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Female Veteran Students' Transition Experiences from the Military to Higher Education: A Mixed Methods Study

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I am submitting herewith a dissertation written by Carrera Romanini entitled "Female Veteran Students' Transition Experiences from the Military to Higher Education: A Mixed Methods Study." I have examined the final electronic copy of this dissertation for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, with a major in Higher Education Administration.

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Female Veteran Students' Transition Experiences from the Military to Higher Education:
A Mixed Methods Study

A Dissertation Presented for the
Doctor of Philosophy
Degree
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Carrera Romanini
May 2021

Dedication

This work is dedicated to my husband, William, who honorably served his country, proudly serves his community, and lovingly serves his family. Thank you for helping me pursue my dreams.

Semper Fidelis

sem·per fi·de·lis | \ ˌsem-pər-fə-ˈdā-ləs\. Latin for "always faithful," Semper Fidelis has been the Marine Corps motto since 1883. It embodies the promise to always remain faithful, no matter what (The Meaning of Semper Fidelis, 2020).

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Abstract

Female veterans are a growing population on campuses across the United States (DiRamio et al., 2015; National Conference of State Legislatures, 2014). Researchers have turned their attention toward the veteran student population, but research specifically on female veteran students is lacking (Borsari et al., 2017; Demers, 2013). This sequential explanatory mixed method study was conducted to examine and compare the transitional experiences of male and female veteran students from the military to college. In this research method, the quantitative and then qualitative data were collected and analyzed, each in distinct stages (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). Participants from this study were from Patriot University, a large, public 4-year institution. Results from the quantitative phase indicated that gender is not a significant predictor of veteran students' use of transition coping mechanisms for four of the five scales developed. A difference existed between male and female veterans on the stress scale with male participants scoring higher. The qualitative findings converged with existing literature that indicates veteran students experienced transitional challenges but also developed skills and characteristics that were useful in their transition to higher education (Borsari et al., 2017; Stalides, 2008; Steele, Salcedo, & Coley, 2010). This research contributed to the literature by presenting the narratives of eight female veteran students' transition from the military to higher education. Recommendations include providing female veteran students with opportunities to develop reintegration and coping skills as part of a first-year studies course.

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Chapter 1 – Introduction

In this introduction, I provide background information, establish the need for the research, and situate the research project in a larger social context. Chapter 1 is organized in the following sections: Introduction, Statement of the Problem, Rationale for the Study, Purpose of the Study, Research Questions, Theoretical Framework, Key Terms, Delimitations, and Organization of the Study.

Background

Military personnel have used The Servicemen's Readjustment Act (GI Bill) to help pay for their higher education since its enactment in 1944 (Cohen, 1945; Dortch, 2017; Olson, 1974). The purpose of the GI Bill is to create educational opportunities for veterans of the US military, and that goal continues to be a high priority (National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics, 2017). Today, veteran students are a growing population on campuses across the United States, and about 4% of all undergraduate students are veterans (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018). The Department of Veterans Affairs estimates that more than 5 million post-9/11 veterans will enroll in institutions of higher education by 2021 (Hill, 2019). Wars in Iraq (Operation Iraqi Freedom; Operation New Dawn, OND) and Afghanistan (Operation Enduring Freedom) comprise the longest sustained military activity since the Vietnam War, contributing to a surge in veterans reentering civilian society (Borsari et al., 2017). With the drawdowns of the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, an influx of over 2.7 million veterans are returning home, but what distinguishes this generation of veteran students is the historically significant number of women who served during the War on Terror (WOT) (Borsari et al., 2017). Female veterans are entering college in record numbers, and despite comprising only 15.9% of

the military population, women constitute 27% of the veteran student population (Military

OneSource, 2016).

As veteran students attend college for the first time or return from previous

enrollments, they face various obstacles that are unique to their demographic (DiRamio &

Jarvis, 2011). Researchers consider veteran students a special needs population with their own

unique environmental and personal challenges (Borsari et al., 2017). As service members

transition from the military to academia they face obstacles including difficulty connecting with

traditional students, challenges communicating, re-learning how to behave in civilian culture,

and feelings of isolation (Borsari et al., 2017; Stalides, 2008; Steele, Salcedo, & Coley, 2010). To

compound these challenges, this group of students is often reluctant to seek assistance from

administrators, professors, or mental health professionals (DiRamio, Jarvis, Iverson, Seher, &

Anderson, 2015; Romero, Riggs, & Ruggero, 2015).

In addition to experiencing similar challenges as a student group, these veteran students

also share characteristics that help them succeed in higher education. Veterans report that

they consider the discipline they learned in the military to be an asset in their college career

(Campbell, 2016; Stalides, 2008). They also find success through community development by

seeking out other veterans; this connection provides many with a feeling of normalcy and

belonging (Sander, 2012; Stalides, 2008).

Female veteran students are using their GI Bill benefits and entering institutions of

higher education at rates that far surpass the men with whom they served (National

Conference of State Legislatures, 2014). Although resilient, the student veteran population has

been deemed a vulnerable population by the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) (UNC

Asheville, n.d.). Women continue to be underrepresented in the veteran student research, but researchers are increasingly turning their attention to this population (DiRamio et al., 2015; Dobie et al., 2004; Heitzman & Somers, 2015; Rumann & Hamrick, 2012).

This research is important to inform higher education institutions about the experiences of female veteran students and to determine if these students have unique needs, challenges, and/or opportunities based on their military experiences. Additionally, this research is needed to further understand female veteran students' experiences as they transition from military service to higher education.

Past studies on the transition of veterans from military service to college phenomenon have contained all-male samples or the percentage of women participants has been disproportionately small. Researchers have not examined whether female participants have different or unique experiences than their male counterparts (DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2008; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010; Rumann & Hamrick, 2012; Stalides, 2008; Steele et al., 2010). Because of this gap, this research is needed to assist in understanding if women have unique experiences or if their experiences mirror their male counterparts.

Problem Statement

Women continue to join the military at an increasing rate, and as the military population begins to decline, women represent a greater proportion of the population. This is a trend that is predicted to continue (DiRamio et al., 2015; National Conference of State Legislatures, 2014). Once they are discharged (released from service) from the military, female veterans use their VA benefits at disproportionately higher rates than male veterans; consequently, the presence of female veteran students on college campuses continues to rise and is predicted to increase

proportionately in years to come (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2014; Wicks, 2012). Service members face challenges as they transition to civilian life, including their transition to college. In spite of these challenges, this group of students is resilient and resourceful (DiRamio et al., 2008; Stalides, 2008). To assist during their transition to higher education, service members report relying on skills learned during their military service to help them succeed; these students learn discipline and commitment to hard work during their military service (DiRamio et al., 2008; Gregg, Howell, & Shordike, 2016; Stalides, 2008).

The existing research on veteran student transition contains samples that are composed of mostly male or all-male populations (DiRamio et al., 2008; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010; Rumann & Hamrick, 2012; Stalides, 2008; Steele et al., 2010). Research indicates that, when compared to men, women have unique experiences during their military service; but it is unknown if female veterans have different experiences when transitioning from the military to higher education (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011; Heitzman & Somers, 2015; Iverson & Anderson, 2013). Although the research on female veteran students is growing, women are still underrepresented in the research on veteran student experiences (Borsari et al., 2017; Demers, 2013).

The primary population that might benefit from this research is higher education professionals who serve female veteran students. With additional insight, higher education professionals can become more effective in working with this population leading to greater educational attainment, student learning, and educational attainment (Voigt & Hundrieser, 2008).

This research is important because this population and topic have not been investigated, leaving a gap in knowledge about a growing student population. The broader implication for this research is that the higher education community needs to understand the transition experiences of female veterans to effectively help these students transition from military to civilian life.

Rationale for the Study

Female veteran students continue to enroll in higher education institutions in record numbers ("Who Are Today's Student Veterans," n.d.). Their veteran status denotes them as a vulnerable population, and they are regarded as unique because of their military service as females (UNC Asheville, n.d.). This research is important because higher education institutions need to know if female veteran students have unique needs, challenges, and/or opportunities based on their military experiences. Historically, higher education has made a commitment to assist historically underrepresented student populations, including first-generation students, students with disabilities, and students of color, achieve academic success (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011). This research will continue that tradition and has the potential to benefit the veteran student population (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011). This research is needed to better understand female veteran students' experiences as they transition from the military service to higher education and to give institutions of higher education a framework determine whether they are equipped to meet the needs of female veteran students.

Past veteran student studies have contained all-male samples or have had a disproportionately small percentage of women participants. None of the studies have examined whether female participants have different or unique experiences compared to their

male counterparts (Ackerman, DiRamio, & Garza Mitchell, 2009; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010; Rumann & Hamrick, 2012; Stalides, 2008). The veteran population is more diverse than it has been in decades past; men and women who serve are diverse in their jobs, their sexual orientation, and their ethnicity (Mulhere, 2017). Because of this gap, this research is needed to understand if women have unique experiences or if their experiences reflect those of their male counterparts.

Purpose of the Study

This research study was driven by the lack of data on female veteran students and a need to develop an enhanced understanding of female veteran students as they transition from the military into higher education. The purpose of this study was to compare the transition experiences of male and female veteran students and to investigate the transition experiences of female veteran students into higher education. Inferences from this study can be used by higher education institutions, counselors, instructors, and academic coaches to better support this population.

Research Questions

A sequential explanatory mixed method was used for this research (Ivankova & Stick, 2007; Li, Worch, Zhou, & Aguiton, 2015; Northall, Ramjan, Everett, & Salamonson, 2016). In this research method, the quantitative and then qualitative data are collected (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). This research was conducted sequentially, meaning that a separate phase of data collection and analysis were conducted for both the qualitative and quantitative phases (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). Both male and female veteran students were invited to participate in an online, researcher-modified survey during the quantitative phase, and survey

data were analyzed (Byrne, 2017; Wisdom & Creswell, 2013). I used data from this phase to develop an open-ended phenomenological interview protocol that was used for the qualitative phase (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). During the qualitative phase, only female veteran students were interviewed. Transcripts from those interviews were analyzed for significant statements, which were then clustered into themes about the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994).

The guiding research question for this study was: What are the experiences of female veteran students transitioning from the military to college?

Phase I: Is gender a significant predictor of veteran students' use of transition coping mechanisms?

Null hypothesis: There is no difference between men's and women's use of coping mechanisms as they transition from the military to higher education.

Phase II: How do female veteran students experience the transition to higher education?

Theoretical Framework

Schlossberg's Adult Transition Theory was used as the theoretical framework for this study. According to this theory, there are four frames (the 4 S System) from which to view transition: situation, self, support, and strategies (Goodman, Schlossberg, & Anderson, 2006). Adult transition can be viewed from each of these frames. *Situation* is the circumstances of the individual, *self* describes the characteristics of the person, *support* describes the external resources available, and *strategies* are the coping mechanisms used by the individual experiencing the transition (Goodman et al., 2006; Schlossberg, 2011). A transition describes a

circumstance that causes a change in a person's routines, assumptions, relationships, and roles (Goodman et al., 2006, p. 33). The two primary features of transition are the transition itself and the mechanisms used to cope with the transition.

A final tenet of transition theory is that the person experiencing the transition must perceive the event or non-event as a transition for it to be characterized as such. I will discuss the theoretical framework in greater detail in Chapter 2.

Delimitations of the Study

Two specific delimitations were placed on this study: population and theoretical framework. This research study was delimited to veteran students at public, four-year institutions. Therefore, the inferences of this study might not be applicable to veteran students at other institution types, including private or two-year institutions. This research is also delimited in the framework that was used to analyze the qualitative data; only Schlossberg's Adult Transition Theory was used in the qualitative data analysis.

Key Terms

*Hypermasculinity —*an exaggeration of stereotypical male behaviors including aggression, physical prowess, sexuality, and violence (Rosen, Knudson, & Fancher, 2003).

*Military Sexual Trauma (MST) —*sexual violence experience by a servicemember (man or woman) while serving in the military (Iverson & Anderson, 2013).

*Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) —*a condition of mental stress resulting from experiencing or witnessing a traumatic event (Mayo Clinic Staff, 2014).

*Servicemen's Readjustment Act (GI Bill) —*legislation, originally enacted in 1944, that provides a range of benefits, including education, to veterans (Olson, 1974; Rumann & Hamrick, 2012).

Serviceman/Servicewoman/Servicemember —terms used to denote men and women who serve/have served in the United States armed forces. These terms are not specific to each of the branches of service. Each branch has its own terminology to describe the people who serve; Army — soldier, Marine Corps — Marine, Navy — sailor, Coast Guard — coast guardsman, and Air Force — airman (Baechtold & De Sawal, 2009; Losey, 2016; Merriam-Webster, n.d.-a, n.d.-b; Treseder, 2015; U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2016; U.S. Navy, n.d.-a).

Transition —a change, as perceived by the person experiencing it, in one's state or condition (Goodman et al., 2006).

Veteran student —a person who is enrolled in an institution of higher education and who was discharged from the United States military under conditions other than dishonorable (Penn State Education Equity, n.d.).

Organization of the Study

This mixed methods study explored the transition experiences of veteran students as they move from the military to an institution of higher education. Inferences from this study can be used to inform higher education professionals and policy makers, including, but not limited to, counselors, administrators, instructors, and academic advisors about the experiences of a growing population on college campuses. In Chapter 1, I presented an overview of the research, including background information, research methodology, and relevant context. To provide a deeper understanding of contextual background, a review of relevant literature is presented in Chapter 2.

Chapter 2 – Literature Review

In Chapter 2, I provide a historical background of the military and higher education and how that relationship developed and has changed over time. I examine the culture of the military and each branch of the military as well as provide a thorough review of military veteran students in general, particularly female veteran students. Finally, I review the literature on Schlossberg's Adult Transition Theory including a description of four factors (the 4 S System) that explain how adults cope during the transition experience.

Historical Background

Military and Higher Education.

Morrill Act.

In the United States, the relationship between the military and higher education is as old as the land-grant system itself. The relationship began when the authors of the Morrill Act of 1862 included a stipulation that institutions financed through the Act must offer military training as part of their educational curriculum (Abrams, 1989). Politicians at the time believed that the power of the military should be minimized, and the country had a strong commitment to the idea of the citizen soldier (militia), a group of individuals who saw themselves as citizens first and could be called upon in the event of a combat situation (Cohen, 2015). Over the years, the concept of the state militia evolved into today's National Guard (Cohen, 2015). The country also expressed a desire to minimize the need for a "large professional military establishment" (Abrams, 1989, p. 17), so land-grant colleges were asked to provide military training for service members (Neiberg, 2009).

The author of the addendum, Congressman Justin Morrill, added the language that began the relationship between the military and higher education in the United States (Abrams, 1989). The Morrill Act of 1862 sought to increase the practical nature of higher education and included an effort to develop research ties between the military and institutions of higher education (Arminio, Grabosky, & Lang, 2014a; Council, 1996). As part of this increased practicality, land-grant institutions were required to offer military training as part of their curriculum (Abrams, 1989; Neiberg, 2009). This military training is the predecessor to the modern Reserve Officers' Training Corp (ROTC), a standardized military officer training program that colleges and universities offer throughout the country (Gruber, 1975; Neiberg, 2009).

At the turn of the 20th century, the federal government sought to further solidify this relationship by offering competitive grants to incentivize military research efforts (Arminio et al., 2014a). Successful projects of this nature include the Manhattan Project, studies on mustard gas, and cultural studies (Arminio et al., 2014a). The National Institutes of Health and the National Science Foundation are modern-day legacies of the relationship between research in higher education and the military (Alexander & Thelin, 2013; National Science Board, 2008).

National Defense Act.

Congress passed the National Defense Act (NDA) in 1916, one year prior to the United States' entrance into World War I (Neiberg, 2009; Williams, 2016). The Act created the Students' Army Training Corps, a program that lasted only a short time (Gruber, 1975; Williams, 2016). This legislation also created the Reserve Officers' Training Corps and the components of the modern United States military, which are still in effect today. The three components of the United States military are the National Guard, organized reserves, and active duty forces.

Today, all five branches are made up of active duty and reserve components (Army, Air Force, Coast Guard, Marine Corps, and Navy), and two branches, the Army and Air Force, include a National Guard component (Powers, 2019).

Servicemen's Readjustment Act.

It was not until 1944 that the Servicemen's Readjustment Act, commonly referred to as the GI Bill, was enacted (Dortch, 2017; Olson, 1974; Rumann & Hamrick, 2012). Returning World War II veterans were offered educational and economic benefits under this program (Dortch, 2017; Rumann & Hamrick, 2012; U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2013). Veterans took advantage of this opportunity, and in the years following World War II, 70% of male students were veterans (Livingston, Havice, Cawthon, & Fleming, 2011; Serow, 2004). The number of veterans who entered institutions of higher education at this juncture nearly overwhelmed the higher education system, but the influx of students was managed by increasing class size, hiring additional faculty, issuing credit for military service, offering family housing, and developing accelerated academic programs (Humes, 2006; Olson, 1974). This is the first documented example of colleges and universities implementing programmatic and policy changes to accommodate veteran students (Olson, 1974).

The GI Bill program has evolved to use service members' length of service, full-time or part-time status, and number of credits the student takes to determine their educational benefits (Asch, Fair, & Kilburn, 2000; Mulhere, 2017). In 1985, the GI Bill underwent changes and was extended to include members of the National Guard and reserve components, a version of the bill that was called the Montgomery GI Bill (Asch et al., 2000; U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2013).

The next major revision to the GI Bill occurred in 2009 with the enactment of the Post

9/11 GI Bill. The Post 9/11 GI Bill further expanded educational benefits for veterans who

served since September 11, 2001 (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2015). The primary

benefit of this bill is that tuition is covered equal to the most expensive public university in the

state and can be used to pay for vocational/technical training, correspondence training, flight

school, tutorial assistance, licensing, national testing programs, and entrepreneurship training

(U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2015). Minor changes were made to the Post 9/11 GI Bill

in 2010 and 2011, but the core components have remained the same ("VA and the Post 9/11 GI

Bill," 2014).

In 2017, lawmakers passed a major expansion to the education bill; it is officially named

the Harry W. Colmery Veterans Education Assistance Act of 2017 and is known as the Forever

GI Bill (Hess, 2017; Mulhere, 2017). The revisions included the elimination of a time limit to use

the benefits, expanded access to Reserve and National Guard service members, and added

protection to veteran students whose institutions close while they are seeking a degree (Hess,

2017; Mulhere, 2017). To help veterans receive access to their benefits, extra resources have

also been dedicated to ensure the program is administered more efficiently (Mulhere, 2017).

Military Culture

The military is composed of a diverse group of people, but despite this diversity, military

culture is uniform enough to be understood as being different from civilian culture (Hall, 2011).

This culture is as well-known as it is unique. For the purpose of this review, culture is defined

as, ". . . language, a code of manners, norms of behavior, belief systems, dress, and rituals. . . "

(Reger, Etherage, Reger, & Gahm, 2008, p. 22). The three components of military culture that

strongly influence veteran students in transition are collectivism, rigid hierarchical structures, and masculinity (Arminio, Grabosky, & Lang, 2014b).

Collectivism.

Collectivism is the hallmark feature of military culture and is characterized by "(a) seeing the self as part of the group; (b) placing more importance on group goals over personal goals; and (c) becoming emotionally committed to the group" (Arminio et al., 2014b, p. 27; Soeters, Winslow, & Weibull, 2006). The function of cohesion in the military is to develop group unification, and unit identification which leads to the advancement of trust and group morale, all of which facilitate combat readiness (Arminio et al., 2014b; Petrovich, 2012).

Despite the diversity of individuals who serve, one experience that all service members share is the "assimilation into military culture" (Demers, 2013, p. 492). A primary purpose of boot camp is to strip recruits of their civilian identity and replace it with a military identity (Demers, 2013; Petrovich, 2012). Servicemen and servicewomen join the military from diverse backgrounds, but they share in the assimilation into military culture (Demers, 2013). This rite of passage process has been described by Van Gennep (2013) as occurring in three stages: separation, liminality (transition), and incorporation. In stage one, separation, the individual is removed from their traditional social life, stripping the individual's identity and individuality and imposing new customs and traditions (Van Gennep, 2013). Liminality is the transition phase between the civilian and military identities and is marked by disorientation and ambiguity (Navon & Morag, 2004; Van Gennep, 2013). During the final stage, incorporation, the individual concludes the liminality phase and re-enters the social structure with a new identity (Van Gennep, 2013). Often, but not always, the individual reenters the social structure at an

elevated status (Van Gennep, 2013). In the military, for example, a civilian recruit enters the

military as a civilian (separation), attends boot camp (liminality), and graduates as an enlisted

person (incorporation). Graduating as an enlisted person is seen by members of the military as

an elevated status because the person is now a member of the group.

Rigid hierarchy.

A second defining feature of military culture is rigid hierarchical structures, a

convention that places an emphasis on a clearly delineated power structure of dominance and

subordination (Arminio et al., 2014b; Soeters et al., 2006). A clear example of hierarchical

structure is the military rank system; communication channels and leadership are both

established through this rank system (Arminio et al., 2014b). The purpose of establishing a

hierarchical structure is to maintain effective leadership and promote a sense of accountability

and responsibility (Arminio et al., 2014b). In addition to rank, pay structure is a formalized and

rigid structure within the military. Pay structure is consistent across the five branches of the

military with each having nine enlisted pay grades, five warrant officer pay grades, and 10

officer pay grades (U.S Department of Defense, n.d.).

Masculinity.

The U.S. military is primarily composed of and has been shaped by men, it traditionally

has been a male-dominated institution ("Demographics of Active Duty U.S. Military," 2016;

Arminio et al., 2014b; Hall, 2016; National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics, 2017;

Strong, Crowe, & Lawson, 2018). Today, 85.4% of active duty military are men, and the military

continues to perpetuate a primarily masculine-warrior culture that is biased against women

(Arminio et al., 2014b; Callahan, 2016). Several examples of masculine behaviors, values, and

norms are promoted throughout the military, including emotional stoicism, use of power and dominance, and warrior idealism (Arminio et al., 2014b). The masculine-warrior culture that the military perpetuates a hidden assumption of male status quo and female deficiency; in the military, servicemembers adhere strictly to masculine norms (Burns & Mahalik, 2011; Callahan, 2016; Dunivin, 1994; Petrovich, 2012). This assumption was systematically preserved by preventing women from serving in combat roles until 2013 (Arminio et al., 2014b; Bradner, 2016; Dunivin, 1994). The masculine culture is valued and perpetuated in the military to ensure mission completeness and to increase chances of survival (Arminio et al., 2014b). Rosen et al. (2003) asserted that "bonding of men in male-only peer groups is often associated with hypermasculinity expressions of extreme, exaggerated, or stereotypic masculine attributes and behaviors" (p. 326). This hypermasculine culture is learned through socialization and further preserved through social interactions (Rosen et al., 2003). In some cases, the hypermasculine culture may have negative consequences, including violence and negative or criminal behavior that can range from sexual harassment to gender discrimination to rape (Rosen et al., 2003).

One demonstration of male power in the military is the tradition of using homophobic and sexist slurs as part of basic training (Rumann & Hamrick, 2012). Racist insults are barred, but drill instructors continue to use call-and-response, songs, and chants that are degrading toward non-heterosexual men (Rumann & Hamrick, 2012). Despite seeing an increase in the diversity of individuals serving in the military, military culture has not necessarily seen a transformation of organizational culture (Rumann & Hamrick, 2012). The pervasiveness of these practices continues to preserve male dominance and leaves little question about women's position in the military hierarchy (Rumann & Hamrick, 2012).

