-structured interviews were designed using Schlossberg's 4Ss System for Coping and Transitions. The findings provide the opportunity to learn about the experiences of women veterans during their transition and adaptation from the military to higher education.

### **Situation**

Each woman veteran has served a certain amount of time in the military and the benefits she receives are based on her length of service. If she is able to fulfill her time of enlistment she is entitled to more benefits than women who opt out early, become disabled, or are dishonorably discharged. Moreover, each woman veteran's marital or relationship status is different and there may be the responsibility of children. Furthermore, women veterans have different needs concerning working or going to



school full or part time. In addition, having the necessities of a place to live and transportation are important things to consider for each individual during her transition.

### **Self**

Women veterans are all individuals and they experience different transitions based on who they are. It is important for each woman to know with whom she identifies and seeks support. Perhaps she identifies with other veterans or a specific group of women. Maybe she does not relate to other veterans and has a hard time interacting with other females. It all depends on the individual. Each woman experiences different levels of self-confidence and learned abilities. Attitudes toward asking for help vary. School and career aspirations differ. Choices made between traditional and non-traditional schools and program delivery varies depending on the degree, location, need to work, family responsibilities, and sense of urgency.

### **Supports**

Women veterans have different support systems as part of their transitions. The military supports women through their formal transition process out of the military. It also provides support through the Veterans Affairs (VA) and its many services. Family situations vary drastically, from the individuals that constitute a family, as well as the level of support they provide. In addition, some women veterans are in the supporter role for their family or individual members. Individuals have different groups of friends, classmates, and peers they can turn to when needed. They also have faculty and staff at their schools that are there to assist them with their needs, learning, and development. Most of all they have themselves. They have learned a lot before and during the military that will serve them well during this time of transition.

## **Strategies**

Strategies used vary by women veterans during their transition. Planning ahead is one way of approaching the situation if that is a possibility. Some women know they are getting out of the military due to the end of their enlistment, opting out, or because of injury. Establishing a network of support that encompasses friends, peers, personnel from the military and school, as well as family is one approach towards transition. Being proactive about learning as much as possible about earned benefits and how they work is another plan. It is important to know if earned benefits will cover all the needs or if alternative methods of funding are required. In addition, this same strategy can be used in researching schools, programs, and degrees. Moreover, meeting and establishing new acquaintances, friends, and classmates at the school is an additional method towards an effective transition.

## **Research Questions and Answers**

Interviews with participants, journal notes and observations, as well as the peer review information provided the information needed to respond to the central research and sub-questions.

### **Question 1**

**What is the transition and adaptation experience like for women veterans who leave the military and are in higher education?**

Participants in the study had varied experiences with their transition and adaptation to higher education from military life. The individual experiences of the women veteran participants with the military influence, family, life as a college student,

and defining identity affected their transition and adaptation from the military to higher education differently.

Each participant's exit from the military, whether planned or unplanned, was an important factor in the phenomenon. The women veterans in the study that knew they were not going to re-enlist in the military planned for their next steps. This is referred to as an anticipated transition in Schlossberg's Theory of Transition (Anderson, Goodman, & Schlossberg, 2012). They either obtained additional transferable skills or researched schools and programs within higher education. The participants, whose military careers were brought to an unexpected end, experienced a more difficult transition and adaptation. Schlossberg refers to this as an unanticipated transition in her transition theory (Anderson et al., 2012). Some of them did not have time to prepare depending on their circumstances. Reasons for exiting the military early varied from injury, military down-sizing, or changes in original life plans.

In addition to their exit from the military, having supportive family members was essential to the participants' positive transition and adaptation. Supportive family members served as an element of support (Anderson et. al., 2012). Husbands, boyfriends, parents, siblings, children, in-laws, neighbors, and church families were mentioned by the women veterans as being essential as they left the military and embarked in a college education. Two examples of supportive family members from the study involved educational benefits and location. One family member provided the educational benefits needed to make seeking a degree possible for one participant, while one husband based his location in the military on where his wife wanted to go to school. Still other family members of participants served as cheerleaders and mentors, providing

the motivation needed for these women veterans to seek the next chapter of their lives through education. Furthermore, family members of some participants provided the needed childcare or assistance with household chores thus enabling participants the time to attend classes and complete assignments.

There were several collegiate elements in addition to the military exit and family that positively affected the transition and adaptation of women veteran participants. Most of the participants valued the educational benefits themselves and planned to use them for this next step in life. In addition, it was essential that participants be able to pursue their bachelor's degree at a convenient location as well as through a curriculum, mode of delivery, and schedule intentionally planned for adult learners. These elements contribute to a smooth transition and adaptation. Moreover, the women veterans greatly appreciated the knowledge and assistance of the college support staff that guided them through the required government paperwork and policies regarding the benefits. They also generally experienced supportive, relatable, and interested faculty as well as classmates.

In addition to their individual identity status and educational elements, participants that experienced a positive transition and adaptation used the many attributes learned or strengthened through the military. Some of these traits were organization, perseverance, time management, and to just get it done. Furthermore, the participants' view of their military experience and identity as a veteran directly affected their transition and adaptation. These two elements combined were influenced by whether a woman veteran was deployed, experienced combat, and how they identified with being a woman. Some participants had difficult experiences in the military through deployment or

otherwise. The severity and amount of those experiences affected their transition and adaptation. In addition, women veterans had to learn how to dress and have the appearance of a civilian woman again after years of military service. Some women had to seek help at department stores and salons to be taught the skills necessary to do it themselves. Furthermore, some women veterans interacted more effectively with men due to serving in the military for years. They were around men most of the time in everything they did. In most cases they were the only female. So, some of these women veterans have to learn to converse and socialize with women again during their transition and adaptation.

Overall, the transition and adaptation experience of the women veterans was an individualized process that was affected by elements of military influence, life as a college student, family, and defining identity. All of the elements were interconnected in many ways and collectively affected the transition and adaptation of each of the woman veteran participants. How women dealt with the transition individually was based on their resources and how they used them to face the situation (Schlossberg, 2011).

## **Question 2**

### **What aspects of women veterans' personal situations affect their transition and adaptation to higher education?**

The response to this question is not too far removed from that of the central question in this study. Each participant in the study had a different experience regarding their transition and adaptation to higher education after serving in the military. Their responsibility and role within the military affected their identity with the military and whether their time within the military was abbreviated. If their responsibility exposed

them to more dangerous situations, including combat, or they were put in a position that did not match with their skills and abilities, the probability of them leaving the military early was higher.

In addition, to an individual participant's relationship with the military, were their educational plans. Some women took classes before entering the military, most took classes while they were in the military, and all planned on pursuing their bachelor's degree after their military service. However, the immediacy of these plans and how these plans would come to fruition were different for every woman veteran participant. Some participants were already planning their educational pursuits upon entrance to the military while others learned the value of an education after a few short months into their years of service. Still other participants planned on a certain number of years in the military and then they would earn their degree.

Of course, best made plans can go awry very quickly when unexpected situations arise. Some of these women found themselves faced with pursuing an education either earlier or later than planned. Some women veterans were injured while others had difficulty adapting to the military culture or their specific job responsibilities within it. Still another found herself in a relationship with the desire to start a family, so her education would have to wait a few years. These occurrences in the lives of these women veterans are consistent with what Schlossberg calls unanticipated events (Anderson et. al., 2012).

