FEATURED ARTICLE

Adapting to College Life After Military Service:
A Motivational Perspective

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This study explores how student veterans draw on principles of self-determination theory, focusing on the learning processes shaping their abilities to adapt to new environments, namely college. By developing intrinsic motivation, student veterans successfully embrace their college student identities. Using a case study method along with self-determination theory, this study demonstrates how characteristics of intrinsic motivation assisted student veterans to shape their development as college students. As such, student veterans were enabled to become self-determined, which fostered their transition to the college environment. Implications for higher education practitioners and counselors are discussed.

Keywords: student veterans, motivation, colleges, transition, self-determination

Over the last 15 years, higher education institutions have seen dramatic increases in student veteran populations—a trend likely to continue with troop reductions and combat withdrawal (Kirchner, 2015). In 2016, over 2.9 million Post-9/11 veterans (64%) enrolled in college, a number expected to increase as more returning service members transition back to civilian life (U. S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2016). Addressing transition issues among student veterans in post-secondary institutions is well documented; however, the growing body of literature often centers on deficit-framed narratives (Phillips & Lincoln, 2017). These narratives paint student veterans with traits such as heavy-drinking, substance abuse, being academically at-risk (Jenner, 2017, 2019; Widome et al., 2011), or having mental health issues (Hoge et al., 2004). These descriptions may outline student veterans' challenges, but do not aid in understanding their successful transitions to college. Accordingly, scholars and practitioners, seeking a deeper understanding of how these students navigate college, critiqued the existing literature, calling for more asset-based approaches (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011).

Markedly, while programs exist to transition veterans to civilian life, they rarely prepare veterans for college (DiRamio et al., 2008). However, student veterans must adjust from a highly-structured military environment to a more self-directed collegiate one. Some higher education faculty and administrators who are unaware of veterans' transition experiences are unable to meet their needs; at institutions without student veterans' service

centers, this requires these students to develop a self-determined path despite insufficient organizational support and lack of institutional understanding.

For the purposes of this study, we base our research on the assumption that most successful student veterans learn to acclimatize to campuses in three ways: feeling confident in their abilities to navigate colleges (competence), embarking upon their own initiatives to assist their college transitions (autonomy), and developing a sense of kinship with others in college settings (relatedness). Through an examination of competency, autonomy, and relatedness, we offer insight into ways student veterans learn to develop the intrinsic motivation needed to successfully transition from military to college life. In this study, success is defined as experiencing high levels of self-regulated behavior and intrinsic motivation. Accordingly, a student veteran exhibiting competency, autonomy, and relatedness would be defined as one who has successfully transitioned because internal motivation has been achieved. Thereby, this paper's purpose is to present a student empowerment model centered on intrinsic motivation, based upon how student veterans have learned to adapt to college.

Using self-determination theory (SDT) (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2000), we explore the role intrinsic motivation, central to said theory, plays in how student veterans learn to navigate their transitions from military life to college. The role motivation can play in student veterans' adaptation to college has not been unexplored, and is premised on the notion that individuals have three basic needs—competence, autonomy, and relatedness—that must be met to foster the development of intrinsic motivation. Once these basic needs are met, an individual is intrinsically motivated, allowing them to become a self-directed learner.

We argue student veterans' abilities to successfully transition into college can be learned and fostered through the development of intrinsic motivation. With intrinsic motivation developed, they become self-directed students. Thus, our research seeks to answer the following: How do student veterans develop the intrinsic motivation needed to learn how to adapt to their new college environments after leaving military life?

Faculty, administrators, and other students will be better equipped to understand student veterans through a frame of success by focusing on how student veterans develop a sense of self-determination. We highlight adaptive behaviors for veterans as determined and learned by themselves, through the development of competence, autonomy, and relatedness. We focus on the learning processes, environments, and relationships that shape student veterans' abilities to adapt at an institution. Collectively, the learning processes, environments, and relationships represent the competency, autonomy, and relatedness that must be built to become intrinsically motivated students. These intrinsically motivated students are then able to successfully transition from the military to a higher education environment.

Literature Summary

Specific military transition programs exist to prepare veterans for civilian life; however, these programs often do not prepare veterans to learn to adapt to college environments (DiRamio et al., 2008). In other words, military veterans are often deployed into a collegiate environment that lacks the necessary conditions to meet their specific needs and are left to their own devices during this transition. The Post-9/11 GI Bill attracted veterans to higher education institutions in record numbers: Approximately 773,000 eligible individuals received educational benefits since 2009 (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2016). This is the most significant education benefit for student veterans passed since the Serviceman's Readjustment Act of 1944 (Vacchi, 2012). Student veterans are more diverse than the college population at large with 61.8% of student veterans being first-generation college students (Kim & Cole, 2013). These students are also more likely to have children, be married,

and are older than "traditionally-aged" undergraduate peers (Radford & Wun, 2009; Whiteman et al., 2013).