Why they serve.

In addition to experiencing a common military culture, servicemen and servicewomen share similarities in why they choose to serve. Hall (2011) described four common reasons individuals choose to enlist: "(a) family tradition, (b) benefits, (c) identification with the warrior mentality, and (d) an escape" (p. 5). Military personnel who join because of a tradition of military service often do not have to look far back in their family tree to identify a related servicemember (Jones-Cruise, 2016; Thompson, 2016). Some individuals chose to enlist after spending their entire lives on military instillations, their parent or parents were enlisted themselves, and military life is the only life they know (Hall, 2011; Jones-Cruise, 2016). Individuals with a family history of military service also find that they receive emotional support to enlist (Hall, 2011). Others choose to enlist because of benefits ranging from financial support to educational assistance (Hall, 2011; Jones-Cruise, 2016; Mankowski, Tower, Brandt, & Mattocks, 2015; Patten & Parker, 2011). Still others join because they identify with the warrior mentality and see the military as an opportunity to integrate their civilian persona with that of a warrior (Hall, 2016). This group also sees the military as an arena that provides a sense of service and life purpose (Hall, 2011; Pew Research Center, 2011). For this group, the military can provide an environment in which organizational culture and personal identity define and reinforce one another (Hall, 2011). Lastly, it is common for servicemembers to see the military as a means to escape their current circumstances. These situations range from difficult personal situations to family problems. For this group, the military can act as a sheltered and predictable life (Hall, 2011). Once servicemembers join, they can predict a military life that is accurately portrayed as:

(a) frequent separations and reunions; (b) regular household relocations; (c) living life under the umbrella of the "mission must come first" dictum; (d) the need for families to adapt to rigidity, regimentation and conformity; (e) early retirement from a career in comparison to civilian counterparts; (f) rumors of loss during a mission; (g) detachment from the mainstream of nonmilitary life; (h) the security of a system that exists to meet the families' needs; (i) work that usually involves travel and adventure; (j) the social effects of rank on the family; and (k) the lack of control over pay, promotion, and other benefits. (Hall, 2011, p. 8)

It is acknowledged that members of other organizations experience some or many of the stresses listed above, but it is unlikely that they face all of these stresses or to the degree that military personnel do (Ridenour, 1984), and in 2018, serving as an enlisted military person was voted the most stressful job in America (Picchi, 2018; Ridenour, 1984). Military culture is also a paradox; service members are self-appointed to defend the American value of democracy, and yet, they do not experience a democratic culture while they are enlisted (Hall, 2016; Wertsch, 1991).

Branch Culture

The United States military strives to create a culture that transcends time, individuals, and branches of service (Bateman, 2015). Many of these cultural elements distinguish the military from other organizations, but as an organization, this culture is neither static nor uniform (Bateman, 2015). Each of the branches of service has their own set of traditions, rituals, uniforms, etiquette, and ceremony that make them unique (Bateman, 2015).

Army.

The Army is the largest branch of the U.S. military; it was established in 1775 (Engel, 2015; Powers, 2019; Publishing, n.d.). The Army is primarily composed of ground troops, but some aviation units do exist; these components work together in what is known as air-ground operations (Powers, 2019; Vergun, 2014). Individuals serving in the Army are called soldiers (Tredseder, 2015). Most soldiers are men; only 14.6% of this branch is composed of women, and the proportion of servicemembers to officers is 4.1 to 1 (Military OneSource, 2016). The Army is comprised of three components: active duty, reserves, and the National Guard (Powers, 2019; Publishing, n.d.).

The Army culture focuses strongly "on a chain-of-command and well-defined policies, processes and procedures" (Gerras, Wong, & Allen, 2008, p. 4). This branch exhibits a high degree of power distance, and decision-making occurs one way (Gerras et al., 2008). The Army is considered to have a collectivist attitude, a value of high-performance orientation, and relies heavily on hierarchy (Engel, 2015; Gerras et al., 2008). In the Army, soldiers are taught to emphasize the team over the individual, and to "express pride and loyalty to their team or organization" (Gerras et al., 2008, p. 12). Another example of the Army's collectivist attitude is the change in recruiting campaign from *Army of One* to *Army Strong* (Gerras et al., 2008).

Navy.

The main function of the United States Navy is to protect the sea and to support the Air Force and Marine Corps by providing runways at sea, transporting air crafts, and transporting Marines to areas of conflict. The Navy was established in 1775 by the Continental Congress

(Engel, 2015; Powers, 2019; Publishing, n.d.). This branch's proportion of enlisted personnel to officers is 4.9 to 1 and boasts the second-largest percentage of servicewomen at 18.7% (Military OneSource, 2016). In addition to the active component, the Navy also has a reserve component (Powers, 2019; Publishing, n.d.).

Men and women who serve in the Navy are referred to as sailors (U.S. Navy, n.d.-a). Navy culture is deeply rooted in tradition, and with more than two centuries on the water, most of that culture can be traced to the branch's work at sea (Department of Defense, 2006; Dorn, Graves, Ulmer Jr., Collins, & Jacobs, 2000). For sailors, tours at sea are sources of pride, and many brag about the number of months or even years they have spent at sea (Department of Defense, 2006). The core values of the Navy are honor, courage, and commitment (U.S. Navy, n.d.-b). Sailors "command by negation," (Department of Defense, 2006, p. 87) meaning that subordinates continue to make decisions until those decisions are overridden by a more senior decisionmaker; this operating procedure is unique to the Navy (Department of Defense, 2006). Despite their independent nature, the Navy has a worldwide presence, and one of the hallmarks of this branch is to be the first to respond to any crisis affecting the United States (Department of Defense, 2006).

Air Force.

The United States Air Force (USAF) is the youngest branch of service and was originally established as a division of the Army. The USAF became an independent branch in 1947 (Craven & Cate, 1948). The primary function of the Air Force is to provide security through air and space as well as to provide support to ground forces (Craven & Cate, 1948; Powers, 2019). The Air Force has the highest proportion of officers to enlisted personnel and has a 4.1 to 1

enlisted member-to-officer ratio (Military OneSource, 2016). This branch also boasts the

highest percentage of women serving; 19.4% of the total Air Force are women, and 19.1% of

officers are women (Military OneSource, 2016). Two reserve components supplement the

active component: the Air National Guard and Air Force Reserves (Powers, 2019; Publishing,

n.d.).

Servicemembers in the Air Force are called airmen (Losey, 2016). Historically, the Air

Force culture has been driven by the force's pilot ranks where officers work with a small group

of an enlisted crew of airmen (Ford, 1993; Mastroianni, 2006). Air Force mythology and

leadership is dominated by stories about pilots (Mastroianni, 2006). The USAF has developed

an egalitarian culture, and Air Force officers do not see a need to distance themselves from

enlisted airmen (Dunlap, 2007). This is a stark difference from other U.S. military branches

where the enlisted serve as the branch's warriors and officers value an authoritarian culture.

The work of the Air Force is highly technical, and its core functions range from cyberspace

superiority, to global precision attack, to agile combat support (U.S. Air Force, 2013).

Marine Corps.

The United States Marine Corps (USMC) is the second smallest branch in the U.S.

military and was originally established as a ground-force element of the Navy in 1775 (Engel,

2015; Powers, 2019; Publishing, n.d.). However, in 1789, Congress established the U.S. Marine

Corps as a separate service. Marines are described as the "first to fight or help anywhere in the

world. . . they are mobile, fast, and innovative" (Carvalho & Pancheco, 2011, p. 79). The Marine

Corps' primary function is to work as an amphibious operation, but these specialties have

expanded to include ground-combat operations (Powers, 2019). The Marine Corps is composed

mainly of enlisted personnel, with 1 officer to every 7.9 enlisted Marines (Military OneSource, 2016). The USMC also has the lowest percentage of women serving, with only 8.1% of all Marines identifying as women (Military OneSource, 2016). The Marine Corps is solely supported by a Marine Corps Reserve Unit (Powers, 2019; Publishing, n.d.).

Men and women who serve in the Marine Corps are referred to as Marines (Tredseder, 2015). The USMC has been a sub-unit of the Navy since its inception, and despite this relationship, or maybe because of it, the Marine Corps has managed to develop its own separate and distinct identity and culture (Junge, 2013). The Marine Corps is thought of as the most prestigious branch of the armed forces, an idea that is mirrored in the Marine Corps' recruiting slogan, "The few, The proud, The Marines" (Darnell, 2008; Newport, 2011). The Marine Corps culture places high value on history and physical readiness, and shares the core values of "Honor, Courage, and Commitment" (Conway, 2008; Darnell, 2008). Marine indoctrination begins with boot camp, and Marine Corps history is taught throughout each Marine's professional career. The branch's reverence for history is exemplified in the Marine Corps History Division that is responsible for researching, analyzing, recording, and archiving the history of the organization (Marine Corps History Division, 2018). The Marine Corps is a unique service and Marines have the strongest service culture (Dorn et al., 2000).

The Marine Corps motto is "Semper Fidelis (often shortened to Semper Fi)," a Latin phrase that translates to "always faithful" (Marine Corps News). The Marine Corps culture is strongly engrained and individuals who join the USMC are seen as always carrying on the honor of being a Marine. The "once a Marine, always a Marine" ethos is commonly shared, and veteran Marines are commonly referred to by their last earned rank (Freedman, 2000).

Coast Guard.

The United States Coast Guard (USCG) is the smallest branch of service and was established in 1790 as the Revenue Cutter Service until it was reformed to the Coast Guard in 1915 (Engel, 2015; Powers, 2019; Publishing, n.d.). During times of peace, the primary mission of the Coast Guard is to conduct law enforcement, conduct sea rescues, and protect against illegal immigration by sea (Powers, 2019). Fifteen point seven percent (15.7%) of coast guardsmen are women, and 15.5% of Coast Guard officers are women ("Demographics of Active Duty U.S. Military," 2016). The Coast Guard is comprised of an active duty unit, a Reserve unit, and a volunteer organization, the Coast Guard Axillary (Powers, 2019; Publishing, n.d.). The Coast Guard is unique, and during times of peace, this branch falls under the Department of Homeland Security, but during times of war, this branch is controlled by the Navy (U.S. Department of Defense, n.d.). The Coast Guard is also unique because it is a search and rescue entity that also maintains maritime law enforcement authority (Dolbow & Howe, 2017; Dorn et al., 2000). The Coast Guard organizational culture was shaped and thrives on acts of individual heroism (Kauffman, n.d.). This organization conducts more peace-time missions than other branches of service and focuses on the short-term events such as, "the next rescue, the next drug bust, the next patrol" (Mitchell, 2009, p.36). The USCG conducts an array of peace-time missions while also maintaining a state of readiness for the next war mission (Mitchell, 2009).

The Coast Guard's missions are varied, and as such, coast guardsmen (members of the Coast Guard) are not as specialized as other branches of service (Blunier, 2014; U.S. Coast Guard, 2019). The USCG boasts eleven missions ranging from maritime environmental

protection to migrant interdiction, and it is common for members to move between missions

throughout their career (Blunier, 2014; U.S. Coast Guard, 2019). The Coast Guard does not

focus on warfighting, but members of this organization do deploy in support of law

enforcement-oriented missions (Blunier, 2014). The motto for the Coast Guard is Semper

Paratus meaning "always ready" (Wells, 2006). The USCG is an agile organization with a focus

on humanitarianism and often responds first to events such as the Haiti Earthquake, Hurricane

Katrina, and the Deepwater Horizon disaster (Blunier, 2014; Mitchell, 2009).

Female Veterans

Historical perspective.

Throughout the United States' military history, women have served in American

conflicts and wars, although initially not in formal capacities (Veterans Health Administration,

2007). Women engaged in military service as early as the American Revolution, serving as

water bearers, nurses, laundresses, cooks, and saboteurs (National Center for Veterans Analysis

and Statistics, 2017). Women were not given full military status until World War II with the

establishment of the Women's Army Corp (WAC) in 1943 (Veterans Health Administration,

2007). WWII was the first time that a large number of women served, and near the end of the

war, nearly 280,000 women out of 12 million veterans (2.3%) had served (Veterans Health

Administration, 2007). Women servicemembers have continued to contribute to the U.S.

military, including the most recent WOT conflicts. More than 11% of the forces that have been

deployed in support of OEF and OIF have been women (National Center for Veterans Analysis

and Statistics, 2017).

Historically, women's roles were limited formally, but it is well-documented that women served in these capacities *informally*. About 10% of military positions were formally limited to men. Most of the positions that were limited to men were considered "male warrior positions" (Moore & Kennedy, 2011; Rumann & Hamrick, 2012). These are the same positions that most civilians associate with "serving in the military" (Moore & Kennedy, 2011; Rumann & Hamrick, 2012). When in effect, limiting women from serving in combat roles continued to perpetuate gender-based discrimination (Rumann & Hamrick, 2012). The stereotype of the military as being predominantly men leading men into combat continues to persist, even though most servicemen and servicewomen do not perform combat-related jobs (Rumann & Hamrick, 2012).

The types of positions in which women could serve were limited, as were training opportunities (Rumann & Hamrick, 2012). Although women's efforts have been limited in the U.S. military, they have still served on the front lines, even in nonformal capacity (Goldstein, 2018; Rumann & Hamrick, 2012). In a study of OEF and OIF servicewomen, 71% reported experiencing combat exposure (Villagran, Ledford, & Canzona, 2015). Women were frequently attached to combat units, putting them in proximity to combat action (Hall, 2016; Rumann & Hamrick, 2012). For example, in the Marine Corps, women were attached to ground combat units in a program called the Lioness Program (Gallucci, 2010; McLagan & Sommers, 2008; Tzemach Lemmon, 2015). In this program, women service members work in areas focused on culture and religious sensitivity to gender (Callahan, 2015; Gallucci, 2010; McLagan & Sommers, 2008; Tzemach Lemmon, 2015). For example, women are kept separate from male non-family members in places such as Iraq and Afghanistan (Gallucci, 2010; McLagan & Sommers, 2008; Tzemach Lemmon, 2015).

Conscription, commonly referred to as the draft system, ended in 1973 when the United States moved to an all-volunteer force (Petrovich, 2012; Rostker & Yeh, 2006). During this period, the military began actively recruiting more women because there were not enough qualified men to meet the needs of an all-volunteer force (National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics, 2017). The percentage of women serving in the military from the end of conscription to 2010 has increased dramatically, as has women's exposure to the stress of combat (Baechtold & De Sawal, 2009; Patten & Parker, 2011). In 1973, 42,000 (2%) of the all-volunteer force were women, compared to 167,000 (14%) in 2010 (Drake, 2013). During that same period, the total number of service members decreased by 738,000 (Drake, 2013; Patten & Parker, 2011). According to the most recent data available from the Department of Defense, women comprised 16.2% of the military in 2017 (Military OneSource, 2019). In recent years, women's roles in the military have continued to expand, and now women participate in activities, roles, and units that were previously limited to men. In 2010, the ban that prevented women from serving on submarines was lifted, and in 2013 women earned the right to serve in direct combat roles (Bradner, 2016; McDermott, 2017; National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics, 2017).

On September 30, 2016, the Department of Veterans Affairs released demographic information about the veteran population. The total veteran population in the United States was 21.36 million, with 2.05 million female veterans accounting for 9.5% of the veteran population (Department of Veterans Affairs, 2017). The percentage of female veterans is predicted to increase to approximately 13% by the year 2026 (Iverson, Seher, DiRamio, Jarvis, & Anderson, 2016). As of March 31, 2015, 2.7 million veterans served in support of the War on

Terror (Office of Public Health, 2015). Data from the Department of Defense indicates that, currently, more than 2.4 million active duty and ready reserve men and women are currently serving in the United States military; of those service members, women account for 15.9% of the military (Military OneSource, 2016).

In January 2016, all positions and occupations were opened to women in the U.S. military (Pellerin, 2015; Rosenberg & Phillips, 2015). Previously, about 10% of military positions were limited to only men (Pellerin, 2015). Carter asserted that women would, ". . . be allowed to drive tanks, fire mortars and lead infantry soldiers into combat. [They will] be able to serve as Army Rangers and Green Berets, Navy SEALs, Marine Corps infantry, [and] Air Force parajumpers . . . " (Pellerin, 2015, para. 3). Based on historical and predicted trends, it is estimated that the number and proportion of women who serve in the military will continue to rise (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2014; Veterans Health Administration, 2007).

The Department of Defense predicts that the total veteran population will decline over the next 25 years whereas the number of women veterans will continue to increase during that same timeframe (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2014). The number of female veterans has continued to increase since 1980: the number of female veterans, from all conflicts, was 1.1 million in 1980, 1.2 million in 1990, 1.6 million in 2000, 1.8 million in 2010, and 2 million in 2015 (Veterans Health Administration, 2007). The VA projects that the number of female veterans will reach 12% of the total veteran population of an estimated 16 million veterans by the year 2026 (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2014). The total number of veterans is predicted to decline through 2043, which means the percentage of women serving, as a proportion of the total force, is predicted to increase over the next 25 years (Veterans Health Administration,

2007). Currently, women are the fastest growing demographic within the veteran cohort, and

by 2043, the living veteran population is predicted to be composed of 16.3% female veterans

(National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics, 2017).

Female veteran eligibility for GI Bill.

The Office of Public Health (2015) reported that 2.7 million veterans are eligible for the

Post 9/11 GI Bill. Of those, 280,000 women (10%) served in support of the WOT (Sisk, 2015).

This group of veterans served after September 11, 2001, and are eligible to receive educational

benefits, and which are determined by a service members' level of service (Rostker & Yeh,

2006; U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2018a). Veterans who served in an active duty

capacity for a minimum of three years are eligible for 100% of their Post 9/11 GI Bill. Active

duty veterans who served at least 90 days are eligible for 40% of their benefits. As level of

service increases between 90 days and 3 years, so does the percent of benefit eligibility (U.S.

Department of Veterans Affairs, 2018a). Veterans of the National Guard and Reserve

components complete their military service on a part-time basis. Therefore, Reserve and

National Guard veterans follow the same criteria of service, but their benefits are calculated on

cumulative service (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2018b).

Female veteran students using the GI Bill.

Today, veteran students are a growing population on campuses across the United

States. The number of veteran students doubled from fiscal year 2011 (FY11) to FY15, and

according to the Department of Veteran Affairs, more than 1 million veteran students were

enrolled in colleges during FY15 (Veterans Administration, 2016). Twelve million dollars were

expended on VA educational programs, and 84% percent of all VA educational benefits were

used in pursuit of undergraduate education during FY15 (Veterans Administration, 2016).

According to the most recent data, veteran students comprise about 4% of the national

undergraduate enrollment (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018). With the drawdown

of Operation Enduring Freedom in 2014, coupled with the instatement of the Forever GI Bill,

there is an influx of veterans entering higher education, just as there has been in wars past

(Defense, 2014; National Conference of State Legislatures, 2014; Vacchi, 2012). What

distinguishes this generation of veteran students is the historically significant number of

women who served during the War on Terror (WOT) campaign. A 2011 Pew study reported

that 82% of female veterans surveyed indicated that they joined the military for educational

benefits (Patten & Parker, 2011). Female veterans are entering college in record numbers, and

despite comprising only 10-12% of the military population, women constitute 27% of the

veteran student population (Department of Veterans Affairs, 2014; Military OneSource, 2016).

It is estimated that 250,000 women with military experience will attend college by 2020

(DiRamio et al., 2015).

Veteran students, general

As veteran students attend college for the first time or return from previous

enrollments, they face various obstacles that are unique to their demographic (Borsari et al.,

2017; DiRamio et al., 2008; Kirchner, 2015). Service members who transition from the military

to academic life can face challenges including adjusting to college and feeling isolated (Borsari

et al., 2017; Lighthall, 2012; Steele et al., 2010). To compound these challenges, veterans may

also deal with post-military injuries, both physical and invisible (Boodman, 2011; Lighthall,

2012; Sherin, 2014). Veterans consider their time in the military to be an asset to their college

careers and have reported that they learned how to be self-disciplined, to focus on the mission, and to rely on fellow military students for help (Ford & Vignare, 2015). Veterans also believed they were more successful in higher education because of their maturity and ability to concentrate with focus (Ford & Vignare, 2015); 71% of those surveyed by Zoli, Maury, and Fay (2017) indicated that they "moderately or completely" agreed that their military service helped them develop "skills and attributes" (p. 10) that will help them succeed in higher education. From the time they enroll, veteran students often report that they experience challenges in adjusting. Some issues that veteran students face include challenges with social relationships and administration of their educational benefits (Sherin, 2014; Tinoco, 2014). Veteran students report that they do not fit in with fellow students and often struggle with the lack of structure in their college experiences (Kirchner, 2015; Tinoco, 2014). These students are often older than traditional students, are often first-generation students, and have obligations such as work or family outside of their academic pursuits (Kim, 2013; Tinoco, 2014). The VA indicated that in 2014, 62% of military learners were first-generation college students (Department of Veterans Affairs, 2014). Ford and Vignare (2015) described this population as having "risk profiles" (p. 7) that are similar to nontraditional students and first-generation students. Compounding these challenges, veteran students may also face additional issues including disabilities and/or service-connected injuries (Ford & Vignare, 2015).

The challenges of administering the Post 9/11 GI Bill are well-documented, and in addition, students describe difficulty in understanding their total benefit package (Steele et al., 2010; Tinoco, 2014). For example, in previous studies they did not know what payments they had received, the total amount that they were eligible for, and/or the purpose of the payments

they had received (Steele et al., 2010). Although these issues were addressed, students again

experienced challenges receiving their Forever GI Bill benefits (Gross 2018; McCausland, 2018).

A technical glitch in the VA's information technology infrastructure led to delays in the

processing, which resulted in housing and educational payment delays (McCausland, 2018).

A final challenge for veteran students who are returning to school is the injuries they

incurred during their time in the military. These injuries are both physical and mental and

include traumatic brain injury (TBI), depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and

physical injuries (Lighthall, 2012; Sherin, 2014). In 2015, the three most prevalent service-

connected disabilities for female veterans were PTSD, major depressive disorder, and migraine

headaches (National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics, 2017). Because it is invisible

and has no physical signs, service members are often unaware of their TBI but have trouble

with mental reasoning, remembering, and concentrating (Boodman, 2011; Lighthall, 2012).

Veterans might also deal with depression or PTSD (Boodman, 2011). Veteran students'

fear of public stigma has been found to be a significant barrier to their seeking mental health

services (Cheney, 2017). Both men and women suffer from PTSD, but Krupnick (2017) found

that female servicemembers mostly developed PTSD after sexual trauma, and men were more

likely to develop PTSD after combat trauma. These two mental health conditions put this group

of students at a high risk for suicide. In a Student Veteran Association survey, 46% of veterans

surveyed had contemplated suicide, compared to 6% percent of non-veteran students

(Boodman, 2011). On average, 20 United States veterans commit suicide each day, and the

Department of Veterans Affairs reports that veterans are two times more likely to die by suicide

than civilians (Fox, 2018; Office of Public and Intergovernmental Affairs, 2018).

The Wounded Warrior Project estimates that 52,400 service men and women have been physically injured in support of the WOT (Wounded Warrior Project, n.d.). Advancements in medicine have allowed a record percentage of service members to survive severe wounds and injuries; for every WOT servicemember killed, another 48 were injured (Wounded Warrior Project, n.d.). Many veterans have witnessed their peers severely injured, have seen death, and have experienced grief (Baechtold & De Sawal, 2009). Student veterans come to campus with both physical and mental injuries.