Participants' identities as veterans, as women, with women veterans, and with their careers are all areas where each individual brings their own attributes and experiences to the table. Josselson suggests each woman develops an identity based on

different components and have one of four identity statuses as noted in the book by Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn (2010). Josselson's identity statuses are based on the earlier works on identity development by Erik Erikson and James Marcia. The four identity statuses are Foreclosures (Guardians), Identity Achievement (Pathmakers), Moratoriums (Searchers), and Identity Diffusions (Drifters) (Evans et al., 2010). These statuses vary based on an individual's family upbringing, relationships, choices, and more (Evans et al., 2010). So, in addition to their military experiences and their desire to obtain their bachelor's degree, these women veterans all have separate identities. Each participant identifies or does not identify as a veteran established on their military service. They may base this on what their responsibilities were, whether they were deployed, and how long they served. Other women veterans affiliate with the veteran label when they are home and away from the military town where they served. In addition, most participants volunteered they associate better with men than they do with women. When they were in the military they were around men for years, so they are more comfortable interacting with men. However, they will interact and associate with women veterans if provided the opportunity; there are not many of them. Furthermore, participants mentioned they were challenged during their transition and adaptation with basically having to become women again. They had to get used to wearing clothes other than uniforms that included combat boots and hats. In addition, some have to learn about wearing make-up, fixing their hair, and dressing more provocatively for special occasions. All of these challenges faced by women veterans are related to their self-identity and how it was developed (Evans et al., 2010). Now that they are no longer a

part of the military, they see themselves in a way that is unlike what they have been accustomed to in the military.

Participants, in addition to their association with military influence, the collegiate experience, and with defining identity, also have individual attributes and characteristics when it comes to their families. Some participants are wives, girlfriends, daughters, and neighbors while others are mothers and guardians. Depending on their personal situations, these aspects of family life greatly affected their transition and adaptation to higher education. Their roles and responsibilities with family varied as well as the amount of support provided to each of them by family members. However, most of the participants in this study were supported by at least one member of their family, but the majority had many supportive family members. This support is what enabled them to pursue their educational goals. As noted in the book by Evans et al (2010), Gilligan's Theory of Women's Moral Development provides insight on these participants based on care and justice. This theory indicates levels and transitions women experience as they go through life in relation to themselves, their relationships with others, and their own needs (Evans et al., 2010)

In summary, the participants in this study all were different in terms of their personal situations; however each one of them was able to navigate their own challenges with their unique support systems to transition and adapt to higher education.

### **Question 3**

**What kinds of support systems do women veterans describe experiencing and depending on during their transition and adaptation to higher education?**



Participants in this study had support systems that were unique to each individual. They were comprised of different multiple layers from the military, education, their families, as well as within their own personal identities. Support systems are part of Schlossberg's structure (2011) for managing transition. Some participants were supported by their officers and fellow peers with the military about pursuing their education and career goals. In addition, the military also provided transitional workshops for all the participants that included information on how to use the Post- 9/11 GI Bill or educational benefits. Women veterans sought help and received assistance from personnel in institutions of higher education about the required paperwork, policies, and procedures for their educational benefits. Participants also counted on professors, peers, and organizations to assist them with the transition and adaptation to higher education. Family members served as cheerleaders, motivators, and one husband provided the means for his wife to go to school through the transfer of some of his educational benefits. Additionally, another husband waited and selected his military assignment based on his wife's choice of university. Extended family provided babysitting and household support making it possible for some participants to attend classes and complete their schoolwork. Furthermore, most of the women veteran participants had a strong sense of self identity and the wherewithal to depend and support themselves through this process of transition and adaptation to higher education. This is consistent with the component of Self in Schlossberg's Transition Theory (Schlossberg, 2011). Most of them had someone different to turn to for support. In addition, they all had themselves to rely on as well. The participants learned attributes or honed skills and abilities in the military that they depend on to succeed.

**Question 4****What do women veterans identify as strategies they use in their transition and adaptation to higher education?**

The participants in this study applied multiple strategies to aid them in their transition and adaptation to higher education. Strategies are an important component of Schlossberg's Transition Theory (Anderson et al., 2012). Some of them planned for the pursuit of their bachelor's degree by researching the military policies and procedures about their service, their educational benefits, and the exit of the military. In addition, some women veteran participants researched degree programs, different colleges and universities, as well as program delivery. One participant even researched the number of credits she would receive for her military service from multiple universities. Still other participants made a point to not only research schools and programs online but made the concerted effort to visit offices and meet with people in person. Most of the participants in the study planned on what they would study as well as the careers that would follow. For some this meant planning on earning additional degrees while with others it meant thinking about what job possibilities might be where they live currently or if they would need to relocate. All in all, the strategies applied by these participants involved intentional research, creation, and the follow through with their plans in order to assist them with their transition and adaptation to higher education.

**Limitations of the Study**

This study had several limitations that include demographics of the participants, the number and type of institutions represented, limitations on time, the lack of affiliation with veteran status for some women, some limitations of participants based on a

misunderstanding about the Yellow Ribbon Program criteria, as well as the generalizability of the findings. The participants in this study were all female veterans from two universities and four campuses located in the southeastern United States. In addition, these campuses were located near military installations. Therefore, the communities were comprised of a large percentage of military-affiliated personnel and their families. Further context and added data could have resulted in a greater number and type of institution, as well as a more diverse group from various locations within the United States.

Limitations on time may have limited the results of the study. Additional time could have resulted in additional participants as well as the ability to conduct multiple interviews with each participant.

In addition to time, the number of possible participants could have been affected by a misunderstanding about the Yellow Ribbon Program criteria. The initial communication about the study read as if study participants had to be enrolled in the Yellow Ribbon Program. Even though the communication about the study was corrected to reflect participants had to be enrolled as a student at colleges and universities that offered the Yellow Ribbon Program, possible participants may have been lost.

Moreover, the number of possible participants may have been affected due to the lack of affiliation with the term veteran. The results of this study show that some women veterans do not see themselves as being veterans. It depends on their individual military experiences. However, since the study focused on women veterans, this may have been a defining factor to not participate.

The results of this study on the transition and adaptation of women veterans to higher education lack generalizability, as do results of qualitative studies as a rule (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). However, this study tells the story of the transition and adaptation from the military to higher education of these twelve women veteran participants. The finding of the study can be used to guide research on this phenomena as well as the specific population in the future (Marshall & Rossman, 2011).

### **Conclusion**

The results of this study on the transition and adaptation of women veterans demonstrate that the twelve participants had varied experiences based on their individual identities and experiences. Some of the participants had a relatively smooth transition from the military to higher education with very few obstacles. However, some of the women veterans had challenging experiences in the military that currently affect every aspect of their civilian lives, including their education. The details regarding the sources and the effects of combat exposure, Military Sexual Trauma (MST), and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, for these participants is something that the majority of them did not discuss as part of this study.

Participants included information on all four themes of life as a college student, military influence, defining identity, and family throughout the data. They did not experience, therefore discuss, all of these equally or in the same way. However, they were all evident in the research data.

There were three participants that made remarks about not being able to make a full transition from the military to higher education. They discussed how the military is a way of life, particularly if you have served and if your spouse still serves. If your spouse

or boyfriend is still in the military it is as if the woman veteran is left existing between the military and civilian worlds. In this type of situation a woman veteran moves into a transition, but may not be able to completely move through and out unless it occurs gradually as Schlossberg suggests (Schlossberg, 2011). They are trying their best to make the transition out of the military, but the situation is complex. They still live on or near a base. Their social lives revolve around the military, so in some ways they are still living a military life. Even though this study focused on the transition out of the military to higher education, it is apparent that the world of higher education is part of the civilian world for some of these participants and cannot be separated. The two are blended or intertwined together and that is an important finding from the data. Some of these women began their transition to college almost immediately. While other women veterans had a few months or years to adjust to life outside the military before beginning school. So, consistent with Schlossberg's theory (2011), their situations, selves, and strategies varied.