Student veterans are a trending topic on today's university campuses, and the literature about their experiences is abundant (Bellafiore, 2012; DiRamio et al., 2008; Elliot et al., 2011; Moon & Schma, 2011; Nichols-Casebolt, 2012). However, virtually the entirety of the existing literature focuses on the challenges of student veterans and the difficulties they face transitioning (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011; Lapierre et al., 2007; Milliken et al., 2007; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010). Little research has examined these students from a motivational perspective (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2000) to understand the role that motivation can play in their adaptation. Veterans enroll in college for numerous reasons – to improve employment prospects, enhance knowledge, and facilitate transitions to civilian life (McBain et al., 2012). Virtually all the literature focuses on student veterans' transition challenges (Milliken et al., 2007; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010) as opposed to focusing on approaches that develop student veterans' intrinsic motivation in order to facilitate successful adaptations to college.

We approach this study using an intrinsic motivation framework for three reasons. First, training for faculty and staff often view student veterans from a deficit, rather than a motivation-based lens (Blaauw-Hara, 2016). Two, considering student veterans are less likely than nonveterans to obtain degrees (Hammond, 2016), failure to adjust has a potentially disastrous effect on resulting retention rates. Therefore, using self-determination theory allows us to examine the characteristics that intrinsically motivate student veterans. Last, there is limited information available concerning student veterans' successful college transitions from the perspective of them being self-determined and intrinsically motivated students.

Transition and Identity Dissonance

When student veterans transition, they shift from military to academic culture. These students must navigate these conflicting arenas to find congruence and belonging while managing multiple, intersecting identities (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011). These central identities (e.g. veteran status) are often overlooked because they may not be visible or expected in a college setting. Student veterans are experiencing a process requiring "letting go of aspects of the self and former roles and moving toward a new emerging identity" (Anderson & Goodman, 2014, p. 43). This creates an environment where students need to experience competency, autonomy, and relatedness to be self-determined and intrinsically motivated (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

Brown and Gross (2011) characterize student veterans as "serious, motivated, goal-oriented students… success is influenced by their military background: They have worked within a disciplined job environment, established proven work ethic, and developed tested leadership skills" (p. 48); however, these aspects of their identities, and their resulting roles, are largely absent in the literature. Criticism of current student veteran research centers on the lack of veteran voices and calls for an investigation of how veterans succeed (Sansone & Segura, 2020; Vacchi, 2012). Thus, in this study, we consider student veterans' success and how they self-determine it. This research provides insight on how student veterans develop the motivation to overcome the barriers upon enrolling in college, framing a narrative of student success surrounding environmental transitions.

Theoretical Framework

This study provides a lens to examine students as learners while viewing the development of motivation as a learning process. Though there are a number of current motivation and transition theories within higher education literature, we look to self-determination theory to understand what elements of educational environments support the development of intrinsic motivation in student veterans (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2000). While there has been much interest on the subject of student veterans and their college transitions (Nichols-

Casebolt, 2012; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010), many claims made about these students' transitions do not address contemporary learning motivation theories on self-determination or motivation regulation. The notion of self-authorship, a prevailing student development theory, also does not address contemporary learning motivation theories (Baxter Magolda, 1999). For example, Baxter Magolda's theory of self-authorship is defined as "the internal capacity to define one's beliefs, identity, and social relations" (Baxter Magolda, 2008, p. 269). A key critique of self-authorship is its limited consideration regarding external social and environmental impacts, and its apparent linear progression through its four stages (Pizzolato et al., 2012). In contrast, self-determination theory accounts for external interactions as a necessary condition for growth and does not require precondition to move to the next stage of growth (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

Per self-determination theory, social factors affecting an individual's sense of initiative can be examined, and an individual's environment as well as the factors that hinder/bolster self-regulated behavior can be explored. For example, in his seminal study, Deci (1971) investigated how participants would respond when rewarded for participating in an intrinsically motivating activity, playing with a puzzle. Conventional thinking might assume that being rewarded would increase the participants' motivation of playing with the puzzle. However, the reward had an opposite effect, undermining the participants' autonomy and intrinsic motivation tendencies. In other words, self-determination theory focuses on the individual and the environment to understand how intrinsic motivation is developed and best supported (Deci & Ryan, 1985).