Despite these challenges and negative feelings, veterans believe that the military provided a positive foundation for their college experiences. Veterans report that their hard work, discipline, and emotional maturity helped them succeed in college (Stalides, 2008). One veteran expressed this sentiment when he discussed the skills he learned in the military. He lamented that the skills he learned as an infantryman did not transfer well into the civilian world, ". . . however, the broader skills, discipline, duty, working hard, being motivated. . . transfer in anything you do" (Stalides, 2008, p. 57). Veteran students have similar graduation rates as civilian students; in six years, 51.7% of veteran students attain a postsecondary degree whereas the national average is 56.1% (McCann, 2014). In another report from Veterans Education Success, veterans had higher rates of completion (28% of veterans and 23% of non-veterans completed a degree during the study year) and persistence (40% of non-veterans vs. 20% of veterans did not persist) (Ochinko & Payea, 2018).

Transition to civilian life.

The transition from military to civilian life is best described as being difficult including an elevated risk of suicide. Recent research has confirmed this elevated risk to be true, regardless

of a service member's deployment history (Reger et al., 2015). One reason for the challenging

transition is because of the lack of congruency between the collective U.S. military culture and

individualistic U.S. civilian culture (Bryan, Jennings, Jobes, & Bradley, 2012). Service members

have also reported that their feelings of isolation are compounded when they do not "fit in"

with their family's expectations and norms (Resnik et al., 2012).

Veteran students face the challenge of moving from a highly structured military

environment into an unstructured higher education environment (Livingston et al., 2011;

Tinoco, 2014). In the military, service members are subjected to ". . . rules, regulations,

intolerance of deviation, and punishments for failure to conform" (Naphan & Elliot, 2015, p.

41). Participants in Livingston et al.'s (2011) study captured this conundrum, saying

> It was a big transition all of a sudden going from being in the Army and pretty much
>
> knowing what to do because you were told what to do most of the time to [now] having
>
> [to] figure out things on my own (p. 235).

This situation presents an interesting paradox: military students pride themselves on being self-

reliant and yet they struggle with living an unstructured lifestyle (Livingston et al., 2011).

Female Veteran Students

The majority of what is known about female veteran students is about their experiences

during their time in the military. Women who serve in the military experience a

hypermasculine culture (DiRamio et al., 2015; Heitzman & Somers, 2015); they are subjected to

the same combat trauma as men (DiRamio et al., 2015); and a high percentage of women are

sexually traumatized while they are enlisted (DiRamio et al., 2015). This group of students

"possess unique characteristics stemming from personal experiences that few college

administrators, faculty members, campus staff, or traditionally aged students can claim for themselves or, perhaps, empathize with and relate to" (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011, p. 1). As a demographic, female veterans differ from their male colleagues: they are younger and more educated than male veterans (30% hold bachelor's degrees compared to slightly more than 20% for men) (Heitzman & Somers, 2015).

Researchers are beginning to turn their attention to female veteran students. For example, two studies were published in 2015 that specifically examined female veteran students (DiRamio et al., 2015; Heitzman & Somers, 2015). These studies found that there is no statistical difference in psychological help-seeking attitudes between male and female veteran students. This is important because non-veteran women students are historically "statistically better (quantitative studies) and empirically more favorable (qualitative studies) in their attitudes toward seeking help" (DiRamio et al., 2015, p. 53). Women are less likely to define themselves as veterans post-service, further compounding the likelihood that female veteran students will not ask for help or treatment (Baechtold & De Sawal, 2009).

Another issue that female veterans often face is sexual assault, which has been termed military sexual trauma (MST) by the Department of Veterans Affairs (Iverson & Anderson, 2013). MST encompasses sexual assault but can also include rape or threatening and repeated sexual harassment throughout a woman's service in the military (Iverson & Anderson, 2013). A large-scale study conducted by the VA revealed that one in four female servicemembers and one in 100 male servicemembers are victims of MST (Iverson & Anderson, 2013; Wilson, 2018). Military sexual trauma can have devastating effects beyond a person's time in the military. Women, including women veterans, are more likely to suffer from PTSD than men, and in the

civilian population, women are two to three times as likely to suffer from PTSD as men (Dobie et al., 2004; Olff, 2017; Perconte, Wilson, Pontius, Dietrick, & Spiro, 1993). The American Psychological Association indicates that women are twice as likely to develop PTSD and that the duration of their symptoms typically lasts longer than men (American Psychological Association, 2019). Although PTSD is not an uncommon response to sexual trauma or rape, clinicians are less likely to diagnose women (Riddle, 2018) and female veterans with PTSD than men (Iverson & Anderson, 2013; Riddle, 2018). Consequently, MST and PTSD might be underdiagnosed or misdiagnosed in female veterans (Iverson & Anderson, 2013).

The hypermasculine "expression of extreme, exaggerated, or stereotypic masculine attributes and behaviors" (Rosen et al., 2003, p. 326) of military culture that women experience while in the military affects how they experience integration into higher education (DiRamio et al., 2015; Heitzman & Somers, 2015; Iverson et al., 2016). The military environment is characterized by a strict adherence to hierarchy and misogyny that ranges from implied to active (Finlay, 2007). While in the military, women form distinct identities in which they feel pressure to act more feminine (hyperfeminine) or to adopt a more masculine persona. In an effort to appear strong, women often refuse help, even when warranted, for fear of appearing weak (Baechtold & De Sawal, 2009). As female veterans transition to higher education they often grapple with their identities as a woman and as a veteran.

Women sometimes feel unappreciated in the military and are often misunderstood on campus (Baechtold & De Sawal, 2009). Because of this lack of congruency "women veterans need to socially construct a new identity that is specifically related to gender in order to make meaning of the collegiate environment" (Baechtold & De Sawal, 2009, p. 40). Female veterans

often face a general public that does not recognize or understand the service of female veterans (Iverson & Anderson, 2013). For example, 74% of respondents in a 2016 Service Women's Action Network (SWAN) survey indicated that their service in the military was not valued or recognized by the general public (Service Women's Action Network, 2016). Female veteran Mary Beth Bruggeman echoed this sentiment, saying, "It's difficult to overstate the toll that it takes, to have to work so hard to prove ourselves twice—both on the battlefield, and again here at home as we strive to expand that traditional picture of a warrior" (Bruggeman, 2016, para. 3). Some female veterans also experience disconnect when seeking services from the Veterans Administration (Iverson & Anderson, 2013). U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) personnel who misunderstand women's experiences may disqualify them for treatment and benefits to which they are qualified and entitled (Iverson & Anderson, 2013). Iverson and Anderson (2013) described these challenges, saying, "This systematic erasing of women veterans' military experiences creates or exacerbates their sense of isolation and invisibility that may contribute to women's detachment from veteran identity post-service" (p. 92).

A final challenge that female veteran students face is finding role models. Women who serve in the military are less likely than men to find same-gender role models (Armstrong, 2017; Baechtold & De Sawal, 2009). This trend carries onto campus where female veteran students are less likely than males to find a same gender role model (Baechtold & De Sawal, 2009). Female veterans in another study expressed a desire for more mentorship opportunities (Heitzman & Somers, 2015). The students in this group felt that with this type of relationship, they could have acclimated more quickly to campus, connected with other veteran students, and learned about campus veteran resources (Heitzman & Somers, 2015). Baechtold and

DeSawal (2009) indicated that understanding female veteran students requires making a connection between their military service and how it may or may not correspond to how these women "make meaning of their experiences as college students" (p. 38).

The experiences of a woman in the military are drastically different than those of a first-year student. Female veteran students learn to become depersonalized and deindividualized, a process in which the military "must strip the individual of all previous self-definition" (Baechtold & De Sawal, 2009, p. 39). Women are taught to be a soldier, Marine, airman, sailor, or coast guardsman, and in each of these cases, women are expected to exhibit traditionally masculine behaviors (Baechtold & De Sawal, 2009; Maples, 2017). For example, the grooming and dress standards of the military work to downplay female physical characteristics (Maples, 2017). These learned behaviors and expectations are at odds with the expectation civilians have for female veterans (Maples, 2017).

Women must also learn how to negotiate their femaleness, a process that affects them both during their time in the service and afterwards (Downs, 2017; Herbert, 1998). Given this environment, female veterans often feel pressured to act more masculine, more feminine, or both (Downs, 2017; Herbert, 1998). Women are also reluctant to appear weak and will rarely ask for help from male servicemembers (DiRamio et al., 2015; Herbert, 1998). All strategies employed move female servicemembers away from their true expression of gender to a more "forced and conscious" (Baechtold & De Sawal, 2009, p. 39) expression of gender. This learned gendering also affects women once they have left the military, with some women feeling the need to prove themselves once again (Maples, 2017).

Women are most successful in their transition to higher education when they have positive peer-to-peer relationships. Peer support plays an important role in veteran students' engagement in higher education and adjustment (Barry, Whiteman, & MacDermid Wadsworth, 2017). Researchers have found that peer-to-peer support has a positive effect on academic adjustment (Campbell & Riggs, 2015), a reduction in PTSD symptoms (Elliott, Gonzalez, & Larsen, 2011), and reduced alcohol use (Barber, Rosenheck, Armstrong, & Resnick, 2008). Unfortunately, this group of students is also less likely to initiate relationships with their peers, and some veterans are even afraid to disclose their veteran identity for fear of being stigmatized (Cheney, 2017; DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011). Female veteran students are likely not willing to share their identity as a veteran when they are on campus; thus, this population does not receive available resources and benefits to assist them during their transition to civilian life (Rafique, 2016).

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework on which this study was based is Schlossberg's Adult Transition Theory (DeVilbiss, 2014; Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2009; Schlossberg, 1981). Adult Transition Theory was chosen because it provides insights into factors related to the transition, the individual, and the environment that are likely to determine the degree of impact a given transition will have at a particular point in time (Evans et al., 2009). According to Goodman, Schlossberg, and Anderson (2006), transition is described as "any event, or non-event, that results in changed relationship, routines, assumptions, and roles" (p. 33). The two main components of Transition Theory are the transition and the mechanism(s) used to cope (Schlossberg et al., 1995). For an event to be characterized as a transition, it must be perceived

as such by the individual experiencing it (Goodman et al., 2006). These transition events/non-events can be both anticipated and unanticipated and can result in either positive or negative effects on the individual's life (Goodman et al., 2006). Three types of transitions exist: anticipated, unanticipated, and non-events (Goodman et al., 2006). Anticipated events are those that are scheduled to happen and do happen (such as graduating from high school after senior year); unanticipated events are those that are not scheduled but do happen (sudden death of a friend or being fired from a job); and non-events are events that are anticipated but do not happen (experiencing infertility or not receiving a job promotion) (Goodman et al., 2006).

A transition is described as a cyclical model and includes the following three phases: *moving in*, *moving through*, and *moving out* (Goodman et al., 2006). There is no predetermined amount of time a person will spend in any of the phases. Each phase is distinct but also highly linked (Goodman et al., 2006). When a person enters the *moving in* phase, they begin to let go of old ways of doing things, take on new roles, and identify changes in their relationships (Goodman et al., 2006). During the *moving through* phase, the individual often experiences a time of emptiness and confusion as they search for ways to cope with the changes. As the individual proceeds through the transition experience, they often begin to feel more optimistic and hopeful (Goodman et al., 2006). As the transition experience begins to conclude, *moving out*, the individual looks ahead, considers possibilities of what lies ahead, and sets goals for the future (Goodman et al., 2006). Squarely

Schlossberg's Transition Theory is further explained through the 4 S System of situation, self, support, and strategies (Goodman et al., 2006). The 4 S System provide a way to frame

how adults experience transition. *Situation* is characterized by role change, previous experience, current stress, timing, trigger, and duration; it is the individual's circumstances during the transition (Goodman et al., 2006; Schlossberg, 2011). *Self* is described using characteristics of health, age, personality, values, socioeconomic status, ego development, and outlook (Schlossberg, 2011). *Self* can further be understood by the psychological resources from which a person can draw and may include resiliency, coping strategies, and spirituality (Schlossberg, 2011). *Support* is the systems (friends, family, and institutions) and options (perceived, created, and actual) available to the individual in transition (Goodman et al., 2006). A strong support system can positively affect the transition experience by boosting the individual's physical and emotional well-being (Schlossberg, 2011). *Strategies* are the coping mechanisms used by the person in transition; the adult in transition must balance assets and liabilities (Goodman et al., 2006). Strategies are both behavioral and psychological and can be used to reduce the stressful effects of a transition (Taylor, 1998).

Schlossberg's Adult Transition Theory was selected for this study because it is an established framework that is helpful in understanding any transition situation that adults experience. Schlossberg developed this theory with the intention of understanding adult transitions and developing a system to direct them to help needed (DeVilbiss, 2014; Evans et al., 2009). Additionally, this study employed Schlossberg's theory because it has been used extensively in higher education research, such as Pendleton's (2007) research on coping strategies used by welfare recipients attending college, Powers' (2015) investigation of nontraditional male dropouts, and Lazarowicz's (2015) study of community college students' transitions to 4-year institutions. Finally, Schlossberg's theory has been used to study veteran

students, such as DiRamio et al.'s (2008) investigation of combat veterans' transition to higher education, Rumann & Hamrick's (2012) study of combat veterans' re-enrollment after deploying to war zones, and Ryan's (2010) investigation of veteran students' transition to higher education.

Summary

In this chapter, I reviewed the literature relevant to this research project. I investigated the historical underpinnings of the relationship between the U.S. military and higher education and how the relationship has shaped the climate for current veteran students. I also examined the current literature about veteran students as a population, as well as, more specifically, female veteran students. I concluded the chapter by discussing this study's theoretical framework and relevant studies that have also used this theory, both as it applies broadly to transition to higher education and more specifically to veteran students' transition to higher education.

In Chapter 3, I describe the research methods employed for this project. A description of the population, the research site, and the project objectives are given. A main component of this chapter is the research design, which I describe by phase as well as how I integrated both phases. In the final section of the chapter, I discuss the ethical considerations for this research.

Chapter 3 – Methodology

Chapter 3 describes the methods and procedures used to conduct the study. It is organized into the following sections: Purpose, Research Questions, Research Method, Research Objectives, Mixed Methods Research Diagram, Site, Phase I, Phase II, Integration, Mixed Method Legitimation, Ethical Considerations, and Researcher Positionality.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to examine and compare the experiences of male and female veteran students when they transition from the military to college using a sequential explanatory mixed methods research design (Ivankova, & Stick, 2007; Li, Worch, Zhou, & Aguiton, 2015; Northall, Ramjan, Everett, & Salamonson, 2016). The research on male veteran students is extensive, yet female veterans are underrepresented in the research despite women's growing numbers as military members (Borsari et al., 2017). Female veterans continue to enroll in higher education disproportionately to the rate that they enroll in the military ("Characteristics of Student Veterans," 2014; Military OneSource, 2016). This research has the potential to enhance higher education professionals' understanding of female veteran students. Furthermore, the inferences may inform higher education staff, faculty, and administrators on how to better support this growing population.

Research Questions

The guiding question for this study was: What are the experiences of female veteran students transitioning from the military to college?

Phase I: Is gender a significant predictor of veteran students' use of transition coping mechanisms?

Null hypothesis: There is no difference between men's and women's use of coping mechanisms as they transition from the military to higher education.

Phase II: How do female veteran students experience the transition to higher education?

Research Method

The purpose of this study was to examine the experiences of female veteran students as they transition from the military into higher education. I used a sequential explanatory mixed methods research design to examine this phenomenon. Researchers define mixed methodology as the use and combination of both quantitative and qualitative methodologies in a single study (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2016). Mixed method designs are an appropriate methodology because they best address the research question of my project. Quantitative and qualitative research each come with their own strengths and weaknesses, but when used in combination, the weaknesses balance out, and the strengths complement each other (Greene, Caracelli, & Graham, 1989; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2016). This synergy allows for a more thorough and complete analysis (Greene, Caracelli, & Graham, 1989; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2016). As further evidence of their effectiveness, mixed methods designs are used extensively in higher education research as well as in veteran student research (Jones, 2019; Jones-Cruise, 2016; McDonald, 2014; Olsen, Badger, & McCuddy, 2014).

When developing a mixed methods research project, researchers must consider 1) the methods; 2) the priority of each method; and 3) the sequence of each method (Tariq & Woodman, 2013).

The methods used for this research were both quantitative and qualitative. The quantitative analysis was conducted from survey data of both male and female veteran students, and the qualitative phase was an analysis of transcripts from interviews with female veteran students.

The second consideration, priority, describes the emphasis that is placed on each phase in a mixed methods research project (Harrison & Reilly, 2011; Tariq & Woodman, 2013). A mixed methods study can have one component that is smaller than the other, or both components can be weighted equally (Harrison & Reilly, 2011; Tariq & Woodman, 2013; Venkatesh, Brown, & Sullivan, 2016). Determining priority in a mixed methods study is driven primarily by the research question, the data required, and the researcher's skills (Tariq & Woodman, 2013).

The third consideration of a mixed methods research project is sequence (timing) (Harrison & Reilly, 2011; Schoonenboom & Johnson, 2017; Tariq & Woodman, 2013). Sequence describes the order in which each phase is conducted (Schoonenboom & Johnson, 2017; Tariq & Woodman, 2013). In this study, the quantitative phase was conducted then the qualitative phase. The sequence and priority of this study is described as quan/QUAL, meaning that the quantitative phase is conducted first and the qualitative phase takes priority (Harrison & Reilly, 2011). In a quan/QUAL structure, the purpose of the quantitative phase is to guide the sampling of participants for the qualitative phase (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). Qualitative inferences were used to form groups or to characterize participants along particular traits related to the research question (Morgan, 1998; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009).

The research design for this project was sequential explanatory, and it is described as sequential because the quantitative and qualitative components are conducted in two distinct chronological phases (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). The primary purpose of this research design was to use the qualitative phase to help expand or explain the quantitative inferences (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). In sequential mixed methodology, one type of data is collected and analyzed before the second type of data is collected and analyzed (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). This mixed methods study included the collection and statistical analysis of survey data (quantitative) followed by the collection and analysis of phenomenological interviews (qualitative). A survey, as described by Groves et al. (2009), is a "systematic method for gathering information from [a sample of] entities for the purpose of constructing quantitative descriptors of the attributes of the large population of which the entities are members" (p. 2). In explanatory sequential mixed methods design, the quantitative phase leads, and the interview protocol for the qualitative phase is developed based on the results from the first phase (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). Integration occurs during the interpretive phase of the research study (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009).

The research design flowed from the research question(s) and, therefore, a mixed methods design was most appropriate (Roberts & Dicenso, 1999). Both a "how" and "what" question were asked, lending the research design to quantitative and qualitative phases that were best combined using a mixed methods design. The "how" question is best addressed using quantitative research, and the "what" question is most appropriately addressed using qualitative research. Little is known about female veteran students, therefore it is appropriate to prioritize/emphasize the qualitative phase (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). A final consideration

for selecting a sequential explanatory mixed methods design was that the quantitative research produced findings that are generalizable to the female veteran student population, and qualitative research gave voice to and specific details about the female veteran student transition (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Taken together, a mixed methods design produced findings that provided a more complete understanding of the transition phenomenon.

Research Objectives

The objectives required to fulfill the purpose of the study include:

1. Test the hypothesis that men and women have different experiences as they transition from the military to higher education; and

2. Develop a description of the lived experiences of female veteran students as they transition from the military to higher education

Mixed Methods Research Diagram

Research diagrams are useful tools intended to condense large amounts of information into a short amount of space and demonstrate the steps taken by the researcher during the research process (Creswell, 2014). Diagrams are important to offer a visual representation of how data from the two methods are treated and where each strand interacts (Ivankova, 2015; Watkins & Gioia, 2015). The sequence for this study was sequential where the quantitative and qualitative phases occurred chronologically (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). Quantitative data was collected and analyzed, then qualitative data was collected and analyzed (Watkins & Gioia, 2015). Research questions, sampling, and data collection were shaped by the quantitative phase (Watkins & Gioia, 2015). Figure 1 presents the research model.

A Sequential Explanatory Design of Mixed Methods

Study of Female Veteran Students' Transition Experience

Procedures

- Obtained data
- Cleaned/analyzed data
- Developed database

quantitative
Survey data collection

quantitative
results

Products

- Descriptive results
- Inferential results
- Exploratory factor analysis
- Independent samples t-test

Procedures

- Developed instrument
- Interviewed participants
- Transcribed interviews
- Coded data

QUALITATIVE
Interview data
collection

QUALITATIVE
findings

Products

- List of quotes, codes, and themes

Procedures

- Used qualitative and quantitative data to explain the phenomenon of female veteran student transition

Integration
analysis

Products

- Essence of female veteran student transition experience

Figure 1- Model for the Research Design (adapted from Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009)

Site

The site for this research was a large public research (R1) institution located in the Southeast. "Patriot University" was purposefully selected because the institution has a veteran student population that is equivalent to the national average, and the university is considered to be a strong supporter of veterans and their families (U.S. News and World Report, 2019).

According to IPEDS (Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System) data, Patriot University's undergraduate veteran student enrollment is on par with the national average (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018). The most recent financial aid data are from the 2014-2015 academic year. During this time, 873 of 21,863 undergraduate students received Post-9/11 GI Bill and Department of Defense Tuition Assistance equating to 3.9% (versus 4% nationally) of undergraduates using military benefits to pay for their education (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018; National Conference of State Legislatures, 2014).

A final consideration for using this is site is the designation of the institution by *U.S. News & World Report Rankings* as a veteran-friendly campus. This institution was recognized as being a leader for its outstanding support of student veterans and military-connected families. The institution ranks in the top 50 for all public institutions ("Veteran Student Services," 2017).

Phase I: Quantitative

Participants

The population of this study was all undergraduate veteran enrollees at Patriot University. The sample for this study was the students who participated in the study; they are a subset of the students who fit the criteria to participate. Patriot University is a public research

(R1) institution located in the Southeast. Participants must have met military service

requirements to be eligible to participate.

Participant Selection

Phase I participants were identified using purposive sampling where individuals were

invited to participate based on meeting specific criteria (Burns et al., 2008). Participation in the

quantitative phase was open to all undergraduate veteran students who had been enlisted in

the military. Students enrolled in graduate or professional education programs were not

eligible to participate. Initially, I worked with the Office of Veteran Student Services at Patriot

University to identify students eligible participate in the survey. On November 11, 2019, the

Veteran Resource Center sent out an email to their Post 9/11 Veteran listserv, which contains

350 student email addresses. I received 19 responses. At the same time, I posted flyers around

campus, including in academic buildings and the university sports and recreation center. I

received no additional responses beyond the initial 19, and on January 7, 2020, I downloaded

and reviewed the responses. None of the 19 responses were usable because no student

answered any of the coping mechanism questions (dependent variable). Students either did

not meet demographic requirements (first-time enrollees at Patriot University), they did not

agree to the consent, or they stopped answering after the demographic questions. At this

point, I developed a new recruitment plan, revised my demographic requirements (students

would not be required to be first-time enrollees at Patriot University), and met with the

university online survey program (Qualtrics) expert to review my survey instrument. This

individual works as part of Patriot University's IT department. I contacted Office of Data

Support at Patriot University, and they were able to develop a list of students who were also

veterans. Due to FERPA, I was not able to see this list; instead it was sent to the online survey expert who sent out the survey on my behalf. The number of participants in the quantitative phase was not limited.