### **Implications for Practice**

The percentage of women in the military continues to increase, therefore the number of women veterans seeking a college degree continues to increase. Those professionals working in higher education need to obtain as much knowledge and understanding about women veterans as possible so they will be able to better serve them. The participants in this study attended four campuses near military bases and installations, but the numbers of veteran students across the country continue to grow. Higher education personnel should not assume they will not get a population of veterans at their institution. In fact, they should expect it and be prepared.

Women veterans are non-traditional students. They have been in the military for years of service and know what career they want to pursue after earning their degree. As noted in the study by Coogan and Chen (2007), most of the participants are experiencing the Exploration or Establishment Stages of career development according to Super's Development of Self-Concept Theory. They have had one set of experiences through the military and now they are exploring options through their collegiate and work experiences (Coogan & Chen, 2007). Once these women graduate they want to establish themselves in their careers.

Knowledge about MST and PTSD is essential so professors and staff members know what to look for and have a plan of action based on the individual student. However, professionals in higher education should not assume that all student veterans have experienced trauma and therefore suffer from any or all these disorders. Institutions should conduct faculty and staff trainings on student veterans, including gender specific information that offers an intentional and consistent approach to understanding the military and how to effectively work with student veterans. If trainings will help with the success of student veterans, then they should be consistently conducted.

Participants in my study opened my eyes to the military as a world of its own. I have relatives that have served in the military, but I knew very little about it before I conducted this study. Military towns near bases and installations are comfort zones and safe havens for those individuals that have served in the military, for family members of those who have served, or for those who have a spouse or significant other currently serving in the military. Individuals and families establish roots in military towns, purchasing homes and finding jobs in the area with the hope they are able to remain

there. Those working in higher education should acknowledge these tendencies and seek to provide or improve educational opportunities near military installations. There is a ready-made population that is comprised of some individuals seeking to use the educational benefits they earned.

In addition to establishing roots and finding jobs in military towns, individuals seek to pursue their college education close to home in local communities. Community colleges are popular; however if a bachelor's degree is sought, four-year institutions are the only option. While online education has grown and offers a plethora of opportunities in higher education, some individuals do not care for that form of program delivery and seek seated classes for their college education and to make connection with other veterans as well as other students. Higher education professionals should take note that diversity in program delivery is still needed. We should not look to online classes as being the only answer for adult learners.

One of the most interesting findings from this study was the relation of age and time with the military. It makes sense now that I have had insights to the experiences of the participants in this study. The military is a career for the young for the most part. Individuals enlist in their teens and twenties, so when they get out of the military they consider themselves old as they near their thirties and forties. Similarly, you can equate the military with careers in professional sports. The profession consists of young men and women as well as what can be a relatively short career span. This passing of time and getting older creates a sense of urgency for veterans. They want to get their degrees and get on with their lives. Therefore, higher education professionals should be aware of the importance of time and program deliveries such as one night a week and learning at

an accelerated pace to meet the needs of veterans. If these offerings are not being made, professionals should seek to add them to the curricula of their institutions. If they are being offered, expansion in program and degree offerings should be seriously considered. Furthermore, institutions should consider reviewing how many academic credits they award veterans for their military service. There are great discrepancies among institutions across the country. This should be reviewed to better assist veterans towards an accelerated pursuit of degrees if and when appropriate.

I expected that support staff would be needed by veterans. However, this study revealed the significance for the need of the support staff person in the lives of veterans. All branches of the military provide a transition process for individuals leaving the military; however they vary in content, delivery, and length. Educational benefits are discussed, but not in great detail, so veterans must conduct their own research. The support staff on college and university campuses is trained to know the policies, procedures, and paperwork that must be completed in order for veterans to pursue their degree. They are knowledgeable individuals that veterans turn to for understanding how to best use their benefits. This study revealed the positive effectiveness of the individuals in these positions on campuses as well as the need for more of them. As the number of veterans attending colleges and universities increases, their work responsibilities grow. They are overworked and stretched extremely thin in terms of the number of students they serve on campuses. Institutions need to make sure they not only have an office, but they have enough trained, knowledgeable, and experienced personnel to serve the veteran population.



This study enlightened me about women veterans in terms of how difficult it is to know who they are. Some women veterans will divulge who they are but for those that choose not to they are difficult to discern because many do not wear identifiable clothing or symbols. So, not only is the number of women veterans less than men, but some are not distinguishable. In addition, I was not aware that some women veterans do not affiliate with the term veteran. I was under the assumption all military personnel were proud of their military service. However, the results of this study have taught me how some individuals feel about their military service is dependent on their role, the length of service, and whether they were deployed.

As noted in the book by Evans et al., 2010, Josselson's Theory of Identity Development suggests some of these women may be Moratoriums (Searchers) or Identity Diffusers (Drifters). They are seeking a new identity, but they are indecisive and lack direction. Maybe this is why they initially enlisted in the military. They were looking for structure and identity. Now out of the military, they are struggling.

This information on the difficulty of distinguishing women veterans is important for professionals in higher education since they are and will be serving this population in increasing numbers. It is important to know they may be in the classroom whether we are aware of it or not. We need to understand and respect them for who they are and their world views. Holding specific trainings for faculty and staff again is important. We in higher education need to know how to handle ourselves around women veterans and be aware of our behavior, the content of our classes, the behavior of other students, and how it could affect women veterans.

The results of this study also made me aware of the need for a club and specific space for some veterans. This space is not something that should be shared with other groups of students, but needs to be specifically for veterans. Some veterans want a place where they can get together and talk things over with others with military experience. Veterans have a strong sense of camaraderie, but some women veterans relate better to men than they do women. I have to say this finding surprised me. I thought women veterans would be drawn together due to their small numbers and their treatment by men in the military, but I was wrong. Women are around men all the time in the military, they cannot get away from them even if they wanted to. So, it is apparent that their shared military life experience is the dominating factor both men and women have in common. Some veterans have a strong sense of brothers and sisters in arms. I was surprised how strong this bond is for some women veterans. They do not share their experiences except with maybe another veteran, particularly a male. Higher education personnel need to know and have an understanding about these findings for women veterans. Before this study I was sure women veterans would want separate services; now I know this may only be true for a few. Services for veterans, for most part, should be a combined approach that involves both women and men.

This study brought about an awareness of women veterans and their choice in attending a college or university. It is apparent from this study that the location of the institution as well as the programs and their delivery are important. The interesting finding related to this is that women veterans expect to receive services from the military, not the institution of higher education for the most part. Of course, this depends on whether a women veteran enrolls on a more traditional or non-traditional campus. Those

enrolled on a more traditional campus and attending day classes tended to have more extensive expectations of the institution in regards to services. However, those women veterans enrolled in more non-traditional programs and attending evening classes expected almost nothing from the institution in terms of services. Women veterans think about the military first and foremost when it comes to seeking services and using their benefits. So, for those working in higher education this is an important piece of knowledge to have about women veterans. However, not all women veterans are the same. Therefore, we need to keep up with the changing needs of these students through asking questions and formal assessments.

### **Recommended Practical Application for Higher Education Professionals**

The results of this study provide a number of recommendations that professionals in higher education can use in their work with the population of women veterans on their campuses. Not all student veteran populations are the same on every campus, but these practical applications will provide guidance and direction in intentional efforts with this special student population. In addition, not all colleges and universities are the same, so higher educational professionals will need to implement these recommendations in a manner that best fits their campus culture.