Intrinsic motivation is expressed when a person engages in enjoyable activities absent of external pressure or potential reward. Deci and Ryan (1985) provided evidence that external rewards, threats, evaluation, or lack of choice undermined autonomous behavior and individuals' motivation to engage in seemingly appealing or beneficial activities. However, intrinsic motivation is not solely established by the absence of external rewards or punishments. Self-determination theory asserts social settings promote an individual's intrinsic motivation when three basic needs are met—competence, autonomy, and relatedness (Brophy, 2004; Deci & Ryan, 2000). Competence refers to an individual's ability to feel accomplished and capable. Autonomy is defined as the ability to feel as if one's behavior is derived from the self rather than by means of coercion or external force. Relatedness refers to an individual's ability to feel connected with others.

As summarized by Brophy (2004), when all the above needs are met, "people are inherently motivated to feel connected to others within the setting, to function effectively in it, and to feel a sense of personal initiative" (p. 189). Thus, when an individual meets these needs, one is said to be intrinsically motivated. Notably, since Deci's (1971) pioneering study, self-determination theory has grown in a number of fields, including education (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Academic self-concept has been previously examined with respect to student veterans and their motivation (Morreale, 2011). While Morreale did not use a self-determination frame in her study, her findings indicate that academic motivation was found to be moderately to strongly related to academic self-concept. While the relationship between academic self-concept and self-determination is not completely understood, research suggests that self-determination skills are positively correlated with factors that have been shown to improve academic achievement (Zheng et al., 2014).

This study explores the development of intrinsic motivation within student veterans and the ability to perform well, to self-regulate behaviors (take personal initiative), and thrive within a certain context or environment. This is what is meant by a self-determined individual. As such, self-determination theory can then guide higher education faculty and administrators to conceive of new ways to support student veterans, ensuring these students the best chances of success as they transition to higher education institutions.

Methods

Data Gathering

This single-institution case study used a constructivist paradigm of naturalistic inquiry (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) to collect data about how student veterans learn to adapt to a new environment (college) through a learning motivation process. Qualitative methods permit researchers to develop a comprehensive representation of a particular social setting using data gathering tools that consider the social, research-gathered environment (Mason, 1996). Thus, acquiring knowledge and gathering data on social structures were crucial.

We utilized a case study method, which is considered a formal method of research that explores a contemporary phenomenon (e.g. the case) in real-world conditions, when the boundaries between phenomenon and context may not be evident (Yin, 2018). Creswell (2002) details the case study process as an in-depth examination of a bounded system; a bounded system can be an activity, event, process, or group of individuals. We used individual interviews as the primary data gathering tool. Patton (2002) asserts that individual interviews are useful in gaining insights about how individuals make meaning of lived experiences. A predetermined protocol prompted discussions while allowing the participants to narrow conversations to issues significant to them. Participants were asked questions that focused on various aspects of their transitions from military to college, such as social interactions, adaptive behaviors, and transition strategies. These questions were used to ascertain to what degree the components of intrinsic motivation were prevalent in their transitions. For example, participants were asked, "What strategies did you use to adapt to your new role as a student?" and "Describe how your social interactions with those around you have created barriers for your transition."

Yin (2018) suggests that multiple types of data be collected to provide various perspectives in which to view the phenomenon under study. As researchers, it was critical to understand the history and culture of the institution and student veterans; thus, in addition to individual interviews, we also examined documents, brochures, and social media sites containing information about the institutional culture. This helped to provide a richer understanding of the institution and its context.

The Site

As previously mentioned, Creswell (2002) and Yin (2018) state that case studies should be delimited by certain boundaries. This case study is bounded by the institution itself, a particular student constituency (student veterans), and the questions that surround the phenomenon being studied. The institution in which this case study took place is a doctoral university located in the southern United States with an undergraduate enrollment of over 45,000. Ample co-curricular opportunities are available for students to participate in campus activities and student organizations. A student veterans' center is highly reputable among the university community. The institution has consistently been ranked as a student veteran-friendly institution, including having a silver designation status by Military.com, and ranking among the top 25 best 4-year institutions for vets by the Military Times.

It is important to note that the institution has a robust ROTC and student cadet program, which produces one of the highest graduation rates of commissioned officers outside of U.S. military academies. To a large extent, student veterans within this study did not interact with younger undergraduate students in the ROTC and cadet programs. These two populations differed vastly in their ages and military/life experiences. To be clear, our focus was on the institution's student veterans and not on those participating in the ROTC and student cadet program.