Research Question and Hypothesis

The research question guiding Phase I was: Is gender a significant predictor of veteran students' use of transition coping mechanisms? To answer this question, I explored the relationship between veteran students' gender and their use of the four coping mechanisms (situation, self, support, and strategies). I tested the following hypotheses:

H_0: Coping mechanisms, as measured by Schlossberg's 4 S System, do not differ significantly for veteran students based on gender.

H_A: Coping mechanisms, as measured by Schlossberg's 4 S System, differ significantly for veteran students based on gender.

Quantitative Research Procedure

The procedure I used for the quantitative phase was to adopt a survey based on Gregg's Well-being and Coping of Student Veterans Readjusting into Academia: A Pilot Survey (2016). Adopting an instrument is the process of making slight modifications to meet the needs of the specific population, phenomenon, and/or topic that the researcher is interested in studying (Korb, 2012). Gregg's (2016) study examined how student veterans coped while transitioning from the military to higher education. Minor changes to the instrument were made to increase question clarification and make them applicable to a larger demographic of veteran students (all veteran students vs. only combat veteran students). The second component of the survey

included respondent demographic information. Table 1 indicates which questions were changed and how they were changed.

After I adopted the instrument, I converted it to a web-based survey using Qualtrics, an online survey software tool (see Appendix A for the adopted instrument). The survey was administered via email through the IT representative on my behalf to all identified Patriot University veteran students. The survey was sent out once to all veteran students then three follow-up requests were made to students who had not completed the survey. Potential survey participants were incentivized with the opportunity to earn one of three $20 digital Amazon gift cards. Once the data collection period concluded and the online survey closed, I reviewed and cleaned the data and developed an Excel spreadsheet. I then analyzed this spreadsheet using statistics to produce descriptive statistics and inferential statistics (Trochim, 2006). Descriptive statistics are measures that describe the basic attributes of a dataset and provide simplified summaries of the sample; inferential statistics draw conclusions beyond what is immediately available from the data alone (Trochim, 2006).

Data collection.

Quantitative data was collected for both male and female veteran students. Survey responses served as the sole source of data for the quantitative phase. A survey is a method of collecting information from a subset of people, usually with the intent to generalize the results to a larger population (Burns et al., 2008; Vanette, 2015). Four collection methods are commonly used: 1) face-to-face, 2) telephone, 3) paper (self-administered), and 4) electronic (self-administered) (Vanette, 2015).

Table 1

Survey Question Adoption

Original Survey Question	Adopted Survey Question	Change(s) Made	Justification
Please indicate your level of agreement with the following questions:			
I routinely use military decision making skills within an academic setting.			
I don't feel any negative mental effects following <u>combat service</u> (i.e. decreased concentration, memory or comprehension).	I don't feel any negative mental effects following <u>military service</u> (i.e. decreased concentration, memory or comprehension).	<u>combat service</u> changed to: military service	Survey is also open to non-combat servicemembers
I use previous military experiences and/or training for managing the stressors of everyday life.			
I manage the memories of <u>combat service</u> in a healthy manner.	I manage the memories of <u>military service</u> in a healthy manner.	<u>combat service</u> changed to: military service	Survey is also open to non-combat service
I was never in imminent danger during my <u>deployment</u> experiences.	I was never in imminent danger during my <u>military</u> experiences.	<u>deployment experiences</u> changed to: military experiences	The demographic I am surveying did not necessarily deploy
I did not engage in direct enemy contact.	I did engage in direct enemy contact.	<u>did not</u> changed to: did	Reversed question for scoring clarity.
I <u>have</u> a detailed plan for life after discharge from the military.	I <u>had</u> a detailed plan for life after discharge from the military.	<u>have</u> changed to: had	This survey is for veterans who have already separated from the military
I budget and manage my finances without difficulty.			
I have a healthy outlet for managing daily stressors.			
I would consider my experience in readjusting to an academic setting as normal compared to my peers.			

Table 1 continued

Original Survey Question	Adopted Survey Question	Change(s) Made	Justification
Please indicate your level of agreement with the following questions:			
I feel veteran's needs are supported at my academic institution.			
I feel confident in completing my academic requirements in order to graduate on time.			
I feel exercise helps me manage stressful situations.			
Please rate "how often" you experience the following situations:			
I fulfill daily roles within my family (i.e. parent, spouse and or community service roles).			
I engage in activities that give me an identity separate from being a <u>soldier</u>.	I engage in activities that give me an identity separate from being a <u>veteran</u>.	<u>soldier</u> changed to: veteran	This survey is open to all branches of the military
I achieve restful sleep on a consistent basis (6.5-8hrs).			
I eat healthy meals.			
I bounce back from adversity.			
I have the energy to accomplish daily tasks.			
I experience financial issues.			
I routinely communicate with peers or family members.			
I can sustain concentration on my academic studies.			
I have moments of feeling down or in the dumps.			
I experience stressful <u>combat</u>-related memories.	I experience stressful <u>military</u>-related memories.	<u>combat</u> changed to: military	Survey is open to non-combat servicemembers
I get distressed with academic requirements.			
I seek out people or situations that provide positive support within the university.			
I engage in a routine of physical exercise.			
I utilize the campus Veteran Resource Center			

Instrumentation.

The survey collection method I used was electronic, self-administered. A self-administered study is one in which the respondent completes the questionnaire without the intervention of the investigator; self-administered surveys can be distributed by mail, in person, or electronically (Wolf, 2008). The electronic survey is created using computer technology (Lambries, 2008).

Each survey took less than 10 minutes to complete. Using the Qualtrics program, respondents had the option to save their progress and return to complete the survey at a later time. After one week, incomplete surveys were saved, and responses were recorded as is.

The instrument was adopted from Gregg's (2016) "Well-being and Coping of Student Veterans Readjusting into Academia: A Pilot Survey" that examined coping responses used by veteran students as they transition to higher education. His instrument consisted of 28 Likert scale questions and 12 demographic and open-ended questions. For the purpose of this study, I adopted the 28 Likert scale questions and omitted the open-ended questions. I developed my own set of demographic questions. Gregg's (2016) instrument was developed based on Schlossberg's 4 S System. Table 2 details each of the transition questions and to which of the 4 S System that question corresponds.

The second part of my instrument contained demographic information about the veteran student. The demographic information I collected included military service, year in school, gender, and age. My instrument, titled Veteran Student Transition Survey, consisted of 28 Likert scale questions and 11 demographic questions.

Table 2

Question and associated transition mechanism

Please indicate your level of agreement with the following questions:	Transition Mechanism
12) I routinely use military decision-making skills within an academic setting.	*Strategies*
13) I don't feel any negative mental effects following combat service (i.e. decreased concentration, memory or comprehension).	*Support*
14) I use previous military experiences and/or training for managing the stressors of everyday life.	*Strategies*
15) I manage the memories of military service in a healthy manner.	*Strategies*
16) I was never in imminent danger during my military experiences.	*Self*
17) I did engage in direct enemy contact.	*Support*
18) I had a detailed plan for life after discharge from the military.	*Support*
19) I budget and manage my finances without difficulty.	*Self*
20) I have a healthy outlet for managing daily stressors.	*Strategies*
21) I would consider my experience in readjusting to an academic setting as normal compared to my peers.	*Strategies*
22) I feel veteran's needs are supported at my academic institution.	*Support*
23) I feel confident in completing my academic requirements in order to graduate on time.	*Support*
24) I feel exercise helps me manage stressful situations.	*Support*
Please rate "how often" you experience the following situations:	**Transition Mechanism**
25) I fulfill daily roles within my family (i.e. parent, spouse and or community service roles).	*Support*
26) I engage in activities that give me an identity separate from being a veteran.	*Support*
27) I achieve restful sleep on a consistent basis (6.5-8hrs).	*Support*
28) I eat healthy meals.	*Strategies*
29) I bounce back from adversity.	*Strategies*
30) I have the energy to accomplish daily tasks.	*Support*
31) I experience financial issues.	*Support*
32) I routinely communicate with peers or family members.	*Support*
33) I can sustain concentration on my academic studies.	*Support*
34) I have moments of feeling down or in the dumps.	*Situation*
35) I experience stressful military-related memories.	*Support*
36) I get distressed with academic requirements.	*Self*
37) I seek out people or situations that provide positive support within the university.	*Support*
38) I engage in a routine of physical exercise.	*Strategies*
39) I utilize the campus Veteran Resource Center	*Support*

Variables.

The independent variable for this study was gender. In survey research, an independent variable is the variable that is believed to influence or be correlated to the dependent variable(s) (Boyd, 2008). Commonly, the independent variable is denoted as *x,* and the dependent variable is denoted with a *y*, with the suggestion that a "change in *x* causes a change in *y*" or in a non-causal relationship "*x* and *y* are related" (Boyd, 2008). For this study, gender was determined by the survey question asking respondents to *identify the gender to which they most identify*. The gender question could be answered by selecting one of the following options: "male," "female," "transgender," "not listed: _____," or "prefer not to answer." This variable is considered a categorical variable because respondents must select the category that expresses their gender identity (McDonald, 2014). Categorical variables are typically expressed with names (versus numbers or rankings), and categories are discrete (respondents must classify themselves into only one category) (McDonald, 2014).

The dependent variables for this study were coping mechanisms used by veteran students experiencing a transition from the military to higher education. A dependent variable is one that is shaped or caused by an independent variable (Mokhtarian & Cao, 2008). There are four dependent variables for this study, and they are grouped according to Schlossberg's 4 S System of *situation, self, support, and strategies* (Anderson, Goodman, & Schlossberg, 2011). These 4 S System are the identified intrinsic and extrinsic mechanisms of support and barriers faced by servicemembers transitioning to higher education. Variables, research question, and survey item are presented in Table 3.

Table 3

Variables, Research Question, and Survey Items

Variable	Research Question	Survey Items
Independent Variable: Gender	Is gender a significant predictor of veteran students' use of transition coping mechanisms?	3
Dependent Variable 1: Situation	Is gender a significant predictor of veteran students' use of transition coping mechanisms?	34
Dependent Variable 2: Self	Is gender a significant predictor of veteran students' use of transition coping mechanisms?	16, 19, 36
Dependent Variable 3: Support	Is gender a significant predictor of veteran students' use of transition coping mechanisms?	13, 17, 18, 22, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 30, 31, 32, 33, 35, 37, 39
Dependent Variable 4: Strategies	Is gender a significant predictor of veteran students' use of transition coping mechanisms?	12, 14, 15, 20, 21, 28, 29, 38

One challenge often faced by researchers is describing the relationship between the independent variable and dependent variable(s) in establishing causality and not merely correlation (Mokhtarian & Cao, 2008; Singh, 2018). Three criteria must be met for causality to be established: 1) the variables must be correlated; 2) the independent variable must occur before the dependent variable; and 3) the observed correlation cannot be explained by other variables (Mokhtarian & Cao, 2008).

Data Analysis.

I analyzed the data using International Business Machines (IBM) Statistical Package for the Social Sciences 25 (SPSS 25). I also developed a profile of the participants based on demographic information. As part of this analysis, I computed descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations, frequencies, and percentages) for relevant variables. I conducted a coefficient analysis of the original scales by computing Cronbach's Alpha. Throughout this analysis, I determined that the constructs presented by Gregg (2016) did not measure the same concepts (situation, self, support, and strategies). At this point I ran an exploratory factor analysis (EFA) to identify questions that could be grouped into better-fitting categories. Once those categories were established, I ran independent t-tests to measure the difference in means between male and female veterans on each of those scales.

Before analysis began, all data were converted to numeric responses where: strongly disagree = 1; disagree = 2; neither agree nor disagree = 3; agree = 4; and strongly agree = 5 (questions 12–24). Never = 1; less than once a month = 2; once a month = 3; 2-3 times a month = 4; weekly = 5; 2-3 times a week = 6; and daily = 7 (questions 25–39). Once the data were converted to numeric responses, I computed descriptive statistics for the dataset. The purpose

of descriptive statistics is to describe *what is,* whereas the purpose of inferential statistics is to infer a conclusion beyond what the immediate data present (George & Mallery, 2016; Pyrczak, 2016; Trochim, 2006). For this study, I used descriptive analysis to determine the frequency of each response.

Quantitative Rigor.

Two areas of rigor that must be addressed in the quantitative phase are validity and reliability (Heale & Twycross, 2015). Validity is defined as the extent to which a study accurately measures the concept of interest (Heale & Twycross, 2015). Onwuegbuzie's (2000) Quantitative Legitimation Model suggests that the two areas of validity that should be addressed are internal validity and external validity. The concept of internal validity is the extent to which "we infer that a relationship between two variables is causal" (Cook & Campbell, 1979, p. 37).

Instrumentation is considered one of the possible threats to internal validity (Dunbar-Jacob, 2018). To test the instrument's validity, Gregg (2016) subjected it to a two-part process of evaluation. First, a panel of military clinical researchers reviewed the instrument, then it was revised and reviewed by a panel of student veterans. I adopted the instrument, then sent it back to Gregg for review. He made comments and provided further context for why the questions were worded the way they were.

External validity, in contrast, is the degree to which a study's results can be generalized across "populations of persons, settings, times, outcomes, and treatment variations" (Johnson & Christensen, 2010, p. 585). Survey research traditionally does not address the idea of external validity; instead, survey researchers are concerned with coverage error and

nonresponse error (Kalaian & Kasim, 2008). Each of these concepts is related to how well a survey's findings can be generalized to the target population (Kalaian & Kasim, 2008). I reported the survey response rate to inform the reader of the generalizability of the survey results. Nonresponse bias, the bias that occurs when inferences differ significantly between respondents and non-respondents, limits the generalizability of the sample to the population (Bruffaerts et al., 2018; Burkell, 2003; Merkle, 2008).

The second concept of error in survey research is coverage error, which describes a "bias in a statistic that occurs when the target population does not coincide with the population actually sampled" (Mulray, 2008, p. 162). Coverage error can occur because the members of the population are not included in the sampling frame or because of errors in data collection (Booth, 2001; Mulray, 2008).

Finally, reliability is the degree to which the instrument is accurate and consistently produces the same results (Heale & Twycross, 2015). I used Cronbach's α (Cronbach's alpha) to determine the internal consistency (homogeneity) of each of the four coping mechanisms presented in the survey instrument (Heale & Twycross, 2015). Internal consistency measures the degree to which questions on a survey measure the same construct (Hensen, 2001). For the purpose of my instrument, this means that I measured consistency for all questions that addressed *situation,* for all questions that addressed *self,* for all questions that addressed *support,* and for all questions that addressed *strategies.*

Limitations.

There are three limitations to using survey data: the data is self-reported, missing data, and access to the sample (Couper, 2000; Kang, 2013; Wright, 2005). Because the instrument

was administered online, there is no way to verify who actually took the survey, or if they answered questions honestly. When completing an online survey, respondents cannot rely on an interviewer to define terms, probe incomplete answers, or to motivate them to complete the survey (Couper, 2000).

A second challenge of using survey data sets is missing data. As with any survey work, some respondents do not answer all questions in the survey, resulting in missing data. Missing data increases the likeliness of reducing the null hypothesis when it is false and can lead to invalid conclusions (Kang, 2013). There are two ways to address missing data, and which method is used depends on what data are missing. When faced with missing data, cases can be deleted, or data can be imputed. Imputation is the process of ascribing a constant value, such as the mean, to a missing value (Humphries, 2013). It is important to note that the independent variable (gender) cannot be imputed; consequently, any cases that are missing gender would have to be deleted (Humphries, 2013).

A third challenge of using a web-based survey instrument is that veteran students only have access to the instrument if their email address is correct and it is included on the list of veteran students identified by the Office of Data Support (Wright, 2005). As a way to mediate this potential issue, I also posted flyers in the veterans affairs office, the library, the student recreation center, and the student union to advertise the research project and included a link for veteran students to participate in the survey.

Phase II: Qualitative

Phenomenology

The phenomenological approach as a research method is grounded in the philosophical

work of Edmund Husserl, and both the research method and philosophy are termed

phenomenology (Goble, 2014). In his philosophical work, Husserl wanted to ". . . go back to

the 'things themselves'. . . " (Schneider, Pierson, & Bugental, 2014, p. 278), and the term

"phenomenology" is derived from a Greek term meaning "to bring into the light" (Pringle,

Hendry, & McLafferty, 2011, p. 8). In the 1950s, phenomenology was first used as an

interpretive tool by researchers in the Netherlands to understand human existence (van

Manen, 2014). As a research tool, phenomenology is used to capture the essence of

individuals' lived experiences, and at the core of the methodology is a desire to understand

human experiences (Flynn & Korcuska, 2018; Pringle et al., 2011; Sokolowski, 2000). The

purpose of phenomenology is to describe "the common meaning for several individuals of their

lived experiences of a concept or phenomenon" (Creswell & Poth, 2017, p. 75) that the

researcher investigates. Findings in phenomenology are presented from the research

participants' perspectives and offer a first-person point of view into the phenomenon. This

type of research is descriptive rather than explanatory (Lester, 1999).

The phenomenological approach is used when the phenomenon of interest is intensely

emotional. This approach is a common research tool used in the social and health sciences,

especially psychology, education, nursing, and sociology (Van Manen, 2014). Examples of

phenomenological studies in higher education include the experiences of out gay and lesbian

university presidents (Bullard, 2013), higher education students with disabilities (Heindel,

2014), and the lived experiences of first-generation female students (Gatto, 2009). A final tenet

of phenomenology is that the use of the method is based on the assumption that there is an

essence, a common theme, and/or a shared experience among individuals who have

experienced a phenomenon (Patton, 2002). As described by Patton (2002), phenomenological

research assumes "that there is an essence or essences to shared experience" (p. 33). An

individual who reads a phenomenological study should walk away feeling that they have a

better understanding of what it is like for someone to experience a particular phenomenon

(Goble, 2014).

The three main types of phenomenology are hermeneutic, existential, and

transcendental (Kafle, 2011). This study used the transcendental approach. Transcendental

phenomenology is the original philosophy of the method, as developed by Edmund Husserl

(Kafle, 2011). The basic notion of this methodology is to transcend the experience to discover

reality (Kafle, 2011). This school of thought focuses on phenomenological reduction, which is

suspending "preconceived thoughts, judgements, and biases" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 90) to reach

the core or essence of the experience. Transcendental phenomenology was most appropriate

for this study because the methodology allowed me to take a systematic and methodical

approach (Moerer-Urdahl & Creswell, 2004). Additionally, because I have been engrossed in

the literature, using the transcendental technique allowed me to approach the research with an

open mind and fresh eyes by setting aside biases and judgement (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016;

Moustakas, 1994).

By using phenomenological design, I was able to describe the "essence" of participants'

experiences and "provide a comprehensive description" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 13) of the female

veteran transition experience. Because the intent of my study was to examine the essence of

the experience of female veterans transitioning from the military to higher education,

phenomenological research was most appropriate to achieve that objective (Moustakas, 1994;

Valle, King, & Halling, 1989).

Qualitative Research Procedure

The procedure I used for the qualitative phase was to review the results from the

quantitative phase, develop the interview protocol (see Appendix B), interview participants,

and analyze the data. In order to develop the interview protocol, I began by examining the

results from the quantitative phase and reviewed already published research interview

protocols. Once the protocol was developed, I identified and interviewed female veteran

students using open-ended interview questions with probes.

During the interview process, I articulated the purpose of the research to the

participants, both verbally and in writing, before beginning interviews. I informed participants

that their participation in the study was voluntary, their interview responses were confidential,

their names were to be changed to pseudonyms, the institution name was to be removed, and

any identifying data were to be removed. Participants were informed that they are free to skip

questions or stop the interview and withdraw at any point during the process without penalty.

Once participants read the consent form, I asked them if they understood their rights as a

research participant (see Appendix C to review the consent form).

Each interview was audio recorded with the permission of the participant and lasted

between 30 and 60 minutes. I described the "essence" of participants' experiences

(Moustakas, 1994) and developed a complete description of the female veteran transition

experience. Because the intent of the study was to examine the essence of the experience of

female veterans transitioning from the military to higher education, phenomenological

research was most appropriate to achieve that objective (Moustakas, 1994; Valle et al., 1989).

Phenomenological methodology has been used effectively in other studies examining veteran

transition, further establishing this method as a reliable technique (Rumann, 2010; Lolatte,

2010).

Participant Selection

I identified seven interview participants through the Phase I survey. One additional

participant was recruited using purposeful snowball sampling for the qualitative phase. The

purpose of phenomenological research is to describe the phenomenon and not the

characteristics of the research participants who have experienced the phenomenon.

Participant selection was critical, and for this study they needed to meet the following criteria

for participation: 1) the participants needed to have experienced the phenomena being

studied; and 2) the participants needed to be able to clearly describe and articulate those

experiences (Flynn & Korcuska, 2018; Polkinghorne, 1989).

I attempted to recruit additional participants through snowball sampling, also referred

to as chain or network sampling. This process involves identifying initial key participants who

meet the criteria set forth for participation in the study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). At the

conclusion of each interview, I asked for a reference for other participants (Merriam & Tisdell,

2016). Snowball sampling is a non-probability sampling technique, a technique frequently used

for "hidden populations" that are difficult for the researcher to access (Magnani, Sabin, Saidel,

& Heckathorn, 2005). This technique was largely unsuccessful because most of the interviewees did not know other female veteran students.

I conducted interviews with female veterans until saturation was reached. The purpose of phenomenological research is to describe the phenomenon and not the characteristics of a group; therefore, participants were selected using criterion-based sampling, whereby the interviewees are eligible to participate if they meet established criteria (Flynn & Korcuska, 2018; Polkinghorne, 1989). Therefore, female veteran students were eligible to participate in interviews regardless of branch of service, age, or undergraduate major (Flynn & Korcuska, 2018; Polkinghorne, 1989). They must, however, meet the same eligibility requirements of the quantitative participants. Additionally, a description of the female veterans who participated in the study, which included year in school, major, branch of service, officer or enlisted, how long the veteran served, when the veteran separated, and deployment(s) is included with the findings.

One challenge of conducting phenomenological research is participant selection (Polkinghorne, 1989). For this project, participant selection was doubly challenging because of the specificity of the phenomenon in study as well as the reluctance of female veteran students to identify themselves (DiRamio et al., 2015; Rafique, 2016).

I overcame the challenge of participant selection by recruiting participants using the following two techniques: 1) solicit participants through existing campus resources; and 2) use snowball sampling to further identify additional eligible participants. The existing infrastructure I used was the Office of Data Support at Patriot University to identify female veteran students to whom I could solicit participation.

Data Collection

Interviews with female veterans served as the only data source for the study's qualitative phase. I used a semi-structured interview protocol for the qualitative phase. Semi-structured interviews follow a consistent line of inquiry but rely on questions that are "fluid rather than rigid" (Yin, 2003, p. 89). The interviews varied in length but took approximately 45 minutes on average. Due to the current pandemic, all interviews were conducted via Zoom, an online meeting program. I audio recorded the interviews after obtaining consent from each participant. Interviews are the most common data collection method used in phenomenology because the researcher seeks to understand the "life world of the individual being studied" (Ploeg, 1999, para. 6). I determined experimental saturation, the point at which additional interviews does not add new information or perspectives to the data already collected (Saunders, Sim, Kingstone, Baker, Waterfield, Bartlam, Burroughs, & Jinks, 2018). For this study, no new themes emerged after eight interviews, and consequently, it was determined that saturation was reached (Fusch & Ness, 2015). At the point of saturation, data collection was considered complete.

Data Analysis

Interviews were transcribed verbatim to maintain the integrity of the participant's language and to stay true to the participants' accounts of their transition experience (Bradshaw, Atkinson, & Doody, 2017). To increase fluidity of the transcription, non-lexical conversation sounds such as "uh, um, and ah, etc." were omitted from the transcripts if they were irrelevant to the interview question (Ward, 2006). I transcribed all interviews to enhance familiarity and to gain deeper insight into the data.