### **More Intentional Communication with Veterans**

**Websites.** The review of specific college and university websites as part of this study consistently demonstrated how difficult it is finding veteran information. Few institutions in this study had websites with veteran information that was easily accessible, including the name of the designated certifying official. So, higher education professionals should review their websites from the standpoint of a veteran that is not

familiar with their campus or services. The websites should be designed in such a way that detailed information is easily accessible. In addition, the name and contact information for the certifying official should be readily available so student veterans are able to call, email, or schedule an appointment to ask questions about the use of their educational benefits.

**Manuals and videos.** Very few institutional websites reviewed in this study included a direct link to access a veteran manual or video. The manuals I was able to review provided detailed information and step-by-step directions on what individuals needed to do to use their benefits and enroll as a student at those particular institutions. The minimal number of videos viewed provided an official welcome to the college or university. They also demonstrated appreciation and respect for the military and veterans. Higher education professionals should consider adding manuals and videos to their websites to attract and assist veterans. Manuals and videos are also versatile components that can be used at college fairs and other recruitment events.

**Military transition programs.** Each of the branches within the military conducts their own programs for personnel making the transition out of the military. These programs vary in terms of organization, length, process, and content. Colleges and universities located near military installations and training facilities should look into the possibility of being a part of these formal transition programs. Participants in this study mentioned the programs they participated in needed more diverse college information. Information on the institutions, degrees offered, and program delivery. Not all colleges and universities are located near military installations and training facilities; however,

every institution should intentionally seek out opportunities to present to military personnel in their areas.

**Benefits sessions.** If speaking as part of a formal military transition program is not a possibility, higher education professionals should offer sessions on the use of benefits for military personnel. These sessions could be provided both in person and online. However, the results of this study show the importance of a personal approach as well. Therefore, college and university personnel should utilize both the group and individual approach in working with veterans on the use of their educational benefits.

### **Enough Trained Staff**

Additional attention to the intentional communication with veterans through website design, military transition programs, educational benefits sessions, and individual appointments means additional responsibilities for staff. Higher education professionals should assess their current veteran populations, programs, and potential growth through increased efforts to determine if the number of trained staff is adequate. Results of this study show how needed and valued these staff members are to the women veteran participants. However, it was also apparent that large workloads exist; workloads that affect the effectiveness and personal approach of these professionals. Therefore, higher education professionals need to make sure they have an office for veteran services with enough trained, knowledgeable, and experienced personnel to effectively serve the veteran population.

### **Varied Program Delivery**

The results of this study demonstrate that the passing of time creates a sense of urgency for many veterans. They want to get their degrees and get on with their lives.

Higher education professionals should be aware of the importance of time and provide a variety of program deliveries to the needs of student veterans. One-night-a-week, two-nights-a-week, and other programs that allow veterans and other non-traditional students to learn at an accelerated pace should be considered. If offerings such as these do not exist, professionals should seek to add them to the curricula. If already offered, the expansion of program and degree offerings should be assessed and considered. In addition, not all individuals like online instruction, so seated classes for bachelor's degrees, are still needed. One size continues to not fit all. Professionals in higher education should continually keep their fingers on the pulse of those programs and degrees veterans seek in order to keep up with the demand.

### **Military Credits**

In addition to varied program and degree offerings, higher education professionals should consider reviewing the number of academic credits awarded by their institutions for military service. Great discrepancies exist across the United States. Academic credits for military service should be reviewed and changes considered to better assist veterans towards an accelerated pursuit of degrees if and when appropriate.

### **Trainings**

Higher educational professionals should review the academic credits awarded to veterans for their military service. In addition, professionals should provide mandatory trainings about veterans for faculty and staff on their campuses. Trainings, including gender specific information, should be designed with an intentional and consistent approach to provide the understanding needed to effectively work with veterans. Due to the increased number of veterans and those with combat exposure, the possibility of

working with individuals suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), Military Sexual Trauma (MST), and other conditions escalates. It should not be assumed that every veteran suffers from conditions, but higher education personnel should know what to look for and be prepared to implement individual action plans. Furthermore, specific trainings are important because higher education personnel need to know how to handle themselves around veterans. They need to be aware of their behavior, the content of classes, the behavior of other students, and how it could affect veterans.

### **Space**

The results of this study not only indicate the importance of trainings, but also the desire for a designated space for veterans. This need will vary depending on the campus culture and student veteran population; however, the desire for a place to get together and discuss shared experiences may be present. Veterans have a strong sense of camaraderie and having a designated space is important to some of them. Higher education professionals should survey and evaluate the needs of student veterans on their campuses regarding separate space.

### **Clubs**

In addition to considering space specifically for veterans, higher education professionals should evaluate the club and organization offerings on their campuses. If an organization for veterans does not exist, professionals should consider working with student veterans in the establishment of such a group. Again, veterans share a special connection due to their experiences in the military, and having a veteran organization is important to some of them.

### **Programs**

While designated organizations may be an important need for veterans on some campuses, specific programs must also be considered. Special programs such as faculty and staff trainings, orientation, and peer mentor programs for veterans should be considered by higher educational professionals on each campus. Professionals should also consider career development sessions for veterans. The participants in this study demonstrated their seriousness in earning their degrees and pursuing their careers outside the military. The military and educational environments are very different, so additional assistance may be needed by veterans seeking civilian careers. They may know their desired major, but they may not be aware of the options available to them with a particular degree. Again, it depends on the veteran population at specific colleges and universities.

### **Importance of Family**

Specific programs for veterans are needed on college and university campuses. In addition, the results of this study indicate how important family is to most veterans. A supportive family was essential to a positive transition and adaptation to higher education. Therefore, higher education personnel should consider special organizations and programs for student veterans and their families. Two examples might be a Veteran Family Organization and a Veteran Family Picnic with food and special activities. Organizations and programs will vary by institution based on the campus culture and veteran population.

### **Program Evaluation and Assessment**

Organizations and programs for veteran families will vary from campus to campus. However, program evaluation and assessment is something that all higher



education professionals should be implementing on college and university campuses. Intentional and consistent evaluation and assessment is needed whether programs and services are established or brand new. Designs and implementation will vary depending on the professional and institution.

### **Knowing and Understanding Women Veterans**

Evaluation and assessment is needed with veteran programs and services on each campus. It is also important to have knowledge and understanding about women veterans. The results of this study provide important and interesting information on the twelve participants, so they lack generalizability. However, the findings on women veterans are still important for higher education personnel to consider. The findings indicate women may or may not affiliate with being a veteran. This depends on such elements as role, job responsibilities, whether they were deployed or not, their feelings about themselves, their relationships with others, their military experiences, and if their exit from the military was anticipated or not.

In addition, some women veterans need to learn how to do their hair, make-up, and dress for the civilian world again now they are no longer in the military. Moreover, some may affiliate with men more than women. They have been around men for the majority of their military career, so some women veterans find it difficult interacting with other women. So, some do not see the need for separate services for women veterans.

Furthermore, some women veterans are very serious about school and have high expectations of themselves and look forward to pursuing their degrees and careers. In addition, just as it is with other non-traditional students, women veterans' roles and responsibilities vary with work and family. Therefore, their schedules are limited.

### **Future Research**

Suggestions for future research as a result of this study and previous studies are varied. One suggestion is a mixed methods study on the transition and adaptation of women veterans to higher education involving an increased number of participants at both traditional and non-traditional four-year campuses. In addition, are separate studies focusing on the women veterans attending institutions located away from military installations as well as those enrolled at solely public or all-women institutions. These studies would assess if there are different needs of women veterans at these diverse locations. Moreover, another suggested study is one focused on the transition and adaptation of women veterans to higher education that are from the different military branches. The study would assess if differences in experience and need exist between the women. In addition, distinct studies could be conducted on the transition and adaptation of women veterans to higher education in relation to their deployment and combat exposure experience, those with previous higher education experience, anticipated or unanticipated exits from the military, as well as those women veterans married or in relationships with current military personnel. Furthermore, comparative studies could be conducted on the transition and adaptation of women veterans to higher education including women with children and without, disabilities (physical or psychological) and without, as well as men verses women veterans.