Recruitment and Sampling

Following IRB approval, we sent an email invitation to potential participants from the university's student veteran center's listserv with assistance from the director of the center; the same message was posted on the center's social media outlets. Thirteen student veterans responded and were contacted. We were unable to schedule an interview with three of the potential participants. In the end, we conducted 10 semi-structured, individual interviews lasting between 30-75 minutes (60 minutes on average). Interviews were conducted in private work offices or other suitable places, including public areas where participants were comfortable and felt most natural (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

We employed purposive sampling (Merriam, 2009) to select participants who would provide the most useful data for this study. The participant pool consisted of both part- and full-time undergraduate students who served in the military after September 11, 2001. We limited our pool to undergraduates for two reasons: 1) the undergraduate population of the institution consists primarily of traditional-aged college students, and 2) given the undergraduate student veteran population is non-traditional, one of our goals was to determine how these veterans learned to adapt to a traditional, on-campus environment. Table 1 provides an overview of our participants. All names herein are pseudonyms.

Table 1.
List of participants

Name	Age	Military Branch	Marital Status	Time Between Transition To College
Amy	24	Air Force	Single	Less than 6 months
Tim	22	Army	Single	1-2 months
Joyce	54	Navy and Army	Single	Transitioned multiple times
John	26	Air Force	Married	Transitioned multiple times
Josh	33	Army & Marine Corps	Single	5 years
Frank	29	Navy	Married with children	About 1 year
Edwin	27	Army	Single	About 1 year
Kenneth	32	Army	Single	About 10 years
Garrett	24	Navy	Single	About 1 year
Ryan	30	Navy	Engaged	About 5 years

Analysis & Trustworthiness

Utilizing an interpretive approach, student veterans offered data interpreted through their own perspectives. Participants' personal experiences influenced their perceptions of "reality" or perceptual realism (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). Our responsibility was to ascertain participants' realities and compare them collectively. We examined various participants' experiences by interpreting their specific accounts in transitioning from military life to college. Implicit in this approach is the belief that social actors (in this case, student veterans) are continuously interpreting their environments (Mason, 1996).

The constant comparative method (Merriam, 1998) was used during data analysis—i.e. data were continually analyzed and compared to one another. Categories were integrated in various ways to offer the researcher numerous perspectives. We assigned 39 initial codes and developed several categories based on a cursory review of the data. Categories consisted of a grouping of subcategories similar in nature, e.g. data in the subcategory asking for help were placed in the larger category assessing environment.

We established trustworthiness through data validation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), using member checking and peer debriefing (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). Member checks allowed individuals to review and verify their data, provide feedback, clarify, or expand upon their data to ensure accurate portrayals. Peer debriefers, who were individuals familiar with student veteran topics, including other researchers, faculty, and staff, offered data insights. Since no authors served in the military, we remained conscious of biases. The use of peer debriefers assisted in assumption minimization.

Findings

Our study examined how student veterans adapted strategies that led them to become intrinsically motivated, helping them transition from military life to higher education. Three main themes emerged from this study. Developing mastery, or competence, focused on how student veterans drew from prior experiences to persevere when in self-doubt. Self-organization and adaptability, or autonomy, related to participants' resourcefulness in goal-planning. Creating networks of support, or relatedness, discussed the importance of others in assisting participants. The overlap of these themes into the basic needs of competency, autonomy, and relatedness is depicted in Figure 1. Collectively, as shown in the diagram, these lead to the development of intrinsic motivation in student veterans.

Figure 1.
How Students Veterans Become Intrinsically Motivated.
This Venn diagram shows how the themes of this study fall under the larger umbrella of competency, autonomy, and relatedness, which combine to form intrinsic motivation in student veterans.
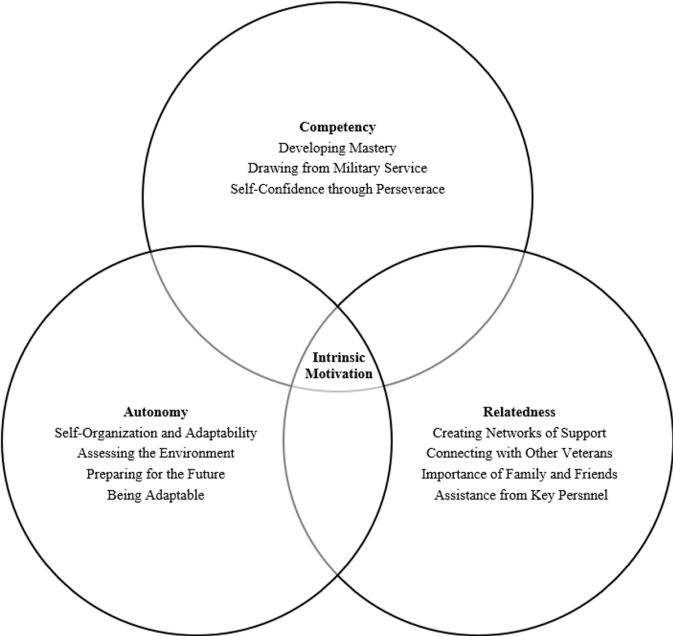
Developing Mastery