Data were analyzed using a methodology developed by Moustakas (1994). The major steps of the technique are:

- Determine that phenomenology is the best approach to answer my research question;

- Identify that the transition of female veteran students from the military to higher education is the phenomenon of interest;

- Bracket my personal experience with the phenomenon;

- Collect interview data from the individuals who have experienced the phenomenon of study;

- Ask participants about the phenomenon using open-ended questioning;

- Review the data and highlight meaningful data, quotes, sentences, and significant statements. Cluster the data by meaning and develop into themes;

- Develop a textural description of the participants' experiences by writing a description of the participants' collective experience. Include the structural description, context, or setting that "influenced how the participants experienced the phenomenon" (p. 61);

- Finally, I wrote a composite description of participants' experiences with the phenomenon. This composite description drew heavily on the textural and structural descriptions developed in the previous step. The final composite presents the essence of participants' experiences of the phenomenon. The composite describes the underlying structure of a phenomenon and is usually one or two paragraphs in length. By reading this composite, readers will have a better understanding of what it is like for someone to experience the researched phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994).

Qualitative Rigor

There are various types of strategies to enhance trustworthiness in qualitative research. Lincoln and Guba (1985) described trustworthiness in research as necessary to persuade a reader that results are meaningful and worth believing; it is a concept that is synonymous with high-quality research. Low-inference descriptors and researcher reflexivity are two techniques that I used. Low-inference descriptors include using direct quotations from participant interviews (Seale, 1999). Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed to ensure that I had access to direct quotations during the data analysis. The result was that participants described their transition experience in their own words rather than through interpretations made by the researcher (Seale, 1999).

In qualitative research, trustworthiness refers to the reader's perception of the study's worth of consideration (Connelly, 2016). At every level, researchers have an obligation to document and be transparent in their activities and decision-making process during the research project (Connelly, 2016).

To increase trustworthiness in the research, disclose any predispositions, and identify any potential influences, I engaged in reflexivity, the practice of critical self-reflection, and bracketing before beginning interview (Johnson & Christensen, 2010). It was an honest evaluation of my interests and values that might have influenced the study (Primeau, 2003). Identifying the potential areas of bias allowed me to bracket them. Researcher bias tends to result from following the researcher's perspective and values (Johnson & Christensen, 2010). Examples of researcher bias include being selective in observations, discriminating in recording information, or being affected while interpreting data (Johnson & Christensen, 2010). Participating in reflexivity allowed me to become aware of my prejudices to minimize

researcher bias.

In transcendental phenomenology, bracketing is a method of adding trustworthiness to the data collection and data analysis process (Chan et al., 2013). Bracketing is the act of setting aside preconceived notions about the phenomenon at hand so as not to taint the research process (Tufford & Newman, 2012). The purpose of bracketing, or epoché, is to allow the researcher to gain an understanding of their own prejudices (Marshall & Rossman, 2014). There are many methods for achieving bracketing, and there is no single strategy for gaining an understanding of one's preconceptions (Chan et al., 2013). For this study, I used Chan et al.'s (2013) bracketing technique throughout the research process.

In an effort to conduct my investigation with an open mind, I continued the process of bracketing while conducting the research; bracketing is not an exercise that is performed once then forgotten (Chan et al., 2013). Throughout data collection and analysis, Chan et al. (2013) suggested that the researcher maintain a curiosity about what they might not know during the process. By examining my experiences that might have influenced my research and maintaining a curiosity during data collection and analysis, I was able to uphold my objectivity about female veteran's experiences of transitioning from the military to higher education.

Integration

I integrated the inferences after all data were collected and analyzed. According to Creswell & Plano Clark (2017) each of the phases either converge (quantitative and qualitative results and findings agree) or diverge (results and findings do not agree) during final integration. Because the qualitative phase had priority (emphasis) in this research design, the quantitative inferences supplemented the qualitative inferences. The reason for integrating the

findings in this study was to offer a sense of completeness to the research. Research

completeness refers to the idea that a research project that uses both qualitative and

quantitative accounts can provide a more comprehensive account by employing both methods

(Bryman, 2006).

Mixed Methods Legitimation

Conducting mixed methods research involves integrating "complementary strengths and

nonoverlapping weaknesses of quantitative and qualitative research" (Onwuegbuzie & Johnson,

2006, p. 48). Because of this integration, issues of research quality in mixed methodology is

especially complex (Onwuegbuzie & Johnson, 2006). Scholars argue that issues of validity in

mixed methods research should be termed *legitimation* to use a bi-method nomenclature

(Onwuegbuzie & Johnson, 2006).

In mixed methods research, issues of quality must be faced in each phase, but research

quality issues that are specific to the mixed methods design also arise (Teddlie & Tashakkori,

2009). Reliability is the extent to which research is consistent and is repeatable (Joppe, 2000).

Similarly, issues of reliability must be addressed in each phase, but issues of reliability that are

specific to mixed methods research methodology must also be addressed (Teddlie &

Tashakkori, 2009). For example, in this study, I used a survey instrument that had been tested

for validity (quantitative legitimation); I performed an audit trail to increase researcher

dependability (qualitative legitimation); and I evaluated the appropriateness of the research

design for the research question (mixed methods legitimation) (Carcary, 2009).

I also incorporated procedures to enhance the study's dependability, which is the

consistency of the inquiry process used over time (Williams, 2011). The researcher, as the

instrument, is examined to further determine the dependability of the study. Was the researcher careless or did she make mistakes in conceptualizing the data? Data collection, interpretation of the findings, and reported inferences should also be sound (Williams, 2011). To increase researcher dependability, I maintained an audit trail and practiced self-reflection. An audit trail is a description of steps taken and decisions made throughout the research project (Carcary, 2009). The audit trail began at the conception of the study and continued to the final stage of reporting the findings. The audit trail details the procedures used to conduct the study and chronicles how the data are handled as well as any decisions that the researcher made about the conduct of the study. An audit trail allows readers to "trace through a researcher's logic and determine whether the study's findings may be relied upon as a platform for further enquiry" (Carcary, 2009, p. 11).

O'Cathain (2010) ascribes the term *interpretive rigor* as standards used during mixed methods evaluation. Interpretive rigor is a description of the quality of the study's inferences; in other words, it is the "authenticity of conclusions from the study" (O'Cathain, 2010, p. 538). When a study has interpretive rigor, the inferences are trustworthy and credible (O'Cathain, 2010). Validity issues for mixed methods include unequal sample size and incompatible findings (Creswell, 2007). Using mixed methods research allowed me to balance the strengths and weaknesses of both the quantitative and qualitative phases, but one issue of validity that must be addressed is unequal sample sizes. The quantitative phase introduces breadth when addressing the research questions, and the qualitative phase provides depth to the project. To address the issue of a small sample size during the qualitative phase, I recruited participants who were representative of the group by using a non-probability sampling technique (snowball

sampling) (Magnani et al., 2005). Additionally, I collected data until I reached saturation

(Saunders et al., 2018).

Ethical Considerations

Research ethics are concerned with the possibility that the act of conducting the

research can result in harm to the participants (Maxwell 2005). I followed several procedures

to reduce the likeliness that this research caused any harm to the study's participants: 1) I

secured Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval (Appendix D); 2) I received consent before

beginning interviews; and 3) I ensured participant privacy throughout the process.

Researchers have a responsibility to ensure and maintain the privacy and confidentiality

of the research participant. The first area of concern for this study was the protection and

confidentiality of the veteran participants. To protect the identities of participants, I kept

interviews private and stored them in a password-protected electronic file; only I had access to

these files. I did not include any identifying information about the institution or the

participants for any public reports. Audio recordings were only accessible to me, and once I

transcribed the interviews, the audio files were destroyed.

Given the potentially sensitive nature of this topic, I took additional precaution to

ensure that participants were respected and kept safe. The most damaging effect of this

research project was the potential for participants to become affected emotionally.

Specifically, I feared that the women I interviewed may have experienced sexual violence

during their military service. Because of the potential of unearthing or revisiting past traumatic

experiences, I was particularly cognizant of the likelihood of emotional conversations. As part

of my awareness, I paused after participants described emotional subjects to remind them that we could take breaks or stop the interviews if necessary.

Researcher's Positionality

A challenge of transcendental phenomenological research that is fundamental to the research process is remaining objective. In qualitative research "the researcher is the research instrument;" (Pezalla, Pettigrew, & Miller-Day, 2012, p. 165). Findings are mediated through the research instrument (Chan et al., 2013). Identifying my preconceptions, knowledge, experience, and values allowed me to undertake my research in an untainted manner (Marshall & Rossman, 2014).

My interest in this study came from my respect for service personnel and the military community. I am not a veteran myself, but I am married to a veteran, and I have had the good fortune to have many military-connected friends in my life. I am associated with the military through a previous professional appointment, academic endeavors, and personal experiences.

In my previous profession, I was the coordinator for Operation: Military Kids (OMK), a program that works with the youth of military service members. Through this program, I provided youth programming to military youth whose parents worked in all military branches (Army, Air Force, Marine Corp, Navy, and Coast Guard) and military components (Active Duty, National Guard and Reserves). The work on my master's thesis was centered on a program evaluation of Ready, Set, Go! (RSG!), the community education component of OMK. My hope was that an evaluation of the program would lead to improvements of RSG! and thereby improve military and community relations.

Personally, I connect with military families each year through several volunteer

opportunities with the McGhee Tyson Air National Guard base in Knoxville, Tennessee. I assist

with programming for both their Easter and Christmas holiday events. I volunteered through

the McGhee Tyson Family Programs department for eight years.

My interest in veterans in higher education comes through working with this population

in my schoolwork, community involvement, and previous research. I believe that female

veterans bring strengths from their experiences in the military, but they also face challenges as

they move from the military to higher education. My hope is that this research will advance the

literature on veteran transition and bring awareness to educators about female veteran

students on campus.

Summary

In Chapter 3, I provided a detailed explanation of the methods I used for my research. I

addressed the methodology as well as an analysis of characteristics that are specific to each of

the quantitative and qualitative phases. I concluded the chapter with a discussion of how

inferences from each phase were treated during integration, and, finally, I addressed measures

that I took to ensure the entire study was both trustworthy and reliable.

Chapter 4 – Findings

The purpose of this sequential explanatory mixed method study was to examine and compare the transitional experiences of male and female veteran students from the military to college. I collected data from a single large public research (R1) institution, Patriot University. Male and female veteran students were invited to participate in the online survey. To examine my quantitative data, I used exploratory factor analysis (EFA) to determine appropriate scales for the independent variables. After identifying conceptually congruent scales, I ran independent t-tests to measure the difference in means between males and females across those scales. I used inferences from the survey to develop a semi-structured interview, which was then administered to eight female veteran students. To examine my qualitative data, I used Schlossberg's Adult Transition Theory to further investigate the transitional experience of female veteran students as they moved from the military to institutions of higher education.

The chapter is organized in the following sections: Phase I Participants, Data Cleaning, Results, Research Question, Data Analysis and Phase II Participants and Findings. The chapter concludes with a summary.

Phase I Participants

Demographic information

Participants from phase I were asked questions about their demographic characteristics, college enrollment, and military service. Demographic information is presented in Table 4.

Table 4

Phase I Demographic Information Frequency.

Variable	n	%
Gender		
Female	37	74.0
Male	13	26.0
Age		
20 – 29	28	56.0
Valid 30 – 39	13	26.0
40 – 49	5	10.0
50 – 59	3	6.0
Missing	1	2.0
Enrollment at Patriot University		
First time	15	30.0
Not first time	35	70.0
Enrollment by gender		
First time female	2	4.0
Valid First time male	9	18.0
Not fist time female	9	18.0
Not first time male	26	52.0
Missing	4	8.0
Year in school		
Freshman	2	4.0
Sophomore	6	12.0
Valid Junior	15	30.0
Senior	21	42.0
Graduate/Professional	1	2.0
Other	2	4.0
Missing	3	6.0

Table 4 continued

Variable	n	%
College affiliation		
Agriculture	4	8.0
Architecture	3	6.0
Arts & Sciences	21	42.0
Valid Business	4	8.0
Communication	3	6.0
Education	2	4.0
Engineering	8	16.0
Social Work	1	2.0
Missing	4	8.0
Enlistment year		
1980s	2	4.0
1990s	6	12.0
Valid 2000s	11	22.0
2010s	26	52.0
Missing	5	10.0
Separation year		
1980s	1	2.0
1990s	1	2.0
Valid 2000s	3	6.0
2010s	36	72.0
2020s	1	2.0
Missing	8	16.0
Branch and component		
Active Duty Air Force	8	16.0
Active Duty Army	13	26.0
Valid Active Duty Marine Corps	11	22.0
Active Duty Navy	12	24.0
Army National Guard	1	2.0
Marine Corps Reserves	1	2.0
Missing	4	8.0

Table 4 continued

	Variable	n	%
Branch and component			
	Active Duty Air Force	8	16.0
	Active Duty Army	13	26.0
Valid	Active Duty Marine Corps	11	22.0
	Active Duty Navy	12	24.0
	Army National Guard	1	2.0
	Marine Corps Reserves	1	2.0
Missing		4	8.0
Rank			
Valid	Enlisted	46	92.0
	Officer	0	0.0
Missing		4	8.0
Deployment			
	Deployed	31	62.0
	Did not Deploy	15	30.0
Missing		4	8.0
Deployment Frequency			
	One deployment	12	40.0
	Two deployments	11	36.67
	Three deployments	3	10.0
	Four deployments	1	3.33
	Five deployments	1	3.33
	Six deployments	1	3.33
	Seven deployments	1	3.33
Average length of deployment			
	1.7 and 6 months	5	15.7
	7 and 12 months	20	39.3
	13 and 30 months	3	6.0

Phase I Data Cleaning

A total of 55 participants completed or partially completed the survey. Responses were imported into SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences 25) for evaluation of usability. After reviewing the completeness of the data, a total of 51 responses were determined to be usable because the participant completed the dependent variable questions (28 Likert-scale items). Of those responses, only one participant selected "prefer not to answer" in response to the gender to which they most identify. Because the remainder of the respondents selected "male" or "female," the one non-identifying response was omitted. This left a total of 50 usable responses.

Items that were negatively worded were recoded into different variables so that all items would be scored consistently. A total of five items were rescaled: Situation1, Self3, Support2, Support11, and Support14. Each item was recoded into a new variable with the same variable name, and "_Recode" was added to the end of the new variable name (e.g., Situation1 was recoded into Situation1_Recode). Once all variables were recoded to answer questions in the same direction, I rescaled the Likert-scale questions to the same scale. In the survey, Likert-scale questions were asked on both a 1–5 and 1–7 scale. All 5-point scale items were rescaled to a 7-point scale. In total, 13 questions were rescaled.

Phase I Research Question

In this section, I provide the results for the research question for Phase I. The guiding question for this research project was, "What are the experiences of female veteran students transitioning from the military to college?" The research question for phase I was:

Is gender a significant predictor of veteran students' use of transition coping

mechanisms?

Null hypothesis: There is no difference between men's and women's use of coping

mechanisms as they transition from the military to higher education.

Phase I Results

After developing descriptive statistics, I performed a coefficient analysis of the original

scales developed (Gregg, 2016). In this study, the independent variables for the survey

comprised 28 Likert-scale questions, with each question assessing one of the 4 S transition

coping mechanisms (*situation*, *self*, *support*, and *strategies*) as described by Schlossberg (2016).

I calculated the reliability of each of the four scales using Cronbach's Alpha. Cronbach's Alpha is

used to measure the extent to which items in a scale measure the same construct or concept

(Tavakol & Dennick, 2011). The items in the original scale had relatively low internal

consistency and did not appear to measure the same construct. Cronbach's Alpha for the *self*

scale was 0.319 (unreliable), *support* was 0.747 (reliable), and *strategies* was 0.609 (unreliable).

Values for Chronbach's alpha range between 0 and 1 with higher values indicating more

reliability (Trobia, 2008). Some researchers accepted 0.70 as the minimum threshold while

others argue for more stringent values of 0.75 or 0.80 as minimum values for reliability (Trobia,

2008). The situation scale was composed of only one item; consequently, Cronbach's Alpha

was not computed. Because the original scales for *self*, *support*, and *strategies* did not exhibit

internal consistency, I administered an exploratory factor analysis to identify questions that

were aligned with better-fitting categories. Exploratory factor analysis is the process of

identifying patterns and relationships in data and is commonly used to regroup variables, based

on shared variance, into a set number of clusters called "factors" (Young & Pearce, 2013).

After administering exploratory factor analysis using 4 factors, 5 factors, and 6 factors

(four groups, five groups, and six groups), I explored the data to determine how questions

grouped. The questions in the 5-factor analysis (five groupings that included similar items)

grouped in the most thematic and meaningful way and accounted for 60.26% of the shared

variance. After further investigation, I dropped two items (Support1: "I don't feel any negative

mental effects following military service" [i.e., decreased concentration, memory, or

comprehension] and Support3: "I had a detailed plan for life after discharge from the military").

The first item (Support1) was double loaded (cross-loaded on two scales), and the second item

(Support3) was not conceptually congruent with the theme of that scale. Scales are used to

measure "behaviors, attitudes, and hypothetical scenarios" that are anticipated to exist based

on theoretical understanding, but the constructs that are being measured are not able to be

assessed directly (Boateng et al., 2018, p. 1). Additionally, two questions were recoded from (1

to 7) to (7 to 1) to be consistent with the orientation of the other variables.

After deleting these two items I readministered a 5-factor analysis on the remaining

questions and selected the option for output to only display loadings > .44. Factor loadings of

.40 are the lowest acceptable threshold, and .44 was selected to force each variable into a

single distinct factor (Matsunaga, 2010). The final factor analysis, which included the rotated

components matrix output, are presented in Table 5.

The theme for scale 1 (component 1) is *situation,* and questions in this scale describe

the veteran student's current transition situation. This scale is composed of seven questions.

Table 5

Rotated Component Matrix[a]

	Component				
	1	2	3	4	5
Support4 I feel veteran's needs are supported at my academic institution.	.786				
Support9 I achieve restful sleep on a consistent basis (6.5-8hrs).	.706				
Support13 I can sustain concentration on my academic studies.	.634				
Strategies5 I would consider my experience in readjusting to an academic setting as normal compared to my peers.	.630				
Support8 I engage in activities that give me an identity separate from being a veteran.	.627				
Support5 I feel confident in completing my academic requirements in order to graduate on time.	.604				
Self3_Recode I get distressed with academic requirements.	.580	.495			
Support6 I feel exercise helps me manage stressful situations.		.830			
Strategies6 I eat healthy meals.		.676			
Strategies4 I have a healthy outlet for managing daily stressors.		.645			
Strategies8 I engage in a routine of physical exercise.		.644			
Strategies7 I bounce back from adversity.		.632			
Support10 I have the energy to accomplish daily tasks.		.499			
Situation1_Recode I have moments of feeling down or in the dumps.		.468			

Table 5 continued

	Component				
	1	2	3	4	5
Self2 I budget and manage my finances without difficulty.			.703		
Support12 I routinely communicate with peers or family members.			.672		
Strategies3 I manage the memories of military service in a healthy manner.			.650		
Support2_Recode I did engage in direct enemy contact.			.646		
Support11_Recode I experience financial issues.			.583		
Support14_Recode I experience stressful military-related memories.			.564		
Strategies1 I routinely use military decision-making skills within an academic setting.				.737	
Self1 I was never in imminent danger during my military experiences.				.629	
Strategies2 I use previous military experiences and/or training for managing the stressors of everyday life.				.627	
Support16 I utilize the campus Veteran Resource Center.					.767
Support7 I fulfill daily roles within my family (i.e. parent, spouse and or community service roles).					.636
Support15 I seek out people or situations that provide positive support within the university.					.467

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.

 Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization.

a. Rotation converged in 18 iterations.

Scale 2 describes the student's *strategies* for coping with the transition and addresses topics such as exercise, eating healthy meals, and having an outlet for managing stress. Seven questions make up scale 2. Thematically, scale 3 addresses questions about *financial, mental, and military-related stress* (stress scale) and is composed of six questions. Scales 4 and 5 are both composed of three questions. The questions in scale 4 are themed around military experience as a transition strategy (military experience). The theme for scale 5 is transition support, and questions in this scale are about university support and fulfilling family roles.

Once I developed themes for each of the scales, I calculated the mean for each of the questions within the scale. I administered Cronbach's alpha for each of the five scales with the following results:

Situation scale (1): .814

Strategies scale (2): .802

Stress scale (3): .762

Military experience scale (4): .534

Support scale (5): .494

The first three scales (*situation, strategy*, and *stress*) indicated strong internal consistency, and the last two scales (*military experience* and *support*) indicated moderately low internal consistency. Using the five scales, I ran independent t-tests to measure the difference in means between males and females across those scales. The null hypothesis is that there is no difference in means between males and females. A significance level of $p = .05$ was chosen. Means, by gender, for each of the scales are listed in Table 6, and results from the t-tests can be seen in Table 7.

Table 6

Mean by Gender for Each Scale

Scale	Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Situation	1 Male	37	4.62	1.19	0.20
	2 Female	13	5.30	1.04	0.29
Coping	1 Male	37	5.18	1.06	0.17
	2 Female	13	5.18	0.91	0.25
Stress	1 Male	36.68	4.87	1.18	0.19
	2 Female	13	5.85	0.69	0.19
Military Experience	1 Male	37	4.97	1.33	0.22
	2 Female	13	4.73	1.13	0.31
Support	1 Male	35	3.05	1.53	0.26
	2 Female	13	3.15	1.14	0.32

Table 7

Independent Samples Test

Scale	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances				t-test for Equality of Means					95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
	Equal variances assumed		Equal variances not assumed								
	F	Sig.	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	Lower	Upper
Situation	0.68	0.41			-1.84	48	0.07	-0.68	0.37	-1.43	0.06
Coping	0.79	0.38			.002	48	1.00	0.00	0.33	-0.66	0.67
Stress			4.93	.03	-3.59	36.68	0.00	-0.98	0.27	-1.53	-0.43
Military experience	0.88	0.35			.59	48	0.56	0.24	0.41	-0.59	1.08
Support	1.24	0.27			-.23	46	0.82	-0.11	0.47	-1.05	0.83

For the coping, military experience, and support scales, I fail to reject the null hypothesis that there is no difference in means between males and females at the 0.05 level of significance. For the situation scale, a marginal statistically significant difference at the 0.10 level of significance exists. Finally, the stress scale indicates that differences do exist with at the 0.5 significance. Levene's Test for Equality of Variances is significant (.031); consequently, unequal variances should be assumed. With a significance level of .001, evidence is strong that there is a difference between men and women on the stress scale.

Phase II Participants

Demographic information

Demographic information for phase II participants is presented in Table 8.

Table 8

Phase I Demographic Information Frequency.