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## Appendix A

### Definition of Terms

**Adaptation:** Process where individuals move from being acutely aware and preoccupied with a transition or change they are experiencing to integrating the transition into everyday life (Schlossberg, 1981).

**Alcohol misuse (or Alcohol-Related Disorders):** Alcohol misuse is a disorder characterized by the excessive consumption and dependence on alcoholic beverages, leading to physical and psychological harm, as well as, impaired social and work-related ability (American Psychiatric Association, 2013, 490-491).

**Anxiety Disorder:** Condition that involves having fear about something happening immediately as well as worrying about what could happen in the future. Excessiveness, a prolonged presence, as well as physical symptoms such as loss of sleep and concentration, is what distinguish an anxiety disorder from normal fear and anxiety in a person's life (American Psychiatric Association, 2013, 189-190).

**Department of Defense (DOD):** The unified branches of the military that coordinates efforts to protect the United States of America (Department of Defense, 2013a).

**Department of Education (ED):** Created in 1980, the ED exists to promote student achievement and preparation for global competitiveness by fostering educational excellence and ensuring equal access (Department of Education, 2013).

**Department of Veterans Affairs (VA):** Entity of the government that serves veterans and their dependents with medical care and benefits (Department of Veterans Affairs, 2013h).

**Depression:** Depression is an illness that exists when a combination of factors - genetic, biological, environmental, and psychological – causes symptoms that interfere with an individual’s everyday life. Depression disorder can vary in its severity and may be diagnosed as being minor, dysthymic (moderate), or major. There are also different depression disorders that occur under different circumstances – Psychotic, Postpartum, and Seasonal. Effective treatments are available if sought out by affected individuals (American Psychiatric Association, 2013, 155-156).

**Depressive Symptom Severity (DSS):** Depression and the decision about its severity– mild, moderate, or severe – must be diagnosed by medical professionals taking into consideration symptoms present in an individual - the number, type and severity (American Psychiatric Association, 2013, 156).

**Disabled Student Services (DSS):** Disabled Student Services (DSS) or Disabled Students’ Program (DSP) is usually an office, department, or program on a college or university campus with the mission to provide services developed to meet the educational needs of individuals with disabilities (Berkeley, 2013).

**Global War on Terror (GWT):** The military response by the United States and United Kingdom to the terrorist attacks on New York City and Washington, D.C. on September 11, 2001 (Department of Defense, 2014b).

**Guard (National Guard):** The National Guard or Citizen-Soldiers (the oldest military branch) maintain military training part time while working in civilian jobs or while attending college. These individuals are called to serve both state and federal governments in the event of an emergency (National Guard, 2014).

**Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs):** Explosive devices created out of ordinary, everyday items by offenders with the intent to cause damage, destroy, and/or create a distraction. These devices (the name originated Iraq in 2003) can be carried, delivered, planted, driven, or thrown (Department of Defense, 2014c)

**Intimate Partner Violence (IPV):** Partner or spouse (current or former) initiated physical, sexual, or psychological injury (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2013).

**Military Friendly:** Schools that welcome veterans through the existence of VA approved programs and services; some feel this label needs to involve more consistency in programs and services (college credit for military service, set policies, the acceptance of non-traditional education sources, flexibility in delivery, etc.) (Department of Veterans Affairs, 2014e).

**Military Sexual Trauma (MST):** Sexual assault, touching, grabbing, unwelcome remarks and sexual advances, and/or sexual harassment (repeated and threatening) during military service (Department of Veteran Affairs, 2013f).

**Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF):** Joint combat operation (United States, United Kingdom, and Afghan) in Afghanistan, meant to provide stability and inhibit further terrorist development (Department of Defense, 2014d).

**Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF):** Mission (U.S. led) was the removal of Saddam Hussein as well as the use and trafficking of weapons of mass destruction; mission changed to help with the development of a new, more effective Iraqi Government and economy (Department of Defense, 2014e).



**Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD):** The experience of being exposed to traumatic events such as death, injury, or violence that result in invasive symptoms. This exposure can be direct, witnessed, or learned (American Psychiatric Association, 2013, p. 271-272).

**Posttraumatic Stress Symptoms (PSS):** PSS are the invasive symptoms related to PTSD. The following are examples of the invasive symptoms: reoccurring troubling memories or dreams, flashbacks, avoidance, mood swings, withdrawn behavior, negative emotional state, inability to remember, and self-blame (American Psychiatric Association, 2013, p. 271-274).

**Reintegration:** A service member's reentry into his or her daily life as experienced prior to deployment, or into a new civilian life (work, family, and personal experiences) (Marek, Tech, Hollingsworth, D'Aniello, O'Rourke, Brock, Moore, Butler, Zhang, & Wiles, 2013.)

**Reserves:** Non-active duty Services members that could be called to active duty at any time. The Army National Guard, Army Reserve, Navy Reserve, Marine Corps Reserve, Air National Guard, Air Force Reserve, and the Coast Guard Reserve make up the United States Reserve Component (Department of Defense, 2014f).

**Student Veteran Organizations (SVOs):** Student Veterans Organizations are groups formed on college campuses for student veterans for support, advocacy, a safe environment, supportive of military identity, and to provide a social outlet (Summerlot, Green, & Parker, 2009).

**Transition:** A change in assumptions about oneself and the world (caused by event or non-event) that entails behavioral and relationship changes (Schlossberg, 1981).

**Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) or Polytrauma:** Multiple injuries due to a blast affecting several areas of the body (head, core, limbs, and or organs); it is usually coupled with other types of medical conditions that greatly impact the lives of the injured and their caregivers (Department of Veterans Affairs, 2014g).

**Veterans Service Officers (VSO):** The Veterans Service Officer advises, counsels, and actively assists local veterans and their dependents of their rights and entitlements (benefits and assistance) under various federal and state laws (compensation, pension, insurance, death benefits, hospitalization and education). The VSO also acts as the liaison to the Department of Veterans Affairs and NSO (National Service Officers) to work on how veterans or their beneficiaries receive their benefits (North Dakota Department of Veterans Affairs, 2014).

**Women Veteran:** For the purpose of this study, the term women veteran refers to women retired from the military (Department of Veterans Affairs, 2014).

**Woman Veterans Cohort Study (WVCS):** Project conducted using an electronic survey with male and female veterans to identify important factors between gender and health care utilization and outcomes among OEF/OIF/OND veterans receiving care in the VA system. The long term goal of this project is to improve preventive and overall VA healthcare delivery (Department of Veterans Affairs, 2013).

**Wounded Warrior:** Injured military service members. The Wounded Warrior Project exists to honor and empower injured military service people through raising awareness, enlisting the public's aid, and providing programs and services to meet the needs of injured service members (Wounded Warrior Project, 2013).

**Yellow Ribbon Program:** A voluntary partnership between participating colleges and universities (Degree Granting Institutions) and the VA that makes additional educational funds available to veterans. The program does not affect the GI Bill entitlement for veterans. Institutions make independent decisions on the number of allocations as well as the amount of tuition and fees that will be contributed. The VA matches the set amount and pays institutions directly.