Developing mastery encompasses how participants established skills necessary to succeed as college students. Actions representative of developing mastery include creating schedules, balancing budgets, and learning to study. Several participants discussed how developing a sense of efficacy was imperative to college adaptation. Overall, this theme is primarily representative of establishing competency.

Drawing from military service. Participants realized the skills they learned in the military could apply to an institutional environment, particularly staying regulated and committed. Frank relayed, "Discipline, at least that... going to class, doing your homework, and preparing for exams, I think that will help out big time." Amy similarly described how military-ingrained discipline helped her remain focused,

> [Some] days you get up and you're like "I don't want to go to class," and you don't have to... whereas in the military, you've got to get up. You have to have a legitimate reason [to stay in bed], like you're dying, like sick and dying, and they're like "you better be at the sick call," so you have to get up anyways. So, stuff like that, having accountability for myself.

Amy was clear to point out the discipline she developed for attending classes even when she could have an excuse came from the expectations in the military to be present even when sick.

Another participant, Ryan, echoed Amy's "no excuse" comment by explaining, "I had a really strong work ethic from the military. I mean I can do this. I just have to find out how to do it."

Self-confidence through perseverance. Participants also stressed the notion of perseverance or staying committed in the face of adversity. Frank mentioned that his perseverance stemmed from personal history: "Because I had never failed at something before... I knew that if I applied myself, that if I gave it 100% that I could do it because that was what history told me about myself." When asked about his strengths in transitioning to a college student identity, he stated,

> Perseverance. I mean I could have given up at any time, whether it was the first failing test grade I had. Whether it was the professor who told me that he would have never talked to me if I had told him I was a veteran [or] the first interactions I had with the student body. I could have easily given up and could have justified it to people.

Likewise, Ryan discussed how surviving a challenging math course built his ability to persevere academically, "It made me realize I can do this. I can do whatever I want." Edwin echoed similar sentiments about veterans' unfaltering drives stating, "I usually like drive toward something until it's finished... That whole drive thing is what a lot of veterans talk about." All three of these participants highlighted their confidence was self-determined (Deci et al., 1991) and not controlled by the motivation to do well in classes or diminished when faced with adversity.

Responsibility to help others. The responsibility to help others adds to the larger discussion of how student veterans created a sense of self-efficacy. Participants were able to reestablish their senses of competence. Edwin explained how he became involved with the university's veterans' resource center, developing a sense of responsibility, "I've actually gotten involved in the group to where I'm now the assistant veterans' outreach director. So, now I'm going to VFWs and American Legions to help out other veterans." Edwin went on to state how much he was able to offer others after becoming involved in the resource center.

Another participant, John, described his sense of purpose from assisting fellow veterans, "It's up to us to take care of each other. So, you have that responsibility and that... I mean it's an unspoken responsibility. It's not like I'm required to go take care of my buddies." Comparably, Amy asserted, "I personally feel a responsibility to help and grow those people. I've been afforded a lot of great opportunities." In these examples, participants

illuminated their desire to assist others was not externally motivated (Deci & Ryan, 1985), but developed through an internal desire to help and the competence they developed with assisting others.

Self-Organization and Adaptability

The next theme, *self-organization and adaptability,* related to participants' resourcefulness in planning for goals. Student veterans often spoke about how they assessed environments and planned ahead. Many emphasized the need to keep an open mind. Overall, these abilities helped them adjust to their college environments. Largely, this theme is representative of autonomy, a basic need in establishing intrinsic motivation.

Assessing the environment. Time spent assessing the institutional environment, or acclimating, was discussed by several interviewees. Frank noted, "I did some research online about courses and the professors and what they expect. [I] asked questions when I needed to." Garrett simply surveyed the campus stating, "I would just walk around campus. I would go into a building, and I would just read the placards." Both Frank and Garrett took it upon themselves to learn the campus environment and did not rely on others or wait until they were given a tour. Tim conveyed how the military prepares individuals for changing environments, "What are all the other hallmarks of the military? I guess learn the environment and all that. Try to familiarize yourself with the culture and the environment… I [did] research." Other participants described how they were not afraid to seek answers to questions for clarification. For example, Edwin stated, "I wasn't afraid to go up to a professor and say, 'Hey, I have no idea what you're talking about. I would like you to walk me through this.'" Without external controls or incentives (Niemiec & Ryan, 2009), participants described how they often took it upon themselves to find information or be genuinely curious about the campus environment.