Variable	n	%
Age		
20 – 29	3	37.5
Valid 30 – 39	3	37.5
40 – 49	2	25.0
Enrollment at Patriot University		
First time	1	87.5
Not first time	7	12.5
Year in school		
Freshman	1	12.5
Sophomore	0	0.0
Junior	4	50.0
Senior	2	25.0
Graduate/Professional	1	12.5
College affiliation		
Agriculture	2	25.0
Architecture	1	12.5
Arts & Sciences	4	50.0
Education	1	12.5
Enlistment year		
1990s	2	25.0
2000s	0	0.0
2010s	6	75.0
Separation year		
1990s	2	25.0
2000s	2	25.0
2010s	3	37.5
Currently serving	1	12.5

Table 8 continued

Variable	n	%
Branch and component		
Active Duty Air Force	1	12.5
Active Duty Army	2	25.0
Active Duty Marine Corps	2	25.0
Active Duty Navy	1	12.5
Army National Guard	2	25.0
Rank		
Enlisted	8	100.0
Officer	0	0.0
Deployment		
Deployed	2	25.0
Did not Deploy	6	75.0
Deployment Frequency		
One deployment	0	0.0
Two deployments	1	50.0
Three deployments	1	50.0
Average length of deployment		
1.7 and 6 months	1	50.0
7 and 12 months	1	50.0
13 and 30 months	0	0.0

Phase II Findings

After coding the qualitative data using Schlossberg's Adult Transition theory, I grouped similar concepts and developed themes based on those groupings. Six themes emerged from the qualitative phase of the study. The themes included 1) *why they serve*; 2) *transition to military culture*; 3) *becoming the new you*; 4) *transition challenges*; 5) *transition support mechanisms*; and 6) *skills learned and characteristics developed in the military*.

Why They Serve

The first theme to emerge was the reasons participants joined the military. Participants described their reasons for joining the military as *family tradition*, *benefits*, or as *an escape*. Family tradition was identified by participants as a reason for joining, but none of them described family tradition as their primary reason for joining. Carly described her reasons for joining the military by sharing:

> I was living in a town where I was going nowhere and had nothing to do, and my brother had joined the Army and my dad was in the Army. And all my uncles were either in the Army or the Marine Corps, and I was like well, I've got nothing to do. Let's just do this.

Alex also expressed that family tradition was a reason she joined; for her, the family tradition extended several generations. Alex, who served 6 years in the Navy, illustrated her family's commitment to the military: "Every generation of my family has had at least one person join. I'm the only one of 50 grandchildren to do it. My uncle was Coast Guard. My grandfather was Navy. Navy runs through my family." Abigail also referenced family tradition and communicated that a few generations had passed since anyone in her family had served. She

shared her reason for joining: "It was really spontaneous, honestly, because no one in my family is in the military except my great-grandfathers."

Benefits was a second reason participants enlisted in in the military. Abigail, who is currently serving in the Army National Guard, was in high school looking for a way to pay for college. She recalled her reason for joining: "I couldn't afford college or anything, so it's pretty much financial reasons. So, I was just literally on Google [searching] 'how to pay for college.'" Within hours of providing contact information, her local recruiter called and scheduled a visit to speak with her and her parents. Like Abigail, Stephanie also sought benefits as a reason to join the military. She saw the military as an opportunity to get "decent training that I hoped would transfer back to the civilian world when I got out." In addition to training opportunities, Stephanie saw the military as a way to obtain health insurance and put a "roof over [her] head." She described how, at the time, she was "trying to do everything on my own without finishing my college education."

Similar to Stephanie, Christina sought financial stability. She and her husband were searching for jobs during the 2008 recession when they considered joining the military for monetary reasons. She revealed:

> Honestly, I needed money. Yeah. Couldn't find a job. It was in Florida. Economy was tanked. My husband couldn't find a job. You know, I had two little babies that I had to feed. I had no idea how I was going to pay rent or car or anything like that. Nobody was hiring. I mean I worked a lot of places, and nobody, nobody was hiring.

Although she joined for financial reasons, Christina acknowledged that after her initial enlistment, she re-upped (re-enlisted) because she loved serving in the military as a medic.

Participants who identified an escape as their reason for enlisting described wanting to leave their current geographic region or sought to leave their current personal situation. Stephanie described her hometown as one where "most people I know are still there and don't really travel anywhere but Beach City and back." She indicated that when growing up, she never left her hometown and eventually sought the military as a way to escape her situation. She articulated, "I had an aunt that had went in [to the military], and she just had a wonderful time, had a fabulous career, made lots of great friends. Got to see the world. And that's kind of what I wanted." The Air Force was her ticket out. Stephanie found her escape; she would eventually be stationed at Royal Air Force Lakenheath in England.

Like Stephanie, Claire also saw the military as a way to escape. She enlisted for 7 years and sought the structure of the military after she "started kind of getting into the bad stuff, getting around the bad stuff, and getting around bad people." She specifically joined the Marine Corps because she knew that branch would provide "that hard discipline that I felt that I needed, something that was going to be super like jamming on (jarring from) what I had exposed myself to following high school." The military became what she described as her "safe ground," because that is what she knew she needed in her life. Similarly, Carly, an Army veteran, described herself as an "out of control teenager," but she found that she easily adapted to the structure of the military culture because she needed rules and boundaries. She described the situation she was trying to escape: "I was living in a town where I was going nowhere and had nothing to do." Carly concluded that her military service "actually gave me something to be proud of. And [it] gave me, I wouldn't say morals, but it gave me skills and gave me a purpose. And with that comes respect of the rules . . ."

Megan did not join the military for any of the reasons the other participants joined. She indicated that she found her reason for joining while enrolled in college and participating in the ROTC program. She articulated, "While I was in the Army ROTC program for a while, I had met some people who were in the service, and they just kind of inspired me." She used that inspiration to join the Army National Guard in 2011 and served while continuing her enrollment in college.

Participants identified three primary reasons for joining the military: benefits, family tradition, and escape, and most identified a combination of reasons for joining. Megan is the lone participant who did not join for any of the reasons described by her female veteran peers. She joined after being inspired by other military personnel while she was enrolled in her university's ROTC program.

Transition to Military Culture

Whatever their reason(s) for joining the military, participants described several methods of preparation for transitioning from civilian life into the military. They did not believe assimilating to military culture was extremely challenging, but participants did believe they were changed by their military service. Megan, an Army National Guard veteran, excitedly shared about her bootcamp experience:

I LOVED basic training! I would have done it many times. I'm not even kidding. I loved my drill sergeants; they had so much that inspired me to be a better soldier. So for me it was very easy. But I will say that it definitely changed me as a person.

Christina's experience was similar to Megan's but acknowledged that the process was challenging. Christina remembered her experience:

We come back after chow (meals) and everybody's bed would be flipped but mine. Everybody's wall locker would be dumped out but mine because my bed was right, and they were even madder 'cause I was on top bunk. Basic sucked.

Other participants familiarized themselves with the expectations of the military by researching the experience. Claire, who is 36 years old, indicated that she specifically sought out the Marine Corps after researching all the military branches. She recounted:

I did my research. Maybe not everybody does. But I mean I was a stupid little, you know, teenager. So, but I specifically picked the Marines. I knew I was very aware of all the branches and what they offered.

Abigail also conducted research by watching YouTube videos and practicing putting her hair up in the required "neat and slicked back" low bun. She consulted with a friend who was

already in the military about the best technique to get her hair put up quickly and correctly. She confessed that, "I was actually super nervous for that. I practiced every night for two weeks," and she timed herself to monitor her progress.

Christina and Stephanie also conducted research, but they relied on their family's connections to the military to learn what would be expected of them. Christina described her father's service in the Air Force and the influence it had on her childhood. She remembered, "When other kids were having tea parties, I was learning how to bounce a quarter off my bed with a comforter. Can you imagine trying to figure that out with a princess comforter?" Stephanie also relied on her family's military connection to develop an understanding of what would be expected of her. She recalled:

> I'd already done a year-and-a-half of ROTC, so I knew what to expect. And plus having
> my aunt and her husband, she met her husband in the military. So [I] kind of knew
> some of the stuff she went through and how things worked.

Whereas Stephanie relied on her family's Air Force connection to prepare for her military service, Megan and Abigail both partially attributed their successful transition to their physical ability. Megan, who is 26 years old, grew up running track and cross country. She recalled during her (pre-military) college years that "Everyone said in college, 'You would be great in the Army, because you know, as a runner you'd be able to do it all.'" Similarly, Abigail described her excitement after being contacted by the Army recruiter:

> But then when he (the recruiter) came to my house, and we talked, and I was like, this
> actually sounds kind of cool! I like a physical challenge, and I thought it'd be something
> different. So then I was just like, all right I'll do it (laughing).

Abigail was so successful in basic training that she received the top PT (physical training) score.

A final technique identified by participants was mental preparation. Megan reflected that her personality was suited for serving in the military because, "I'm used to following orders, I'm used to doing the right thing. For me it was very easy." Stephanie was also prepared mentally and recalled that before joining the military she "kind of knew that I was going to have to let somebody control my life for a while." She laughingly recounted that since she was getting out of a bad marriage, she "was used to already being controlled." While Megan and Stephanie used life experiences to prepare mentally, Abigail used online research to gain an understanding of how she would be treated during bootcamp. During her online research she learned about drill sergeants' techniques and was prepared for the drill sergeants to be in her face. She communicated her experience:

> And some of this stuff, I thought, yeah, there's no way they're yelling at you like that.
> But then whenever I got there and that's the first thing. And I was like, "OH!" I'm like,
> wow. But then some things, it's so extreme.

Once in training, she had to anchor herself with the idea that she was not doing anything wrong and to remember that the drill sergeants were using this technique to "get in your head." She relayed, "They just are right in your face, and it's hard for me not to laugh when that's happening. So, I always was just . . . I just try not to look at them directly and focus in on something else."

Participants discussed transitioning to military culture and contended that assimilation was easier than they imagined. They did, however, acknowledge that their military service had

changed them. Participants also addressed their strategies for preparing for military

acculturation, including interviewing family and friends with military connections, using online

resources, conducting research, and watching YouTube videos. In addition to research,

participants relied on their physical capability to acclimate to the training demands of the

military. Finally, participants used mental techniques to prepare for the transition to military

culture.

Becoming the New You

Although participants indicated that acculturating to the military was a challenging, but

achievable, process, many of them had specific and descriptive memories of joining the

military. Christina recounted her time in basic training where "there was smoking (euphemism

for physical discipline), there was you know bed dress-right-dress (meaning neat and organized)

and everything." She recalled her living quarters where 86 women lived "right on top of each

other" in one bay (living quarters). She found solace in her comrades through a concept called

"embracing the suck," meaning she found comfort in the idea of taking on challenges because

she was surrounded by a group of people who were enduring the same discomfort. She said

that being in the military was physically demanding, "but at the same time there's 20 other

people doing it with you. 30, 40, 50 other people. I don't know . . . it's like I'm not the only one,

so it's not so bad."

Alex also vividly remembers bootcamp. She recalled:

They forced that culture. You know it starts with boot camp. It starts with the first day

you get there. I mean when you pull up to [Naval Station] Great Lakes in Chicago the

only welcome you get is the sign above the door.

Similarly, Claire described her experience at Parris Island where she and her peers were asked to step on "those little yellow footprints . . . It was right then and there, it's like everything just became real. It just got real. So, my hot head got deflated pretty quick." During the bootcamp process, she explained that you are being "broken down and you're being renewed" into what they want you to be. She expressed, "You learn to forget about who you were before. You are becoming someone new." She summarized the experience saying, "It wasn't easy, but I acclimated pretty well."

Participants vividly remembered their first interaction with the military and the effects it had on them. Specific details of their initial interaction with the military included Alex who recalled her "welcome" to the Navy as being a sign above the door. Claire, vividly described the "little yellow footprints" she was asked to step on when she arrived at Parris Island. She also described the renewal process and the "someone new"—who she was after the experience. Christina remembered the physical discipline and intense focus on being neat and organized. She was able to find comfort and strength in the other military personnel who were enduring the process with her.

Transition Challenges

The fourth theme that emerged was the challenges experienced transitioning from the military to higher education. Participants shared challenges in the areas of communication, responsibilities outside the classroom, veteran anonymity, challenges faced by others, and proving yourself twice.

Communication.

Communication challenges fell into several categories, including military communication style, not having a shared experience to draw on, and relearning how to communicate with civilians.

The content of military communication is different than civilian communication. In the military, there is a shared understanding of vocabulary, phrases, and acronyms that are not commonly known or understood outside the military, and participants carry this communication style to campus. When describing their time in the military, participants described their jobs using their military job code, and then clarified with their job title. Additionally, contributing to the vocabulary of military communication was the use of the phonetic alphabet (alpha, bravo, charlie, delta, echo, foxtrot, etc.). For example, Abigail was a 92 golf (92G—culinary specialist), Carly was a 71 lima (71L—admin assistant) and then later a 91 tango (91T—animal care specialist), and Claire was a 92 fox (92F—petroleum supply). Abigail shared her AT (annual training) experience during summers and MREs (Meals Ready to Eat) that soldiers ate for lunch. Abigail and Christina both described their AIT (Advanced Individual Training), job-specific training. Alex was the most fluent in military acronyms, and her vocabulary included: military bearing (conducting oneself in a professions manner), birthing area (sleeping quarters), rate (military rank), and NAVSUP (Naval Supply Systems Command).

Carly, who spent 8 years in the Army, succinctly described her experience of relearning how to learn how to "[undo] everything the military had done," which she articulated as follows:

The discipline level, the way you carry yourself, the way you speak to people, and just

the way you think. They (the military) change everything about it for the better. But

there is some undoing when you have to relearn to communicate with civilians.

Carly struggled to communicate with individuals who were not connected to the military. She

was grateful for her military-connected husband with whom she was able to communicate "in

the military manner and write and talk about things military related" even after she separated.

Similar to Carly, Alex recounted her greatest communication challenge as writing

resumes for job applications. When describing her job-seeking experience, she shared:

That (communication) is the biggest problem between the military and civilian sectors,

the language. I can show you everything I've done. I've kept every evaluation, every

write up, everything I've done. And when you hand that to civilians, they're like, "What

is this? Is this English?"

She says that even though she's led a team of 25 personnel, employers were not able to look

beyond her title of cook, and she received job offers way below her skill set. She recounted:

When you would go through the headhunters and recruiters and the so-called "helpers"

they'd be like, "Oh cook! You know there is this cooking job at Disney you could work at

you know. It's like 16 hours a day. You know, you're making French fries. How does

that sound?" Okay I just gave you a list of my qualifications, and that's what you've

come up with?

Similarly, Claire's challenge of relating to civilians came when somebody outside of the military

asked her what she did while she was in the military. She wondered how to put her military

experience in terms the civilian sector would understand. She concurred with Alex and the

challenges of seeking jobs:

But then when somebody outside of that who's like, "Oh what did you do?" And I'm

like, "How do I put this in terms that you'll understand?" You know, that's hard. That is

difficult. And I struggle with that just with a resume."

Participants identified communication as a transition challenge including a specific

communication style used in the military, civilian's lack of a shared military experience, and

challenges when relearning how to communicate with civilians. Participants relied heavily on

acronyms and military concepts in their communication. Carly struggled to connect with

civilians because of a lack of shared vocabulary and experiences, whereas Alex found it

challenging to translate her military experience on her resume.

Outside responsibilities.

In addition to pursuing their degrees, participants also balanced other responsibilities

including part- or full-time employment and family responsibility. Claire was juggling the

demands of serving full-time as a police officer while also seeking her degree in psychology.

She had already used her GI Bill benefits for her previous degrees and was excited to take a

position as a campus police officer so she could pursue another undergraduate degree. She

recalled:

. . . around the end of the [police] FTO (Field Training Officer) program, I had decided to

go to Patriot University at Veteran City campus to be a police officer there because they

had offered me free school and I was like, "Ah, free is free (singing)!" I'll take it. I used

all my benefits you know for education. So, I was like shoot, I'll take that. And I said,

"So I can go to like anywhere?" And they're like, "Anywhere in the state." "Like Patriot

University in Patriotville (flagship campus)?" I wanted to go to Patriot University in

Patriotville my whole life.

Like Claire, Abigail was also balancing school and work. Abigail joined the military as a

way to pay for her college education; she was pursuing her degree and serving in the Army

National Guard. She discussed the challenges of balancing school and military service:

It's always like I have all my finals, all my exams, on Monday [after drill]. And I have drill

Saturday, Sunday. I'm always so stressed because I'm a big study-er and stuff. And I'm

always like, well I have drill.

She described herself as the student in her friend group who says, "I can't, I have drill."

Stephanie was unable to work while attending school which she described as being

"frustrating." She labeled Patriot University as "not nontraditional student friendly." Despite

the frustration she felt about the campus not being flexible for nontraditional students, she did

feel supported as a veteran and was complimentary of the Veteran Resource Center.

Participants described balancing school and family responsibility while also pursuing

their degree. Between their children's homework, pickup, and co-curricular activities, these

veterans have different priorities than their traditional student counterparts. Stephanie

described herself as a high achiever in high school who always made As and Bs. She had the

same expectations for herself in college. With the challenge of raising four children, whom she

homeschooled at times, she changed her major and her expectations for herself to keep up

with family responsibilities. She bemoaned, "I wanted to major in geology, but with my family

and the demands of my family I didn't have the opportunities to study as much as a lot of the

professors assumed we had." She acclimated by using different tactics including taking a

semester off, attending part-time, dropping a class, and changing her major.

Christina, like Stephanie, was also busy with family demands and had to develop her

course schedule based on her five kids' pickup and drop off schedules, leaving her courses

scattered throughout the day. Her children's ages are staggered (ages 17, 16, 13, 10, 6), and

she had to account for pick up and drop off at elementary, middle, and high school. She

shared, "My classes are all staggered, so I don't really have any free time to do anything if I

wanted to do anything."

Similar to Christina, Claire also found it challenging to mingle with peers because of their

differing priorities. While her peers wanted to go out and party, she reflected, "I'm like I got

kids at home, I ain't got time for this. You know I don't mingle with the immaturity."

Participants balanced demands outside of the classroom including jobs and family.

Claire worked as a campus police officer while Abigail was serving in the Army National Guard.

Stephanie, however, lamented that she was not able to seek employment while pursuing her

degree. In addition to employment, participants navigated the challenges of attending an

institution of higher education while raising a family. Stephanie changed her major to

accommodate her family responsibilities, and Christina scheduled her class around her five

children's school schedules. Claire noticed the differences in priorities between herself and her

peers when they went out to "party" and she went home to care for her children.

Veteran anonymity.

Participants indicated that they were not immediately recognized on campus as veteran

students. Generally, the students' peers did not know about their veteran status until the

female veteran students brought it up. Stephanie summed up this sentiment by saying, "At Patriot University if I don't mention that I'm a veteran nobody knows." She continued, "I think it goes back to, as a woman, most people in society, unless you're Israeli or Russian, most people don't assume as a female that you've been in the military."

Megan had a similar experience to Stephanie. Even though she was the one who has served, her military service was often attributed to her nonexistent spouse. She recounted:

> I mean I guess there are instances when I'm out in public you know and maybe I'm wearing something that has some sort of military affiliation on it and people will think, "Did your husband serve?" No, it was me. That's only . . . that kind of makes me mad sometimes.

She commented that people are becoming more aware of women serving in the military, and that "Some things are getting better, definitely."

Participants built on the idea of veteran anonymity by sharing that being a veteran was part of their identify, but it was not the part that most identified them anymore. Michelle, a mother of a 4 year old and a 6 year old, commented:

> I'm older than a lot of students, and one of the things, I feel like I'm a mom first, above anything else. I'm a mom. And so, I think I just . . . I see that (being a mom) as my identity more than like as a veteran.

Michelle indicated that being in the military was something that she did and that it is "kind of a part of my identity but not so much anymore."

Stephanie concurred:

I think that's a great way that the military has helped me, looking at life is that I may

have been in the military for a while and that was part of it. But that's not all that

defines me . . . and getting my degree has been a dream of mine for a long time. So now

I'm finally back to doing that. Just that degree is not the only thing that's going to define

me.

Participants' veteran identities were mostly unnoticed by their student peers.

Stephanie attributed the lack of veteran status identification to a low proportion of women

serving in the United States military. Megan's veteran status was overlooked, and often, her

veteran status was attributed to her nonexistent spouse. Michelle described her primary

identity as a mother of two children. Stephanie also saw her veteran status as part of her

identity, but she did not want to allow any one part of her identity to define her as a person.

Not connecting with others.

Age and lived experiences were two factors that distinguished veteran students and

non-veteran students' understanding of cultural references. Christina, a 25-years old veteran,

stated of non-veteran students, "I don't understand any of their references. I don't understand

any of their language. I didn't even know what Twitter was." Christina continued by discussing

the idea of making friends with other students. She reflected:

I'd like to have a group of friends there (on campus), but it's just different because

they're all so much younger than me. Or if there is somebody that's similar to my age,

they have a totally different life experiences than I have.

She concluded by stating, "It's like we can't really [connect]."

Claire, like Christina, also tried to connect with her non-veteran peers. She explored the idea of trying to fit in while also not wanting to stand out. She relayed the challenges she faced when she first came to campus: "So that was kind of hard because I'm like 29 years old, and I'm trying to be a teenager again." She compared the experience of being on campus to taking someone and dropping them in a town in another country:

It's basically like taking somebody from Italy and bringing them here to the U.S. and dropping them down in the center of Patriotville and saying, "Have fun!" And there's no comfort there because there's nobody there that is, in your opinion, like in your thought process, there's nobody there that's like me. So how am I supposed to . . . how do I adapt to this? Where do I start?

Claire struggled to find her community on campus until she joined the ROTC. Although she felt like she was more advanced than the ROTC cadets, joining ROTC helped her develop a sense of community. She remembered her decision to join, "which is why I went to the ROTC, thinking those are my people, that is my community . . ." Unfortunately, the time commitments of ROTC conflicted with her home responsibilities, and eventually she had to drop the program.

Whereas Claire found it hard to connect with non-veteran peers, Stephanie found it hard to connect with her veteran peers. She had visited the Veteran Resource Center on campus, but she did not feel welcome there. She stated that the staff and fellow veteran students are "nice," but she did not feel like she was part of that group. Stephanie separated in 1997 and explained, "I don't feel like I'm part of the veteran population either, and I don't feel it's because of my gender though; it's just because I've been out of the military so long."

Alex, who is 30 years old, accounted for the level of disconnect as being more a question of maturity. She recognized that the first time she was an undergraduate student she also thought she "knew everything." She described her level of maturity before she enlisted in the military:

> When I came into the military I was a knucklehead, I mean I, I thought I knew everything. I was one of those college kids, "Oh yeah, I've got a degree." Well whoop-de-do. The military really helped me grow up.

This time she sees herself as the one who needs to be the leader in the classroom. Alex shared her plans for the fall during the pandemic:

> I'm going to be the person in the mask all the time. You've got to be a good example for the young ones. I always try to be a good example of the young when they don't have a clue.

She struggled with being able to "deal with the 18 year olds" and shared a story about a male student with a bull ring nose piercing who was sleeping at the library. She remembered, "And I thought, so that's how you get to class? Someone has to drag you by your nose to get you anywhere. Or the clothes . . . Honey, do you have pants under there? Is that just underwear?" She was also concerned about how younger students presented themselves, thinking that some students would benefit from a haircut or that she could give lessons to the "ladies" on "how to dress."

Challenges faced by others.

Participants spoke positively about their military service and their current status in life. They acknowledge challenges during their enlistment and during their transition to the civilian

world, but that was not their focus. Participants were dismissive about their own challenges and quick to acknowledge the experiences of other female veterans as being more challenging than their own. Megan described the sexist humor that women in other military jobs experienced and indicated, "for some females in the military, it can definitely be challenging, especially in combat MOSs." She was also upfront about her own experience in the military and was quick to share, "As far as gender, like gender bias, I don't think I really experienced any of that. Honestly most of it has been really positive." Megan summed up her thoughts on other female veterans' experiences by stating, "I would say that it's probably more challenging for women who went into units that do not have very many female figures there. But for me, it was pretty easy."