Program participation is limited to veterans or their transferees with the maximum benefit rate based on service experience. Active duty service members and their spouses are not eligible for this program. Veterans may qualify for the Yellow Ribbon Program if they serve three years of active duty after September 10, 2001, are honorably discharged from active duty due to a service disability, and serve thirty continuous days after September 10, 2001. Eligibility of dependents is based on the Post-9/11 GI Bill and the veteran's service meeting the established criteria (Redden, 2009).

## APPENDIX B

NC State Yellow Ribbon Program Colleges and Universities, 2013-2014,  
Contacted as Part of Study

Belmont Abbey College	Belmont
Brevard College	Brevard
Campbell University	Buies Creek
Catawba College	Salisbury
Chowan University	Murfreesboro
Davidson College	Davidson
Duke University	Durham
East Carolina University	Greenville
Elon University	Elon
Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University	Elizabeth City & Greensboro
Gardner-Webb University	Boiling Springs
Guilford College	Greensboro
High Point University	High Point
Johnson & Wales University	Charlotte
Lees-McRae College	Banner Elk
Lenoir-Rhyne University	Hickory
Livingstone College	Salisbury
Mars Hill College	Mars Hill
Meredith College	Raleigh
Methodist University	Fayetteville
Montreat College	Montreat
North Carolina A&T State University	Greensboro
North Carolina State University	Raleigh
North Carolina Wesleyan College	Rocky Mount
Pfeiffer University	Misenheimer
Phoenix University	Charlotte & Raleigh
Queen's University of Charlotte	Charlotte
Saint Augustine's College	Raleigh
South College	Asheville
South University	High Point
Strayer University	Charlotte, Greensboro, & Raleigh
Troy University	Fayetteville
University of Mount Olive	Mount Olive & 7 other locations
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill	Chapel Hill
University of North Carolina at Charlotte	Charlotte
University of North Carolina at Greensboro	Greensboro
Wake Forest University	Winston-Salem
William Peace University	Raleigh, NC
Wingate University	Wingate, NC

Miller Motte College was not contacted due to only offering an online Bachelor's degree. In addition, Webster University was not contacted due to enrollment being restricted to active duty military personnel.

[http://www.benefits.va.gov/gibill/yellow\\_ribbon/2013/states/nc.asp](http://www.benefits.va.gov/gibill/yellow_ribbon/2013/states/nc.asp)

## Appendix C

Campuses on List of Participating YRP Institutions:  
Not Contacted

Institution	Location	Reason
The Art Institute of Charlotte	Charlotte	Certified Competencies
The Art Institute of Raleigh-Durham	Durham	Certified Competencies
Charlotte School of Law	Charlotte	Master's Program
The Chefs Academy	Morrisville	Associate's & Certificates, Bachelor's Online Only
Craven Community College	New Bern	Community College
DeVry University (Keller Graduate School of Mgt.)	Charlotte and Morrisville	Master's Programs
ECPI College of Technology	Multiple Campuses	Technical School
ITT Technical Institute	Multiple Campuses	Technical School
Living Arts College	Raleigh	Certified Competencies
McDowell Technical Community College	Marion	Community College
Miller Motte College	Multiple Campuses	Bachelor's Online Only
Mountain State University	Hickory and Mooresville	Permanently Closed
New Life Theological Seminary	Charlotte	Seminary School
Pitt Community College	Greenville	Community College
Sandhills Community College	Pinehurst	Community College
Virginia College	Greensboro	Bachelor's Online Only
Wake Technical Community College	Raleigh	Community College
Webster University	Camp Lejeune and Ft. Bragg	Restricted Enrollment

[http://www.benefits.va.gov/gibill/yellow\\_ribbon/2013/states/nc.asp](http://www.benefits.va.gov/gibill/yellow_ribbon/2013/states/nc.asp)

## Appendix D

Veteran Information Available through Search of NC College and  
University Yellow Ribbon Program Participants' Websites:  
**Administration Information**

School Name	City	Contact Office(s)	Certifying Officer	#s & GPA Info	YRP
Belmont Abbey College	Belmont	N/A	N/A	N/A	50/\$1,000
Brevard College	Brevard	Registrar	No Name	N/A	UL/UL
*Campbell University	Buies Creek	Admissions	No Name	N/A	260/\$3,521
Catawba College	Salisbury	Admissions	N/A	N/A	10/\$1,000
Chowan University	Murfreesboro	N/A	N/A	N/A	75/\$3,000
Davidson College	Davidson	Admissions/FA	N/A	N/A	6/\$9,500
Duke University-Engineering	Durham	Registrar	Clay Adams	N/A	2/\$5,000
Duke University-Nursing	Durham	Registrar	Clay Adams	N/A	8/\$5,000
Duke University-Arts & Sci.	Durham	Registrar	Clay Adams	N/A	11/\$5,000
East Carolina University	Greenville	Registrar	Yes/Multiple	N/A	30/\$1,500
Elon University	Elon	Registrar	Nicole Jones	N/A	20/\$4,500
Embry-Riddle University	Greensboro	Admissions	Email/not personal	N/A	20/\$20,000
Gardner-Webb University	Boiling Springs	Grad. Admissions	N/A	N/A	UL/\$4,000
Guilford College	Greensboro	Registrar	Ashley Dilger	N/A	UL/\$7,848
High Point University	High Point	N/A	N/A	N/A	80/\$4,000
Johnson & Wales University	Charlotte	Admissions	Kat Chiton	N/A	UL/UL
Lee-McRae College	Banner Elk	Financial Aid	Kathy Henson	N/A	25/\$500
*Lenoir-Rhyne University	Hickory	Registrar	No Name	N/A	20/\$7,000
Livingstone College	Salisbury	Registrar	W. Jackson	N/A	5/\$4,400
Mars Hill College	Mars Hill	Registrar	N/A	N/A	100/UL
Meredith College	Raleigh	Registrar	Linda Wann	N/A	50/\$5,000
Methodist University	Fayetteville	Veterans Services	Randy Smith	N/A	1000/\$6,200
*Montreat College	Montreat	Admissions	Chock Gross	N/A	50/\$3,087
Mount Olive College	Mount Olive	Registrar	Per Location	N/A	200/\$1,400
	New Bern	Registrar	Per Location	N/A	100/\$1,400
	RTP-Durham	Registrar	Per Location	N/A	50/\$1,400

	Washington	Registrar	Per Location	N/A	50/\$1,400
	Wilmington	Registrar	Per Location	N/A	50/\$1,400
NC A & T State University	Greensboro	Veterans & DSS	N/A	N/A	25/\$500
North Carolina State Univ.	Raleigh	Veterans Affairs	N/A	Yes	50/\$4,000
*NC Wesleyan College	Rocky Mount	N/A	Per Location	N/A	2/\$1,000
William Peace University	Raleigh	N/A	N/A	N/A	10/\$2,000
Pfeiffer University	Misenheimer	N/A	N/A	N/A	All/\$4,000
Queens University	Charlotte	Financial Aid	N/A	N/A	2500/\$6,000
South College	Asheville	Financial Aid	N/A	N/A	UL
South University	High Point	Admissions	N/A	N/A	UL
St. Augustine's College	Raleigh	N/A	N/A	N/A	5/\$787.50
Strayer University	Greensboro	Financial Aid	N/A	N/A	\$5,000
	Charlotte	Financial Aid	N/A	N/A	\$5,000
	RTP	Financial Aid	N/A	N/A	\$5,000
	North Raleigh	Financial Aid	N/A	N/A	\$5,000
	South Raleigh	Financial Aid	N/A	N/A	\$5,000
*Troy University	Fayetteville	Financial Aid	N/A	N/A	UL
*UNC Chapel Hill	Chapel Hill	GI Bill Services	Jan Benjamin	N/A	50/\$5,000
UNC Charlotte	Charlotte	Veteran Student OR	N/A	N/A	20/\$650
*UNC Greensboro	Greensboro	Registrar	N/A	N/A	29/\$6,825
University of Phoenix	Charlotte	Admissions	N/A	N/A	UL
	Raleigh	Admissions	N/A	N/A	UL
Wingate University	Wingate	Admissions	Karen E. Smith	N/A	UL/\$500