Planning for the future. A similar issue associated with asking questions was developing a plan to ease the transition experience. Joyce discussed the importance of evaluating her degree plan, "I set up a spreadsheet for myself to know which classes I needed to take, which classes I wanted to take, and I put down which semesters they are offered: summer, spring, etc. if they had prerequisites."

John discussed how he planned before starting college,

I know I'm going to need living, food… I need to touch base with someone on campus. I need to get the paychecks started. Kind of running through that mental checklist of this is how I'm processed in the military… take that and apply it here.

Being adaptable. Participants expressed how they were able to adapt to college life and the large institution by making connections to similarities with living on a military base. For example, Amy stated, "the values are kind of the same…it's just a new base. You're just at a new place, but you're still the same person. [My] job isn't to do what I did in the Air Force, [but] to be a student."

Edwin believed that the ability to understand younger students are simply unaware or lack life experience helps student veterans adapt,

I sat in class one time where a kid… he stood up there, gave a presentation saying that Guantanamo Bay is the torture factory of the United States. It still makes me upset just thinking about it. But I didn't say anything. I understood that this is a kid. He has no perspective. He's 18 years old.

Edwin went on to discuss the importance of giving younger, undergraduate students the opportunity to openly express their opinions, even if you disagree: "If you don't afford people the opportunity to learn and grow without your ridicule, you're doing them a disservice. You're creating a fear of them expressing their opinions. I would tell [veterans] to not fight what this university is about." Similarly, Josh stated that veterans have to learn

to accept that they are in an environment filled with younger, less mature individuals, "You just kind of learn to ignore it, and you start to appreciate some people who don't act like children, who act more mature for their age." These occasions of adaptation, or accommodating, highlight internalized processing of practices or values of others with whom participants desire to feel connection or already have a sense of belonging (Niemiec & Ryan, 2009).

Creating Networks of Support

Participants also discussed the importance of relying on and connecting with others on campus who could relate to their veteran experiences, as well as family and friends; these people provided vital external support. This overarching theme is indicative of relatedness, helping facilitate the creation of intrinsic motivation.

Importance of connecting with other veterans. The willingness and ability to find fellow veterans was key to participants' abilities to remain motivated. Amy explained how she connected with others, "You make friends with other veterans, but that's just because we tend to hang out together." She also explained the importance of the institution's veterans' resource office in connecting with like-minded individuals: "It's nice to know that I can walk into the [veterans' center] and be like ranting and raving at my group, and they'll listen… They just understand that you have this mindset, and it's different than the regular students' mindset."

Amy's quote illustrates the importance of higher education administrators in supporting student veterans. Speaking to the importance of creating community with individuals of similar experiences, Josh stated, "I also think the whole social network of trying to [connect] with other people that make you feel comfortable is important… I host a brunch every Sunday for whoever wants to hang out and talk to someone that's maybe like-minded." Frank evoked a similar view, "I try to meet up with [student veterans], try to get some contact information from them. Try to hang out with them too… I think that it was something I just liked, and it helped out with my transition." This was echoed by other participants: developing connections with other students, particularly other student veterans, enhanced participants' feelings of relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Niemiec & Ryan, 2009) on campus.

Importance of family and friends. The importance of close friends and family cannot be overstated. Josh described the role of familial support, "In spite of my age, my parents are incredible. My mom is super supportive. Even my step-dad has grown in my life to be supportive for where I'm at."

Frank, speaking of family, said, "It was partly my parents being there to help me out for a couple of years. I lived with them for two years after the service." He added, "I thought about, 'What are my parents doing to help me out? Where would I be without them?' That's part of what got me through it. The positives of that."

John emphasized spousal support, "My wife gave me a lot of support. I often tell her that if it wasn't for her, I wouldn't have finished school." Frank relayed, "Being married and having that family support behind me has definitely been something else… the big speed bumps, I obviously needed someone else to come in and lurch me forward." Financial support and encouragement were other examples provided. Another recurrent area of support was assistance from key faculty and administrators.