Alex shared her experience of living on ship and bringing new female sailors on board and how these women dealt with a tremendous amount of unwanted attention. She commented, "I've seen so many pregnancies, assaults, unwanted advances, wanted advances, competition." She also shared her experience working in Navy Nuke (Nuclear Operations, a prestigious and technically skilled unit), which is heavily male dominated (her class had a 35:1 male-to-female ratio), and eventually she was cut from the program. Sex was used as currency and women who declined this attention were penalized:

> . . . it wasn't unheard of to hear about some girl sleeping with a chief to become an instructor or to make rank or you know some other privilege that would have been extremely hard to get without doing that. Gender inequality was bad in that program.

Alex was one of the women who said "no" and expressed, "Quite frankly I suffered for it. I wasn't going to put myself to that level." Although she was happy to leave that program, she shared:

I think that experience really kind of prepared me well for the ship, but it kind of hardened me a lot too . . . going through that. I think learning to say "no" was the biggest thing I could have learned. And then coming out of the military you know and going to school. I have no problem telling people no.

Participants more readily recognized the challenges faced by other female veterans than acknowledging their own struggles. Megan described the sexist humor experienced by other servicewomen and the struggles faced by female servicemembers in male-dominated units. Alex described the use of sex as currency and the effects it had on her career. Although she was cut from the Navy Nuke program, she felt that learning to say "no" served her well on ship and beyond.

Proving yourself twice.

The final transition challenge that participants described was the idea of having to prove yourself twice and the belief that some forms of military service were more significant than others. Many of the participants qualified their military service by talking about their lack of deployments, the lack of warzone experience, and minimizing their military service. Michelle, who spent 4 years in the Marine Corps, described her job in the key shop (Keys) where she issued badges and held the keys to buildings with "ammunition and radios and stuff like that." She summed up her military experience by concluding, "That was the only thing basically I did."

Abigail, a junior nutrition major, also minimized her time in the military. She confided that she "didn't want to brag," but that she had received the top physical training (PT) score in basic training. She shared that when she discusses women serving in the military "people always throw out that there's no female Special Force person." Abigail further minimized her military service by concluding, "I didn't get deployed or anything."

Similar to Abigail and Michelle, Stephanie also thought of her service as "less than" when describing herself as a veteran. Because she never experienced war, Stephanie never "develop[ed] that mentality that a lot of veterans do have . . ." She also qualified her military service by saying that she had served during peacetime and wasn't able to identify with the "added trauma" of serving during a time of war.

Participants articulated that during their military experience, they were trying to demonstrate their worth at rates much higher than their male counterparts. Alex observed that her superiors supervised the men and women equally on some standards, but on other standards, her male superiors were overly critical of their female subordinates. To illustrate, she shared, "I thought they nitpicked at us more for hair and makeup but for uniforms, military bearing (conduct), customer service, that was across the board because Supply is a customer service job." Abigail had a similar experience where women were held to a higher standard than their male counterparts. For example, the female leaders would hold the servicewomen to higher standards than the men. She shared:

> I remember specifically they were unloading all of our duffel bags from this big truck
> and they're so heavy. And all the guys were up there doing it. And then one of the drill
> sergeants came. And she said, "No, no, no let the females do it." And we were all up

there trying to grab the bags and stuff. But I didn't have a problem with that. I guess I

was fine. I felt they had held us to a little bit higher [standard] sometimes because you

gotta keep up with them (the men).

The atmosphere of making the women prove themselves twice was counterproductive

when Abigail was asked to drive a Humvee during drill weekend:

I remember last summer we had to drive the Humvees. We had to go get gas, and I was

like, I don't even know how to start this because they never even showed us. I think I

was the only female [on the job] at that point. And I was just hopping in, and I was just

like, I don't know if I should just try to figure it or ask. I was too embarrassed to ask and

be like, how do you start this?

Her male colleagues showed her how to start the vehicle then brought humor to the situation

the rest of the day. Abigail remembered, "But then they (the men) pick on you the rest the day,

they're like, 'Yeah, she doesn't know how to start a Humvee.' No one ever showed me. Ever."

Carly described how she was treated the same as her male counterparts during

bootcamp. She said that changed once she got out into "the real Army." She continued, "They

(superiors) treat you like a female and you're weak and you have to try and prove yourself. But

in basic training it wasn't . . . it wasn't bad."

Carly and Alex both described situations where the women in their units got in trouble

for situations that were out of their control. Carly put it succinctly when she stated, "Females

were just getting in trouble left and right for different crap that the males wouldn't get in

trouble for." She expressed that women in her unit were "expected to be just as good as your

male counterpart. You're expected to perform all the same tasks even though you might not be

able to perform them as well physically." Toward the end of her career, she became fed up with the inequity of discipline and partly attributes this behavior to why she got out. She recalled ". . . I got in trouble, and I had had enough."

Abigail shared Carly's sentiment and indicated that the women were always "doing the dirty work," and if something went wrong, the women were always blamed for it. She shared, "Even if the males do something wrong, they punish the females." The women were responsible for fixing the mistakes of their male colleagues, or they would get "smoked" (euphemism for physical punishment). She concluded, "We just have to do a bunch of pushups or whatever they want us to do. It's always on us [the women]."

Stephanie found that she had the exact opposite experience of the women who felt they had to prove themselves twice. She shared, "I love the aspect that we were treated pretty much the same, we dress the same, we had a lot of the same expectations when it came to being in a dental corps in the Air Force." She elaborated, "Nobody was a female or male. We just were. And it (gender) didn't really play a lot into the job that I had to do it." Counter to her claims, she joined the Air Force with the understanding that, "I knew I was going into a man's only club type thing, and that I would have to assimilate and just do whatever."

Participants minimized their military service and often compared themselves to others who had been deployed, experienced a warzone, or did jobs that were considered more meaningful. They found themselves proving themselves twice or diminishing the value of their service because "there's no female Special Forces person" or that their military service was "less than" because of their gender. Participants were also held to higher standards because of their gender, and their supervisors were hypercritical of female participants' physical

appearance. Finally, participants were unequally disciplined compared to their male

counterparts. Stephanie, however, described her situation as being treated the same as her

male counterparts, which was counter to her claim that she understood the Air Force was a

"man's only club."

As participants transitioned to civilian and academic culture, they faced challenges

including communication barriers and re-learning how to communicate. Off campus, this group

of students is often responsible for family and work outside of the classroom and closely guard

their veteran identity. When participants discussed their veteran status, they were quick to

point out why their service was not as significant as others who have seen combat, served

during wartime, or who deployed. Participants also found it hard to connect with nonveteran

students on campus, mostly because of differences in ages, life experiences, and expectations

outside the classroom. Participants readily pointed out that they knew of women whose

military service was more challenging than theirs. Finally, participants believed there was a

perceived deficit because they were women, and they had to work harder just to be considered

equal to their male counterparts.

Transition Support Mechanisms

The fifth theme that emerged was transition support mechanisms that participants used

to help navigate the transition from the military to higher education. Participants relied on

direction from the campus Veteran Resource Center and appreciated the clear and concise

expectations set forth. Participants also eased their transition to campus by relying on their

veteran connections both virtually and in person.

Campus resources.

Overwhelmingly, participants were extremely positive about the campus resources offered at Patriot University. Christina was the only participant who used vocational rehab to pay for her courses. She shared that her transition strategy was to lean heavily on Amanda Morley, a veteran resource administrator at Veteran Community College, the school she attended before transferring to Patriot University. She continued working with Amanda after she transferred to Patriot University.

Participants mentioned Patriot University's Veteran Resource Center and indicated that the center's staff did an excellent job providing guidance on what paperwork was needed and when it was time to submit it. Michelle, a senior in Hispanic Studies, described the Veteran Resource Center as a one-stop shop:

> [They] by far had one of the best veteran resources [center] in the sense that they literally tell you what they expect from you and you don't have to go out of your way to try to figure out what all you need to turn in, what else you need to do, and go from one place to another [to] try and get everything . . . trying to line up everything.

She previously enrolled at two other universities where expectations were not as clearly defined. She described her experiences at the other institutions:

> Because I feel like for Oceanside University and UPWU, I had to make a lot of phone calls, send a lot of emails, and get a lot of things (communication) constantly you know. . . . Whereas, other places (other institutions' veteran resource centers) will be like "Hey we need this." And then a little bit later . . . "We also need this."

Participants were also positive about the support they received from non-veteran students on campus. Christina and Abigail both relayed that their experiences on campus were positive and that they have been supported by their faculty and teaching staff. Abigail, the current National Guardsman, indicated that her professors have been understanding when she had to miss an exam for a military exercise. She shared:

And if it does pop up throughout the semester, I'll just tell them (professors) what the situation is. And they'll be like, "Oh yeah I remember you saying that (you're enlisted)." But they normally work with me all the time. I never really had a huge problem with them, professors, being upset, they're always understanding.

Like Abigail, Christina found her professors to be supportive:

For the most part everybody I've met with and interacted with at Patriot University, faculty, students, staff have been pretty cool, really vet[eran] friendly. So, I've had a really positive experience. I've had teachers agree to meet with me after class and stuff; and work around my schedule instead of theirs to help me out because they know I have five kids. Or I've been lost, and I've had teachers that'll be like, "Hold on, let me show you where it (class) is," and take time to actually walk me to the next class and show me where stuff is. So, it's been a really good experience.

Megan agrees with the overall positive experience on campus, saying that there are a lot of social events for veterans to attend. She shared:

As far as reintegrating goes, I mean, Patriot University has lots of organizations and lots of cool social events for veterans to go to. Male and females can attend those. So, I think Patriot University's doing a great job.

xxxShe joined the Student Veterans of America group and was particularly fond of the football tailgating events they offered last year. She communicated, ". . . I still felt like you know part of a group, like a group at Patriot University."

Claire and Carly were both complimentary of the students who thanked them for their service when they revealed their veteran status. Claire describes her experience by saying, "They've been really great about it. So, you know, they'll be like, 'Thanks for your service.'" Claire indicated that civilian support was what kept her "driven." Carly reported that after being thanked for her service, most students were ". . . shocked that I'm old enough to have served."

Patriot University's campus was supportive of participants as veterans in terms of having a Veterans Resource Center, hosting events catered to veterans, and offering a welcoming environment toward participants. Christina relied heavily on her veterans resource administrator as a "transition tool" as she transferred from Veteran Community College to Patriot University. Michelle saw the Veterans Resource Center as a central hub where she could submit all necessary paperwork, and Megan felt supported through the Student Veterans of America student organization and social events offered to veterans. Christina also felt supported on campus and described positive interactions with professors who helped her navigate campus and scheduled time to meet outside of class around Christina's schedule instead of their own. Carly and Christina were well received by other students and often were thanked for their military service.

Connecting with other veterans.

Connecting with other veteran students was a coping mechanism that participants identified as being helpful in their transition to higher education. Carly, who lived 70 miles from campus, captured this veteran connection by stating:

> Civilians just aren't the same. They don't . . . we don't have a connection with civilians
> like we do each other. And it's hard to explain that. It's hard to explain the military if
> you've never been in; and the experiences that you have, and the hardships that you
> have and the deployments that you have, and the camaraderie that comes with that. It
> really is a brotherhood.

Similar to Carly, Claire, who is currently serving as a police officer, connects with other veterans because the conversations are easier and she feels safe with that group, especially if she wants to talk about something military related. She revealed:

> College students outside of the military spectrum, they don't understand. They don't
> get it. It's just like somebody with PTSD. You know if you've never experienced that
> before then you don't know what it's like to be that way. Whereas I can go to anybody
> in that group and talk to them about anything I want to. And they all get it.

Claire joined the Student Veterans of America at Patriot University, a group in which she feels safe as a member. This sense of belonging helps her work toward the best version of herself:

> . . . when we transition out [of the military], having that unity and the ability to conform
> to that new community of veterans on campus is what allows us to be able to reach for
> what we're looking for (our best selves) because we have that safe zone. And the
> Student Veterans of America student (organization) for me is that safe zone.

At one point during her academic career, Claire joined ROTC so she could find a connection to the military community once again.

Megan also appreciated the Student Veterans of America group because students in this organization have a shared understanding of sacrifice. She said that especially with the current pandemic, you cannot continue to move through the world in the same manner in which you did prior to the pandemic. She indicated that putting the needs of the group first is a mentality that she and her military-connected peers understand, saying "And especially during this virus right now, people don't understand. Sometimes you don't always get what you want. You know . . . and you just have to accept that."

Michelle also stays in contact with fellow veterans, but she kept her connections at an arm's length. She does not really connect with her peers on campus. She does, however, appreciate seeing her fellow Marine students on campus. She shared:

And then just seeing other veterans too. I know that there's actually people at Patriot University that I worked with when I was in the Marine Corps, which is really cool. Just seeing Marines on campus, like, "Hey I know you," it's kind of cool.

Michelle's veteran support network is mostly virtual, and she is part of female veteran groups on social media. She commented:

It is nice because there's a lot of other female veteran moms that I have on Facebook and on Instagram that we talk every once in a while. Someone's like, "Hey, how do you potty train?"

Participants connected with other veterans as a transition mechanism both in person and virtually. Carly and Claire stayed connected by speaking to other veterans who had a

better understanding of their military experience. Claire and Megan both connected with other

veteran students through the Veteran Students of America campus organization. Megan

thoughtfully discussed her and her fellow veterans' shared understanding of sacrifice. Michelle

communicated with her veteran peers virtually through social media and enjoyed seeing her

fellow Marine Corps veterans on campus.

Skills Learned and Characteristics Developed in the Military

The final theme to emerge was skills learned and characteristics developed in the

military that have been useful in participant's transition from the military to higher education.

These skills and characteristics include identity development, maturity, strength, leadership,

and flexibility.

Identity development.

Veteran participants benefited from living on their own before enrolling at Patriot

University and described developing their own identity, which they did not always observe in

their younger, non-veteran classmates. Michelle communicated that veteran students who

have been in the military seem to be more supportive of conservative views, such as being

"pro-Second Amendment." She confided that sometimes in class she feels like she could not

share her opinion because "everybody else around you has different views and will shut you

down really quick." She expressed that although it does not bother her, she has observed that

for "other veterans, too, it seems to bother them a lot."

While Michelle was cautious about sharing her opinion, Carly and Stephanie were

comfortable stating their opinions in class. Stephanie, who is 46 years old, described herself as

"an adult, I mean an older adult," who is used to being "more vocal" in class. Similarly, Carly, a

junior in animal science, stated ". . . I have my own opinions. I don't just have the opinions of the military. I have my own opinions now. And I feel comfortable in sharing those opinions. It took a long time to share opinions."

Counter to the participants who felt they had been changed by the military, Michelle did not perceive much change in herself after her enlistment in the Marine Corps. She described her military experience by stating, "I don't really feel like I changed that much. I feel like I held onto my personality a lot." She had the added perspective of her mother who also watched Michelle's younger sister join the Marine Corps, and both of them observed her sister's personality transformation. Michelle vowed, "I remember thinking when I was in boot camp, no matter what, I'm not going to lose a part of myself."

Participants shared their experience with identity development, and some perceived significant changes. Michelle did not feel comfortable sharing her views with her classmates for fear of "being shut down," while Carly and Stephanie felt very comfortable sharing their views. Although Michelle could not openly express her opinions, she was convicted that the Marine Corps had not changed her.

Maturity.

Participants described a level of maturity that they achieved after serving in the military. Alex summed up her experience of being a woman in the military:

> You know you, I had to grow up, and I had to show that I could be trusted with such things (working with an all-male maintenance team). Maybe not all the girls, but me personally. And that really carried outside the military, because I think it really helps me make more conscious decisions.

Alex reflected on her first undergraduate experience to illustrate her growth and development. She described herself as a "knucklehead" who thought she knew everything when she attended Patriot University the first time. The forestry major shared, "Now I'm the one who asks all the questions. 'Hey! Are you sure this is a sycamore leaf?'" Claire and Michelle also alluded to their sense of maturity compared to their classmates by discussing other students' ages. Claire described her relationship with other students by saying, "But honestly I feel like I'm mom (of the group). I'm the oldest one, I'm over 36 years old. I'm pushing 40 years old. And all the kids are like 21 barely." Michelle added, "And I think we all have that shared experience because everyone else seems so young."

A characteristic that participants described was developing a level of maturity they saw lacking in their non-veteran peers. Alex developed a sense of maturity after serving on a Navy ship and was not afraid to ask questions in class. Claire saw herself as the "mom" of her student friends, and Michelle reported that her veteran peers shared the experience of other, non-veteran students seeming "so young."

Strength.

Another quality the participants developed from their military service was strength. Alex's strength was outwardly forward, which she used on ship and later carried into her academic career. She described acquiring a "saltiness," which she defined as "meanness":

> I think being a female in the Navy, on a ship to be specific, you have to grow up fast, you can't fall for every guy that comes across your way, and you've got to get salty. I mean because if you don't, they're just going to steamroll right over you.

She continued, "To that point, you know, it was me versus the guys. And I had to win. I had to make sure I was on top." Once she came to campus, she described herself as being "fearless," exhibiting "forwardness," and displaying "good posture." She confidently relayed, "There's nothing scary about campus."

In contrast to Alex's outward strength, Megan's strength was a quiet inner strength and determination. She shared what she learned from the military: "If you are really determined, you can pretty much accomplish anything if you have the drive to do it." She further indicated that if you have the passion to do it, you can achieve anything. Megan is currently pursuing her PhD in genome science and technology. She obtained her undergraduate degree while serving as a military police officer and technical engineer sergeant in the Army National Guard. She described herself after leaving the military:

> I guess since leaving the military I feel like I'm a stronger female than I was before. I think people view me as more of a . . . (trails off). I just think that I became a stronger individual as a female in the military.

Michelle was also able to use her military experience as a source of strength when she faced challenging situations on campus. She communicated that during finals week, she reminds herself, "You have done so many things, you can study for this. You can stay up studying all night for this because you have done duty before for 24 hours."

Participants gained strength from their military service that they were able to transfer onto campus. Alex found that being forward and fearless could put her in a better position when working with the men on her Navy ship. She carried this assertiveness to campus. Megan relied on a quieter strength that she learned from the military to help her achieve

anything for which she had a passion. Finally, Michelle relied on the physical challenges of the

military to keep herself motivated to study for exams.

Leadership.

Participants discussed the leadership skills they learned by serving in the military. Carly

and Alex were very straightforward about their intent to be leaders on campus. Alex described

her assertiveness:

> But I'm extremely forward. I'm the person that asks the questions in class like, "Whoa! I
>
> mean you just went over this, but what does that mean? Or, "How do you do that or do
>
> this?" So, I think the forwardness of my personality makes it very likely that . . . yeah
>
> she was in the military.

Alex is the student who planned to wear a mask during the pandemic to be a good example for

her younger peers.

Similarly, Carly, who is 40 years old, shared that her leadership role in the classroom

stemmed from the idea that in the military if you do not volunteer, you are "volun*told*" to do a

task. She described her role as the student who will "gather the troops, if you will, and get

them to engage and participate and get them talking." She asserted, "I felt it was a privilege to

be there (in class) and especially because my college was paid for. But they (other students)

don't, they don't see that because they're so young."

In contrast, Stephanie's leadership was derived from her desire to "get better and

better." As a geography major, she took an optional certification (Project Learning Tree)

offered by her major with the intention to "teach people about the environment and how

things work and kind of give them a different perspective." Her desire to improve herself

stemmed from her military experience in dentistry where she was able to learn the additional skill of administering vaccinations. She recounted, "So I also could go on the flight line and make sure that people had vaccinations; they would pull me out the dental clinic do that."

The leadership skills participants learned in the military varied. Carly and Alex were more assertive in their leadership role on campus, whereas Alex asked questions during class and Carly would "gather the troops" and engage her student peers in class. Stephanie's leadership skills were derived from a desire to improve herself and teach others. She obtained a certificate offered by her major because she wanted to lead others in environmental education.

Flexibility.

The final characteristic the participants acknowledged developing was flexibility. Christina was a graphic arts major who did not make it through review boards and was in the process of changing her major. Before college, she had planned to make the military her career, but medical problems prevented her from pursuing that goal. She shared, "I guess I'm just kind of a living example of if one thing fails, have a backup and push for it. Have multiple dreams this way. I've had six (dreams)."

In contrast, Megan's flexibility took the shape of being able to manage multiple projects simultaneously. She described her time in the National Guard while also continuing her undergraduate degree by stating, "But then at the same time it taught me to juggle more things and to be, I guess, more studious in that way."

Similar to Megan, Stephanie described the many training opportunities that were presented to her while serving as a dental assistant in the Air Force. She shared that her use of

transition strategies was influenced by her military experience because she was taught to be flexible during her enlistment. She recollected:

> You were trained for a certain job, but you knew if you were pulled to go somewhere else to another duty station or you went on deployment that you had to be ready at any time to pick up and be flexible and change roles and just do whatever you needed to do. You know you may have to just change gears and find something that works better and be willing just to do what it takes to get what you need done.

Participants learned to be flexible while serving in the military and brought that skill to campus. Christina had experienced major changes in her life plans and advised others to "have multiple dreams." Megan learned to balance more in her life while serving in the National Guard and attending school, and Stephanie learned to be flexible because during her enlistment she knew that she might have to "change roles" or "pick up" at a moment's notice.

Despite the challenges faced by participants as they transitioned to higher education, they were resourceful and drew on several resources to assist during their transitions. Participants relied on campus support by seeking help from the Veteran Resource Center, seeking support from non-veteran students, and connecting with family and friends who were/had been affiliated with the military, both on and off campus. The most important resource for these veteran students was the skills they learned from the military and could now apply in their pursuit of higher education. These skills included developing their own identity, developing a higher level of maturity from their military experience, drawing on strength from their service, learning leadership skills they exhibited in the classroom, and understanding how to be flexible to achieve their goals.

Summary

In this chapter, I developed demographic profiles of phase I and phase II participants. In the quantitative phase (phase I), I conducted an exploratory factor analysis to answer the research question, "Is gender a significant predictor of veteran students' use of transition coping mechanisms?" After reviewing the data, I determined that the 5-factor loading grouped survey questions in the most thematic and meaningful manner. Each scale was named based on the theme of the variables (situation scale, strategies scale, stress scale, military experience scale, and support scale).

I then administered independent t-tests to measure the difference in mean scores for male and female participants on each scale. I failed to reject the hypothesis on four scales (coping, military experience, support, and support). There was a difference between male and female veterans on the stress scale at the .05 level. From these results, I developed an open-ended interview protocol and conducted interviews with eight female veteran students. After transcribing and coding these interviews, I developed and presented the six themes that emerged*:* 1) why they serve; 2) transition to military culture; 3) becoming the new you; 4) transition challenges; 5) transition support mechanisms; and 6) skills learned and characteristics developed in the military. In Chapter 5 I integrate the results and findings and explicate their significance beyond this study.

Chapter 5 – Discussion, Implications, and Recommendations

The purpose of this study was to compare the coping mechanisms of male and female veteran students transitioning from the military to college and to develop an enhanced understanding of the experiences of the growing population of female veteran students on college campuses. I used a sequential explanatory mixed methods research design to survey both male and female veteran students in phase I of the study. I then developed an interview protocol based on those results, which I used to interview female veteran students.

The guiding question for this study was as follows: What are the experiences of female veteran students transitioning from the military to college? The research questions were as follows:

Research question for phase I:

Is gender a significant predictor of veteran students' use of transition coping mechanisms?