\* Indicates Special Recognition for Campus: Military Times Ranks Campbell University Among Best/Named One of America's top military-friendly universities/Best for Vets Colleges

UL: Unlimited

SOC: Service member Opportunity Colleges

DSS: Disability Support Services

VSSO: Veteran Support Services Office

Information Adapted from the NC Yellow Ribbon Program Information 2013-2014 at [http://www.benefits.va.gov/gibill/yellow\\_ribbon/2013/states/nc.asp](http://www.benefits.va.gov/gibill/yellow_ribbon/2013/states/nc.asp)



Veteran Information Available through Search of NC College and  
University Yellow Ribbon Program Participants' Websites:  
**Program Information**

School Name	Benefits	Video	Publication	Student Organizations	Special Programs
Belmont Abbey College	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Brevard College	Yes	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
*Campbell University	Yes	N/A	Info Packet	Veterans Club	Veterans Affairs
Catawba College	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Chowan University	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Davidson College	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Duke University-Engineering	Yes	Yes	Website	Yes	Twitter/FB/email
Duke University-Nursing	Yes	Yes	Website	Yes	Twitter/FB/email
Duke University-Arts & Sci.	Yes	Yes	Website	Yes	Twitter/FB/email
East Carolina University	Yes	Yes	N/A	Veteran Society	Program Specialist
Elon University	Yes	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Embry-Riddle University	Yes	N/A	Resource Guide	N/A	N/A
Gardner-Webb University	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	Military Science
Guilford College	Yes	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
High Point University	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Johnson & Wales University	Yes	N/A	N/A	N/A	Veterans Affairs
Lee-McRae College	Yes	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
*Lenoir-Rhyne University	Yes	N/A	N/A	N/A	Chaplaincy Program
Livingstone College	Yes	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Mars Hill College	Yes	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Meredith College	Yes	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Methodist University	Yes	N/A	Website/Facebook	3	Veterans' Writing Collection
*Montreat College	Yes	N/A	3 Downloads	N/A	N/A
Mount Olive College	Yes	N/A	Online Application	N/A	SOC
Mount Olive-New Bern	Yes	N/A	Online Application	N/A	SOC
Mount Olive-RTP-Durham	Yes	N/A	Online Application	N/A	SOC
Mount Olive-Washington	Yes	N/A	Online Application	N/A	SOC
Mount Olive-Wilmington	Yes	N/A	Online Application	N/A	SOC
NC A & T State University	Yes	N/A	Website	N/A	VSSO

North Carolina State Univ.	Yes	N/A	Website	3	Online Orientation
*NC Wesleyan College	Yes	N/A	N/A	ROTC	N/A
William Peace University	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Pfeiffer University	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Queens University	Yes	N/A	N/A	QU4Troops	Crisis Line
South College	Yes	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
South University	Yes	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
St. Augustine's College	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Strayer University-Greensboro	Yes	Yes	Website	N/A	N/A
Strayer University-Charlotte	Yes	Yes	Website	N/A	N/A
Strayer University-RTP	Yes	Yes	Website	N/A	N/A
Strayer University-No. Raleigh	Yes	Yes	Website	N/A	N/A
Strayer University-So. Raleigh	Yes	Yes	Website	N/A	N/A
*Troy University	Yes	N/A	Troy for Troops	N/A	N/A
*UNC Chapel Hill	Yes	N/A	Veterans Handbook	3	Resources Team
UNC Charlotte	Yes	N/A	Resource Guide	Veterans Club	Outreach Program
*UNC Greensboro	Yes	N/A	Resources	N/A	VETS/Ally
Univ. of Phoenix-Charlotte	Yes	Yes	Helpful Links	N/A	N/A
Univ. of Phoenix-Raleigh	Yes	Yes	Helpful Links	N/A	N/A
Wingate University	Yes	N/A	Helpful Links	N/A	N/A

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## Appendix E

## Letter about Study to Staff

Date  
Name  
Title  
College/University  
Address  
Re: Assistance Needed for Study on Women Veterans

Dear *Name of Campus Official*:

I am a doctoral student at Western Carolina University and the Director of Campus Life at the University of Mount Olive. I am conducting research to understand the experiences of women veterans as they transition and adapt to higher education. I am interested in learning about each woman's situation, how they define themselves, their support systems, and the strategies they use throughout this significant change from military to college life. I want to hear their individual stories, so I am interviewing full-time, baccalaureate, degree-seeking female military students at Yellow Ribbon Program participating colleges and universities in the state of North Carolina.

I am contacting you as a professional with responsibilities for working with veterans on your campus to ask for your help in notifying female veterans and to have interested individuals contact me directly to volunteer for the study (I have attached a flyer about the study to help with this). I want to hear about their experiences directly from them in order to build a knowledge base about experiences women veterans have as they transition and adapt to higher education. This base of knowledge has the potential to lead to specific programs and services to help women veterans' transition and adapt to higher education.

Each interview session, lasting approximately one hour, will take place at a pre-determined date, time, and location agreed upon by the participant. Sessions will be digitally recorded. As a thank you, each volunteer participant as well as you will receive a \$15 gift card and a copy of the study upon the completion of the study.

I appreciate your consideration and assistance with this request. Please have interested women veteran students contact me at [msdutnell1@catamount.wcu.edu](mailto:msdutnell1@catamount.wcu.edu) or 828-230-4548 for more information about the study and to set up their interview. I truly believe the information gathered from female veterans on your campus and others has the opportunity to bring a stronger understanding, awareness, and therefore programs and services for this very special student population.

Sincerely,

Meg Dutnell  
Director of Campus Life, University of Mount Olive  
630 Henderson Street, Mount Olive, NC 28365  
828-230-4548/919-658-7880  
[msdutnell1@catamount.wcu.edu](mailto:msdutnell1@catamount.wcu.edu)/[mdutnell@moc.edu](mailto:mdutnell@moc.edu)

## Appendix F

## Flyer about Study



### Share Your Transitional Experiences to College as a Woman Veteran

- Why?** Volunteer to tell your story about becoming a college student and make a difference for fellow women veterans! Help educators have a better understanding of you and your experiences as a women veteran student so we can determine the need for specific programs and services.
- Who?** Full-time, baccalaureate, degree-seeking female veteran students at Yellow Ribbon Program participating colleges and universities in the state of North Carolina
- What?** One-on-one interview sessions will be scheduled at your convenience. They will take place at a pre-determined date, time, and location agreed upon by you – the participant.
- How?** Contact Meg Dutnell, Western Carolina University doctoral student and Director of Campus Life at the University of Mount Olive, to find out more information on the study and to voluntarily arrange for your one hour interview. You may contact Meg at [msdutnell1@catamount.wcu.edu](mailto:msdutnell1@catamount.wcu.edu) or 828-230-4548.

This qualitative study is being conducted to explore the experiences of women veteran students at colleges and universities in the state of North Carolina that are Yellow Ribbon Program participants. The purpose of this study is to develop a knowledge base that provides the opportunity for the development of specific programs and services for this special population of students.