Assistance from key personnel. Student veterans' successful transitions were also aided by assistance of university administrators, who either directly helped participants or further facilitated connections with others on campus. For example, John recounted helpful administrators,

I was very fortunate that I ran into a couple of key people at the right time—administrators who were very pro-veteran, who were working on trying to make things better for veterans on campus. And that served me very well because they knew the resources. They knew the campus; they knew the people there.

There were numerous members across the institution willing to assist student veterans with the paperwork

they needed to receive benefits. Amy explained the care and treatment she received from the financial aid staff when she turned in the wrong form, "[like] completely stupid, I know, but she didn't like make fun of me or anything like that."

John, initially reluctant to connect with non-veterans, mentioned the importance of faculty and staff: "But then you meet the people, and you understand [that] they are actually trying to help... those relationships only got broadened and deeper as time went on." Edwin expressed appreciation for a member of the institution's veterans' services office, "Katherine, she is the facilitator for military students.... I'm telling you if she was to be gone for any reason, veteran students would like suffer tremendously." He and other participants explained she was central to them filling out proper paperwork, given deadlines, "If it wasn't for Katherine, I would never have gotten into [the university]."

Josh described how the institution's veterans' services office provided much-needed support, "Almost all the info that every single veteran is getting is not from the VA. It's from the services office at the university." Others spoke about the assistance they received from the institution's veterans' services office director. During a particularly difficult period early on in the semester, the Colonel was key for Garrett,

Colonel Johnson, he helped a lot... what he did was significant. Like one day, I just got to [the university], and it had been like three weeks, and I had no friends. I didn't know anybody. I didn't know any of the other vets. I didn't know much about the veterans' association... So, I went over to the veterans' office, and I saw Colonel Johnson, and I told him how I was feeling, and I'm sure I had tears in my eyes, and he was like, 'Ok, you're construction science?' So, he got on his computer and sent an email to all the construction science vets, and he was like, 'He's new here. Send him an email and welcome him.' So, all these people emailed me... So, I made a bunch of friends.

Clearly, the institution's veterans' resource office played a significant role in participants' adjustments. The staff served as liaisons to other student veterans. More broadly, personnel throughout the institution addressed participants' various needs and reinforced the significance of faculty and administrators in student veterans' successful transitions.

Discussion

Competence occurs when skills necessary to succeed are created (Deci & Ryan, 1985). For student veterans, demonstrating competence meant developing mastery. For example, in drawing from military service, discipline was described as one characteristic that helped participants meet academic goals, allowing them to build intrinsic motivation. Prevailing research on student veterans often focuses on institutional structures or extracurricular experiences (Fernandez et al., 2019). The development of competence by explicitly drawing academic connections to student veterans' military experience suggests faculty and administrators should develop awareness of these transferable skills to academic life. This finding further suggests devoting more attention to understanding how student veterans develop curricular connections.

Autonomy comprises the ability to self-regulate one's behaviors and activities without external coercion or manipulation (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Autonomy "involves experiencing oneself as the origin of one's behavior, rather than feeling like a pawn coerced by circumstances" (Deci et al., 1997, p. 62). An individual demonstrates autonomy by being able to assert one's will, and this is linked to a self-organization tendency. Thus, self-organization and adaptability are markers of autonomy.

As part of self-organization and adaptability in preparing for the future, developing and executing a plan in a forward-thinking (versus reactive) manner is an autonomous behavior (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Accordingly,

participants often spoke of plans, whether immediate or distant. Organizing their lives meant seeking out answers from faculty, staff, and students. Moreover, awareness is a facet of a self-regulated behavior. If awareness is "inhibited, the person is typically less able to engage in the effective self-regulation of action" (Deci & Ryan, 2000, p. 254). Environmental awareness helped participants adapt.

Per Deci and Ryan (2000), autonomous individual actions are "self-organized with respect to their inner and outer circumstances" (p. 254). They further argue that "through autonomy, individuals better regulate their own actions in accord with their full array of felt needs and available capacities, thus coordinating and prioritizing processes toward more effective self-maintenance" (p. 254). In other words, individuals display autonomy when they regulate their behaviors in accordance with their needs for self-maintenance. This represents the importance of being adaptable or accepting values or practices of others. Student veterans wanted to connect with or feel a sense of belonging either in the classroom or on campus (Niemiec & Ryan, 2009).

Feeling connected to others is a hallmark of relatedness (Deci et al., 1997). Relatedness often referred to the ability to create social circles with like-minded individuals—crucial to fostering intrinsic motivation. The importance of creating networks of support for student veterans became especially relevant during their collegiate transition (Jenner, 2019). Finding other student veterans to socialize with, as well as other connections, helped these students adapt to their new environments. Feeling a sense of belonging or connection is not unique to student veterans; however, recent research suggests developing strong connections may have larger impacts on student veteran retention than their non-veteran peers (Fernandez et al., 2019).

Relatedness goes beyond ties to a specific community, extending to individuals such as staff, faculty, and friends outside an institution, along with family (Lechuga, 2012). Some participants spoke of parental support. Families gave student veterans freedom to decide their futures, and most of the participants discussed relationships with staff members from the student veterans' resource center as being integral to their collegiate successes. Such relationships foster the formation of psychological bonds that support growth and well-being, and supply necessary conditions to support intrinsic motivation, and, combined with competence and autonomy, the creation of self-determined learners (Deci & Ryan, 1985).

Implications and Conclusion

The findings of this study support the notion that fostering an environment where student veterans can develop mastery (become competent), be self-organized and adaptable (or autonomous), and create networks of support (e.g. relatedness) are crucial to developing intrinsic motivation and transitioning from the military to college. Overall, there are three main takeaways that can be garnered from these findings. Essentially, institutions should strive to create initiatives that promote competency, autonomy, and relatedness for student veterans.

First, institutions should create opportunities to promote competency in student veterans. As such, courses or workshops could be designed to help facilitate the military-to-college transition for these students, including how skills from military service can be applied to a college context. This would help address the lack of programs that facilitate the student veterans' transition to college. However, higher education practitioners should be cautious implementing mandatory or incentivized educational opportunities. As Deci (1971) found, offering positive reinforcement decreased individuals' intrinsic motivation to complete the puzzle activity. The development of intrinsic motivation relies on the ability to self-select into activities a person feels inherently enjoyable or interesting (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Offering some structured education opportunities alongside opportunities to self-select may also aid in assisting student veterans' transition from the highly-structured military environment to a larger opportunity to explore on the university campus (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011).

Training can also be directed toward faculty and administrators to help them better understand transferable skills student veterans can incorporate in navigating their transition and utilizing their lived experiences as valuable assets in the college classroom (Holley & Steiner, 2005).

Second, institutions should train administrators, faculty, and staff so that they understand the unique needs of the student veteran population, allowing these students to pursue autonomy, or self-organization and adaptability. For example, providing campus maps and course schedules ahead of time can help guide student veterans along with the transition process. The students in this study often engaged in activities (e.g. utilizing the veterans' resource center, surveying the campus layout, attending brunches with other student veterans), because they were available as an option, not compulsory. Indeed, there is a balance to providing limited options and overwhelming students with choices. However, special attention should be paid to providing training for staff regularly interacting with student veterans, so these staff might better direct the students to available resources on campus or in the community.

Finally, institutions looking to further support student veterans can instill programs that promote relatedness by creating networks of support for veterans. For example, to help facilitate peer-to-peer support of fellow student veterans, institutions can employ peer mentoring programs, so students can guide one another through the transition process. Training for advisors, faculty, and administrators should also focus on recognizing if student veterans are having difficulty finding fellow student veterans or are unable to cultivate relationships with peers (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011; Rumann et al., 2011). Institutions with limited resources to provide a stand-alone veterans' center, or with a low enrollment of student veterans, may want to develop relationships with community organizations to provide additional avenues these students can utilize.

The abovementioned needs of developing mastery, self-organization and adaptability, and creating networks of support build intrinsic motivation in student veterans, leading to them becoming self-directed learners. Thereby, student veterans achieve success from their transition away from the military and to campuses. As much of the existing literature frames the student veteran population through a deficit-based lens, institutions committed to these students' success must incorporate asset-based practices to better support their transitions to college. An orientation program dedicated to student veterans, and organized by a student veteran resource center or student veteran organization, could demonstrate to these students the manner in which they can utilize their various skills for a successful transition to college.

Colleges and universities should view student veterans as members of the academic community that bring to the institution a wealth of skills and abilities gained from their military service. These students should be encouraged to engage in the university community by taking on leadership positions that utilize their skills. For instance, they can become campus tour guides given the spatial skills acquired in the military. They could also be encouraged to participate in leadership training programs and lead student organizations where they can demonstrate leadership skills acquired in the military. Participating in such endeavors can ensure they gain the valuable skills needed to develop intrinsic motivation and self-determined behavior. Student veterans should be provided with opportunities to showcase their skills in ways that build a positive sense of competency, offer an ample amount of (but not too much) autonomy, and provide opportunities to build community with other veterans. When used simultaneously, these practices would help foster intrinsic motivation in the student veteran populations, which promotes their successful adaptation to college life.

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