Sessions will be digitally recorded and as a thank you, each volunteer participant will receive a \$15 gift card and a copy of the study upon the completion of the study.

***Make a difference through your participation!***

\*Photographs used by permission from NC AMVETS Association

## Appendix G

### Informed Consent

I am conducting research for my dissertation as part of the graduate education requirements at Western Carolina University. Dr. Mary Jean Ronan Herzog, my professor and dissertation committee chair, is providing guidance and instruction in this process.

I am conducting research to understand the experiences of women veterans as they transition and adapt to higher education. I am interested in learning about each woman's situation, how they define themselves, their support systems, and the strategies they deploy throughout this significant change from military to college life. I want to hear their individual stories, so I am interviewing full-time, baccalaureate, degree-seeking female military students at Yellow Ribbon Program participating colleges and universities in the state of North Carolina.

Your involvement in this study includes telling your story of transition and adaptation to higher education after serving in the military. I want to hear about your experiences directly from you so I might have a better understanding. I purposefully want to build a knowledge base about the experiences women veterans have as they transition and adapt to higher education. This base of knowledge has the potential to lead to specific programs and services to help women veterans in their transition and adaptation to their new role as college student. The session will take about one hour and will be digitally recorded.

Your participation is voluntary and you may decline to answer any question or withdraw from the study completely at any time. There are no foreseeable risks in your participating in this study. Prior to the interview, I will ask you to review a participant information form to provide you with an idea about some of the information I will seek to gather as part of the interview process. Your identity as well as the name of your school will be changed to protect confidentiality. You and your institution will not be identified or publicized, even if direct quotations from the interview are used. I will give you a \$15 gift card at the completion of the study as a thank you for your participation.

Please feel free to contact me – Meg Dutnell - with any questions you may have at 828-230-4548 or [msdutnell1@catamount.wcu.edu](mailto:msdutnell1@catamount.wcu.edu). You may contact my Faculty Advisor, Dr. Mary Jean Ronan Herzog, Department of Educational Leadership, Western Carolina University, at 828-227-3327. Should you have any question or concerns about your treatment as a participant in this study, the Chair of the Western Carolina University Institutional Review Board, can be reached through WCU's Office of Research Administration at 828-227-7212.



## Appendix H

## Participant Information Form

Thank you for completing this brief questionnaire. Your time and effort are appreciated.

Participant Number: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Institution Number: \_\_\_\_\_

Gender: Female Other: \_\_\_\_\_

Age Group: 19-24 25-30 31-35 36-40 41-45 Other: \_\_\_\_\_

Service Branch: Army Navy Air Force Marine Corps Coast Guard

Years in Service: \_\_\_\_\_

Have you ever been deployed? Yes No If yes, please list all the countries to which you have been deployed.

\_\_\_\_\_

If yes, the number of times deployed: \_\_\_\_\_

Actual duration of deployment(s): \_\_\_\_\_

Nature of deployment(s): Combat Non-combat Other: \_\_\_\_\_

Military Job Responsibilities/Transferable skills:  
\_\_\_\_\_

Any previous college experience? Yes No If yes, on-line classes, seated classes, or both? \_\_\_\_\_

Are you full-time, baccalaureate- degree seeking student? Yes No

Are you a first generation college student? Yes No

Please list any/all degrees you have obtained, as well as when and where.

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Certifications:  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Area of Study:  
\_\_\_\_\_

Educational Goals:  
\_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix I

### Interview Protocol

#### Situation

- How long had you been separated from the military before you became a college student?
- What made you decide to enroll in college after military service?
- What helped you choose your particular college/university?
- What goals do you have while you are attending college?
- What goals do you have for yourself once you earn your degree?

#### Self

- How has serving in the military affected your perception of a college education?
- Please describe your transition from the military to college.
- How are you different enrolling as a college student following your years of service?
- What is your attitude towards your fellow college students (veterans)?
- What is your attitude towards your fellow college students (non-veterans)?
- What do you say to others on campus about your military service?
- Do you identify yourself as a veteran?
- Do you talk about your military experiences with others on campus?

#### Support

- What have been your sources of support during your transition and adaptation to life as a college student?
- What are the attitudes demonstrated towards you as a woman veteran by different groups of people on campus? Faculty? Staff? Students?
- What services would be helpful on campus (or off) that do not currently exist for veterans – especially for female veterans?



- Do services for female veterans differ from those needed by males? If yes, please explain.

### Strategies

- What do you wish you had known before making the transition and adaptation to college?
- What did you experience while serving in the military that has helped you in your transition and adaptation to college?
- What have you experienced as a college student that will help you as you progress towards graduation?
- What suggestions would you give to other women veterans enrolling in college following military service?

## Appendix J

### Example of Peer Feedback on Transcription Analysis

From: Epps, Susan Bramlett <EPPS@mail.etsu.edu>  
 Sent: Thursday, June 12, 2014 2:21 PM  
 To: Margaret Dutnell  
 Subject: RE: 2 interviews to code for Meg

Participant #5  
 Themes

- Planning (all aspects of life and school – financial, credits, the works!)
- Resilience (bouncing back from injury, being single parent, dealing with institutional rules re: credits)
- Being proactive (ties the planning and resilience together!) – doing homework, getting involved, seeing out opportunities
- Setting an example

Participant #7  
 Themes

- Resilience (dealing with taking on sister's children, weight issues in military, loss of job, etc)
- Setting an example (for nieces/nephews, being your own motivator)
- Used to structure (lack of that structure at the institution)

Participant #5 Institution #1 (4/29/14)

I Tell me about how long you'd been separated from the military before starting college?

P I was actually a college student while I was still in...

I When you got out this last time (veteran now) and starting classes here on this campus?

P I got out February 18<sup>th</sup> ...it was my last day in the Army...and I started May 20<sup>th</sup>

I Tell me about why you decided to enroll in college once you got out?

P To better myself I guess...to get a better job of course...life satisfaction basically...my driving force behind all of that is that I have a daughter...so I go to college – I hope that she follows that – like my mom went to college – my dad went to college...I want that to continue to her...and I don't want her to stop...my mom didn't go to college so I won't go...I have to set that example for her...

I How old is she?

P She's 8...

I Is she a lot like you?

P She is...she is...she's very into the arts – she loves dancing, plays the guitar...it surprises me that every time I go...when I was doing my homework, she was doing her homework as well...if I didn't know something I couldn't ask anybody, but she doesn't know if she could ask me...this was during the time I was in active duty...

I Going to school together and doing homework together...

I How did you choose this university? (54:26)

P Credits. I went – and not really shopped around – but...I'm from out west...school A didn't give me a lot of credits...with me with all the certifications that I have and going to college when I was still in ...school B ...was only going to give me 6 credits...school C up north ... I take that back, I think school B was going to give me – for my language – maybe 12 credits...for my language plus my military experience but it wasn't enough...so I transferred to ...I enrolled in school C too... not very good – don't know how to say it – it was not good for my situation – it was far from my family – it was far from my daughter's school.

Methodist...when I was looking around for different bases and stuff...because I was in training here...I came from Fort Campbell...so I was doing training here...and I tried FSU (Fayetteville State University)...it was so hard for me to get in because of the program is very exclusive...the Army accepts the graduates of school X...social work...make it so hard for me to get in during active duty...I researched it before...this particular school...I didn't really look at school Y...school Z...maybe I should have ...but it's good, me being a veteran to be in this town – with the VA, Voc (Vocational) Rehab that's in the immediate area...it's better for me with my situation...plus it's a private school. The ratio for the teachers and the students is very small and they are very passionate about teaching. That's why I like this university. I think that's why I...they gave me 44 credits...