Null hypothesis: There is no difference between men's and women's use of coping mechanisms as they transition from the military to higher education.

Research question for phase II:

How do female veteran students experience the transition to higher education?

This study was delimited by the population studied and theoretical framework used to analyze the data. The population examined was veteran students at a public, 4-year institution, and the framework that was used to analyze the qualitative data was Schlossberg's Adult Transition Theory.

Chapter 5 is organized in the following sections: Summary of Findings, Integration, Essence of the Female Veteran Transition Experience, Discussion of Findings, Implications for Higher Education, Limitations, Recommendations for Future Research, and Conclusion.

Summary of Results and Findings

Results from phase I of this study indicated that gender is not a significant predictor of veteran students' use of transition coping mechanisms for four of the five scales developed. The five scales are: *situation, strategies, stress, military experience*, and *support*. The stress scale is the only scale that indicated that a statistically significant difference exists between male and female veteran students, $p < .001$.

Six themes and 13 subthemes emerged from phase II of this study. Findings were presented in Chapter 4 and are summarized in Table 9.

Table 9

Summary of Findings

Theme	Subtheme	Summary of Findings
Why They Serve		Participants chose to enlist in the military for one of three primary reasons: benefits, family tradition, and escape.
Transition to Military Culture		Assimilating to military culture was easier than expected. They relied on current military connections, research, and online videos for guidance on how to prepare for their transition.
Becoming the New You		Participants were changed by their military experience and vividly remembered their first interaction with the military.
Transition Challenges		
	Communication	Participants struggled with communication challenges including communication style, lack of shared military experience, and challenges related to relearning how to communicate with civilians.
	Outside Responsibility	In addition to pursuing their degree, participants had responsibilities outside the classroom, including employment and family responsibilities.
	Veteran Anonymity	Students' veteran status was mostly unknown on campus. Most saw their veteran status a part of their identity but not the most salient identity.
	Not Connecting with Others	Participants did not feel connected to their non-veteran peers because of a difference in age, maturity, and life experience.
	Challenges Faced by Others	Participants more easily recognized the struggles of other female servicemembers then they did their own.

Table 5 continued

Theme	Subtheme	Summary of Findings
	Proving Yourself Twice	Participants struggled with proving themselves twice while in the military. They also minimized their own service by comparing themselves to others who had deployed or served in war zones.
Transition Support Mechanisms	Campus Resources	Participants described Patriot University as supportive of veterans. The Veteran Resource Center, Student Veterans of America group, supportive climate on campus, and positive interactions with instructors contributed to the positive assessment.
	Connecting with Other Veterans	Connecting with other veterans was a transition coping mechanism.
Skills Learned and Characteristics Developed in the Military	Identity Development	Participants identified their military service as a benefit to their identity development. They described developing an increased confidence in expressing their dissenting views in class.
	Maturity	In comparison to their non-veteran peers, participants described having developed an increased level of maturity because of their military service.

Table 5 Continued

Theme	Subtheme	Summary of Findings
	Strength	Participants gained strength from their military service in the form of being assertive and fearless, quiet determination, and drawing on previous challenges as motivation for current tasks.
	Leadership	Participants learned skills from their military service and brought those skills to the classroom to act as role models and leaders for their non-veteran peers.
	Flexibility	Participants' military service taught them flexibility and adaptability. This was a skill that they drew on while navigating their transition to higher education.

<center>**Integration**</center>

In this section, I integrate phase I (quantitative) results and phase II (qualitative) findings and discuss the inferences that are consistent with mixed methods research.

Situation

I feel veteran's needs are supported at my academic institution.

I surveyed male and female participants about their current *situation* while attending Patriot University. According to Schlossberg's Adult Transition Theory, situation describes the individual's current life circumstances and encompasses the external resources available to that person (Goodman et al., 2006; Schlossberg, 2011). The results for the situation scale indicated that there is no statistically significant difference between male (M = 4.62, SD = 1.19) and female participants (M = 5.30, SD = 1.04), $t(48)$ = -1.84, p = .41. Based on these results, I included the following question in the interview protocol: "How have you been received on campus as both a veteran and a female veteran?" to evaluate participants' assessment of their current life situation.

Findings from phase II were convergent with phase I results. Female veterans answered questions on the situation scale and rated their current situation positively (M = 5.30, SD = 1.04). Participants were encouraged that their needs were being met and felt supported on campus. Survey questions for this scale are included in Table 10. Patriot University provided these students with support through dedicated staff at the Veteran Resource Center, which participants described positively. They also depicted the Center as a one-stop shop that guided veteran students through completing their necessary paperwork.

Participants also indicated that Patriot University's Student Veterans of America group was beneficial to their transition experience and helped them feel welcome and "part of a group." Participants benefited from being part of a student group, engaging in social activities together, and staying connected with other veterans through group messaging.

They described a welcoming environment and were received positively by their non-veteran peers on campus. Female participants were described as "badass," thanked for their military service, and respected for bringing life experience to class discussions. Additionally, participants shared that their instructors were understanding if they had a military exercise that conflicted with class. One participant described her instructor's flexibility in arranging tutoring sessions and indicated the instructor was willing to meet around her and her five children's academic schedules.

Stress

I routinely communicate with peers or family members.

Male and female participants were asked questions to assess their stress level using a seven-question scale. Questions on this scale were characterized by Schlossberg's Adult Transition Theory as *strategies.* Strategies are the psychological and behavioral mechanisms used by a person to navigate the transition (Goodman et al., 2006; Schlossberg, 2011).

Results from the stress scale indicated, with strong significance of .007 (.007 < .05), that a difference exists between male and female participants. Because results from phase I indicated a difference, the following question was included in the interview protocol: "In what ways do you think your transitional experiences are different from your male counterparts?" to compare the transition experience of male and female participants.

Table 10

Situation Scale Variables and Survey Questions

Variable	Survey Questions
Support4	I feel veteran's needs are supported at my academic institution.
Support9	I achieve restful sleep on a consistent basis (6.5–8hrs).
Support13	I can sustain concentration on my academic studies.
Strategies5	I would consider my experience in readjusting to an academic setting as normal compared to my peers.
Support8	I engage in activities that give me an identity separate from being a veteran.
Support5	I feel confident in completing my academic requirements in order to graduate on time.
Self3_Recode	I get distressed with academic requirements.

Female veterans (M = 5.85, SD =.69) responded more positively to questions on the stress scale than male participants (M = 4.87, SD =1.18). These scores indicate women feel more confident in their skills to reduce transitional stress. Survey questions for this scale are included in Table 11.

Female veteran students addressed their interest in staying connected with family and peers during phase II interviews. This group was willing and interested in developing relationships with others on campus. Results from phase I and findings from phase II converged. Female veteran students in phase II interviews discussed the various ways they connected with others on and off campus. Participants connected with veteran students in person through the Student Veterans of America organization and virtually through social media. One participant felt connected to her previous military service by seeing other Marine students from her unit on campus. This same participant had one sibling attending Patriot University, and her younger veteran sibling had plans to join the trio in the fall.

Military Experience

I routinely use military decision-making skills within an academic setting.

During phase II, male and female veteran students were asked questions about their *military experience* and how the skills they learned from the military transferred to their civilian lives. Questions on the military experience scale are best characterized using Schlossberg's Adult Transition Theory's 4 S System of *self* (Goodman et al., 2006; Schlossberg, 2011). Schlossberg (2011) defines self as the characteristics of the individual, but it also encompasses the coping strategies a person can draw on to navigate the transition.

Table 11

Stress Scale Variables and Survey Questions

Variable	Survey Questions
Self2	I budget and manage my finances without difficulty.
Support12	I routinely communicate with peers or family members.
Strategies3	I manage the memories of military service in a healthy manner.
Support2_Recode	I did engage in direct enemy contact.
Support11_Recode	I experience financial issues.
Support14_Recod	I experience stressful military-related memories.

The results from the military experience scale indicated no statistical difference

between male (M = 4.97, SD = 1.33) and female (M = 4.73, SD =1.13) participants, *t*(48) = .59, *p*

= .35. Results from phase I indicated that both groups feel equally confident in their ability to

draw on military experience as a tool to successfully navigate their transition from the military

to higher education.

Based on these results, I included the following question in the interview protocol,

"What strategies were helpful to you in navigating this transition to college?" to evaluate

participants' use of military experience as a strategy during their transition from the military to

higher education. Survey questions for this scale are included in Table 12.

Phase I results and phase II findings converged. Female participants described skills learned

from the military and how they applied those skills on campus. The participants reported that

their military service gave them an advantage and helped them develop skills they used after

their military service. After separating from the military, participants felt they had gained an

advantage over their non-veteran peers. Their identity was more fully developed, which

allowed them to have independent thoughts and opinions regardless of how disparate these

opinions were from non-veteran peers. One participant described her experience of having to

"grow up fast" so she could succeed on a male-dominated Navy ship. This group also thought

of themselves as being more mature than their non-veteran peers, and they relied on that

strength to navigate their transitional experiences on campus. Participants discussed their role

on campus and in the classroom as a position of leadership. These students felt privileged to be

on campus pursuing a degree and took it upon themselves to serve as classroom leaders.

Table 12

Military Experience Variables and Survey Questions

Scale	Survey Question
Strategies1	I routinely use military decision-making skills within an academic setting.
Self1	I was never in imminent danger during my military experiences.
Strategies2	I use previous military experiences and/or training for managing the stressors of everyday life.

Finally, this group learned flexibility and adaptability in the military, which helped them successfully navigate completion of their undergraduate degree.

Essence of the Female Veteran Student Transition Experience

I developed a composite description as the essence of the female veteran students transition experiences. The essence illustrates the universal qualities of the participants' experiences (Husserl, 1991). This description emerged from the themes and significant statements made by participants and is captured in the following description:

Female veteran students join the military after trying other paths in life, including attending college, seeking civilian employment, or enlisting in the military to instill structure and discipline in their lives. Whatever their reason for joining (typically a combination of family tradition, military benefits, and an escape), participants vividly remember the "little yellow footprints" or the "welcome" sign above the entrance during their first interaction with the military. Despite the challenges presented, participants were surprised by the ease with which they were able to adapt to their new military culture. Female veterans acknowledged that they were changed through the acculturation process in terms of increased discipline, learning military bearing (conduct), and developing a new communication style while acknowledging the changes were for their "betterment."

Although the military is male-centered, participants do not believe that they were the victims of gender discrimination. However, participants worked from a perceived deficit while in the military and described having to prove themselves worthy of enlistment. They were also quick to point out that regardless of their situation, they knew other female veterans who endured more challenges and setbacks than they had.

When female veterans leave the military, they struggle with adapting to a college

campus, including challenges communicating with non-veteran students, balancing academic

and family responsibilities, keeping their veteran status anonymous, and not feeling connected

to their non-veteran peers. Despite these challenges, this group is resourceful and relies on

transition strategies, including using veteran campus resources and connecting with other

veterans for support. Lastly, female veteran students are eager to employ their military-

acquired coping skills to facilitate a successful transition to higher education. They rely on

having formed their own identity, depend on their increased sense of maturity, draw strength

from their military service, exhibit leadership skills in the classroom, and remain flexible to

successfully earn their degree.

<div align="center">**Discussion of Findings**</div>

Discussion of Findings in Relation to the Theoretical Framework

  Moving in, moving through, and moving out.

  The themes that emerged are consistent with Goodman et al.'s (2006) cyclical

description of a transition, which include *moving in*, *moving through*, and *moving out*. During

the *moving in* phase, participants described why they serve, transitioning to military culture,

and becoming the new you. Hall (2011) presented four common reasons why a person might

enlist: "(a) family tradition, (b) benefits, (c) identification with the warrior mentality, and (d) an

escape" (p. 5). Participants indicated that their reasons for joining were because of family

tradition, benefits, and/or an escape. None of the participants in this study suggested

identification with the warrior mentality as a reason for joining the military. One participant

articulated that she joined because she was inspired by other military personnel. This reason was not presented by Hall (2011) as a common reason for joining the military.

In the *moving through* phase (Goodman et al., 2006), participants described the challenges of transitioning to Patriot University, which included communicating with non-veteran students, responsibilities outside the classroom, and challenges with their veteran identity. The themes that emerged converged with the existing literature that indicates veteran students experience transition challenges as they move from the military to the classroom, including re-learning how to behave in civilian culture, communication challenges, difficulty connecting with traditional students, and feelings of isolation (Borsari et al., 2017; Stalides, 2008; Steele, Salcedo, & Coley, 2010).

During the *moving out* phase, participants enumerated the skills they learned while serving in the military and how those skills helped them successfully navigate their undergraduate experience. One of the skills participants discussed was communication and connecting with others. Previous research indicates that female veteran students are most successful in their transition to higher education when they have positive peer-to-peer relationships (Barber, Rosenheck, Armstrong, & Resnick, 2008; Barry, Whiteman, & MacDermid Wadsworth, 2017; Campbell & Riggs, 2015; Elliott, Gonzalez, & Larsen, 2011). The participants expressed a willingness and interest in developing relationships with their peers on campus but found it hard to connect with non-veteran peers and other female veteran students.

Discussion of Findings in Relation to the Guiding Research Question

This research was guided by the question, "What are the experiences of female veteran students transitioning from the military to college?" One theme that emerged is that

participants learned skills and developed characteristics during their military service that they used as coping skills during their transition to campus. They described themselves as possessing a higher maturity level and developing a more independent sense of self than their non-veteran colleagues. They drew on the strength they learned from the military to navigate the challenges of higher education. Participants also learned flexibility, which enabled them to adapt to their circumstances. Finally, participants saw their role in the classroom as a position of leadership. They modeled good behavior, positively influenced others, and engaged their peers in classroom discussion.

It is well documented that servicemembers benefit from their time in the military (see McCann, 2014; Ochinko & Payea, 2018; Stalides, 2008). Findings from previous research and the findings from this study converge. Previous studies (McCann, 2014; Ochinko & Payea, 2018; Stalides, 2008) found veteran students benefited from their military service, and participants in this study also described the ways in which they benefited from their military service. The participants in this study were able to apply the positive attributes they learned as transition coping strategies. Despite the many benefits that this group of students reported, there are still significant skill-development gaps that institutions of higher education can help fill.

Implications for Higher Education

The GI Bill was developed during World War II with the goal of giving U.S. military veterans access to opportunities, such as job training, access to housing, education benefits, and helping them reintegrate into civilian life after their military service (Department of Defense, 2019). Veterans are using their GI Bill to access higher education, but what is less

clear is how well institutions of higher education help these students develop reintegration skills. There are several implications from this study for higher education.

First, higher education institutions need to examine current understanding, perceptions, and policies of veteran students and challenge views that present veteran students from a deficit-based model (Pacheco, 2017; Phillips & Lincoln, 2017; Vacchi, Hammond, & Diamond, 2017). Current literature and veteran programs primarily emphasize the needs and challenges of this student demographic. Only focusing on the challenging aspects of this demographic negatively influences the perceptions of veteran students by peers, staff, and faculty (Institute for Veterans and Military Families, 2019; Pacheco, 2017). Veterans have been stereotyped as being incapable of achieving academic success since the enactment of the GI Bill in 1944 (Institute for Veterans and Military Families, 2019). Higher education and veteran support offices need to recognize that veteran students are resilient and bring many strengths (e.g., discipline, maturity, and mission focus) to campus (Ford & Vignare, 2015). A strengths-based model will provide a new framework for veteran-serving institutions to work from when interacting with veteran students, developing veteran programming, or creating policies that affect veterans. Institutions need to move beyond examining their "veteran friendly" status and move toward a model of recognizing veteran students as assets who serve as leaders, participate in civic engagement, and recruit other students to campus (Institute for Veterans and Military Families, 2019).

Institutions of higher education can help female veteran students develop reintegration and coping skills. Participants indicated that they would like to connect with other female veteran students on campus (Heitzman & Somers, 2015). Colleges and universities should

recognize this need and develop recognized student organizations geared toward this population (see Vanderbilt's Bass Military Scholars Program and Cleveland State University's SERV [Supportive Education for the Retuning Veteran] Program). For example, a female veteran student organization could meet as part of a first-year studies course and establish a cohort. Members of the cohort could support each other academically and socially with the goal of these students supporting each other throughout their academic careers (Opacich, 2019). To maximize the impact, this course should be taught by a female veteran instructor. Previous research identified a lack of same-gender role models on campus as well as a desire for additional mentorship opportunities by female veteran students (Baechtold & De Sawal, 2009; Heitzman & Somers, 2015). This recommendation would address female veteran students' desire to connect with other female veteran students and enhance opportunities for positive, same-gender mentoring.

Participants often thought of themselves as leaders in the classroom, but rarely had time for co-curricular activities beyond their own family's schedule. To fill this gap, higher education should offer female veteran students a leadership program that is nontraditional student friendly in both content and scheduling (see The Ohio State University's Undergraduate Leadership Conference and Student Veterans of America's The Leadership Institute). The culminating project for this program would be for the students to develop and tell their personal story as a female veteran. This public speaking exercise could help participants identify and strengthen the skills they developed through their military journey. Participants saw themselves as being at a huge advantaged because of their military service, and that is a

message that needs to be shared to teach others about the strengths, skills, and positive qualities this group brings to campus.

Institutions of higher education can shift the paradigm regarding how students, staff, faculty, and administrators perceive veteran students on campus. When these proposed changes are implemented, female veteran students may feel more connected to campus, have increased access to female mentors, and develop their leadership skills. The campus community and community at large may also gain a better understanding of the skills and assets that veteran students develop, and bring with them, from their military service.

Limitations

There are several limitations to this study. First, data collection was conducted at only one university; consequently, inferences may not be applicable to institutions of higher education that are not classified as R-1. Additionally, with a survey response rate of 16.23%, it is unknown whether results, findings, and/or inferences from this study can be generalized.

Second, interview data were collected during the coronavirus pandemic via virtual communication. The global pandemic caused disruption to the lives of billions of people across the world (David, 2020). Despite having contact information for 10 female veteran students from the phase I survey, students in this demographic were sometimes slow to respond or opted to not respond at all. Additionally, snowball sampling (Magnani, Sabin, Saidel, & Heckathorn, 2005; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) was a sampling method that I had proposed to use, but only one additional student was recruited using this technique. Because I conducted interviews virtually, I was not able to ensure that both the interviewer and interviewee had access to a quiet, distraction-free meeting space. Additionally, conducting interviews using an

online communication platform likely stifled or stunted conversations about challenging topics that could have more easily occurred in person (Gray, Wong-Wylie, Rempel, & Cook, 2020; Irani, 2018; Seitz, 2016).

Recommendations for Future Research

The following are recommendations for future research on female veteran students in higher education. The first recommendation is to conduct a study to advance the knowledge and understanding of why women enlist. Research (see Wertsch, 1991) on this topic is dated and was conducted when women enlisted at a lower rate than the current rate. Women in Wertsch's study did not have the opportunity to serve directly in combat roles, on submarines, and or in special operations forces (Bradner, 2016; McDermott, 2017; National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics, 2017). Specifically, this proposed study should focus on why women enlist to develop a deeper understanding of female servicemembers and their motivation(s) for joining the military.

A second recommendation is to conduct research that focuses exclusively on veteran students who enlisted in the post 9/11-era. Initial responses from post 9/11 era veterans were limited for this study; thus, veteran students from all service eras were invited to participate. Female veterans who served during the same military era would have served under similar conditions. They would have enlisted under the same military climate, including serving under the same policies, programming, and population composition (gender and race/ethnicity ratios, for example). Further, limiting participants to the most recent conflict would narrow the time between when the student served in the military and when they enrolled in an institution of

higher education. Future research could replicate this study and only include post 9/11-era

veteran student participants.

Finally, future research should qualitatively explore how male and female veterans

experience items included on the stress scale (financial stress, communication with others, and

engaging in enemy contact/experiencing stressful military-related memories). Results from

phase I of this study indicated that a difference exists between male and female veterans.

Because the female participants in phase II did not discuss topics included on the stress scale,

and I did not interview male participants, I was not able to determine whether results and

findings converged or diverged for phase I and phase II.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to examine and compare the transitional experiences of

male and female veteran students from the military to college. In this study I compared the

transition coping mechanisms of male and female veteran students. I used results from phase I

to develop an interview protocol to interview eight female veteran students. Findings indicated

that participants learned coping skills from their military service that they applied during their

transition from the military to higher education. Participants described five skills learned and

characteristics developed, which included identity development, maturity, strength, leadership,

and flexibility.

This study contributes to the literature by presenting the narratives of eight female

veteran students who transitioned from the military to higher education. Institutions of higher

education can benefit from the inferences of this study to learn about the skills that female

veteran students acquire while serving in the military, the skills and qualities they bring to

campus, and how these students positively impact non-veteran peers. Additionally,

administrators and educators can use this study to develop an enhanced understanding of the

needs of female veteran students and how they might develop future opportunities for these

students.

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Appendix A

Veteran Student Transition Survey

Introduction
You are being asked to take part in a research study about how veteran students experience the transition between the military and college. You have been asked to participate in this study because you have been identified as a veteran student. Please read this form carefully and ask any questions you have before agreeing to participate in the study.

What the study is about: The purpose of this mixed methodology research is to examine the transition of veteran students from the military to college. To be eligible for this study, you must be a veteran student.

What you will be asked to do: If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to complete a web-based survey. They survey will take approximately less than 10 minutes to complete. The survey will include questions about your military service, college experiences, transition from military to college, transition resources, and transition challenges.

Risks and benefits: The risk involved in this study is minimal. Some questions, regarding your military service, might be sensitive or elicit an emotional response. There are no benefits to you for participating in this study. The information learned in this research project could be beneficial to other service members and might inform higher education institutions about how to best help veteran students during their transition experience.

Compensation: You will not be compensated for participating in this study. You will not receive any compensation for completing the survey, however, you will have the opportunity to enter a drawing for one of three $20 Amazon gift cards. Your answers are confidential and will not be connected to your email address in any way. If you do not want to complete the survey, you may still enter the drawing by contacting the researcher at carrera@utk.edu.

Your answers will be confidential. The records of this study will be kept private. If any report is made public, I will not include any identifying information. Research records will be kept in a password protected electronic file; only the researcher will have access to the records.

Taking part is voluntary. Taking part in this study is completely voluntary, and you are free to withdraw at any time. There is no penalty for withdrawing.

If you have questions: If you think of questions you may contact the researcher. She can be reached at carrera@utk.edu or 865-974-7105. If you have any questions or concerns regarding your rights as a subject in this study, you may contact the University of Tennessee's Institutional Review Board (IRB) at 865-974-7697 or access their website at http://irb.utk.edu/.

Statement of Consent: Please select your choice below.

Clicking on the "agree" button indicates that:

> You voluntarily agree to participate
> You are at least 18 years old
> You have read the information above

If you do not wish to participate in this study, you may decline by clicking "disagree."

○ Agree

○ Disagree

To which gender identity do you most identify:

○ Male

○ Female

○ Transgender

○ Not listed: _____

○ Prefer not to answer

What is your age in years?

_____

Please indicate your level of agreement with the following questions:

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
I routinely use military decision making skills within an academic setting.	○	○	○	○	○
I don't feel any negative mental effects following military service (i.e. decreased concentration, memory or comprehension).	○	○	○	○	○
I use previous military experiences and/or training for managing the stressors of everyday life.	○	○	○	○	○
I manage the memories of military service in a healthy manner.	○	○	○	○	○
I was never in imminent danger during my military experiences.	○	○	○	○	○
I did engage in direct enemy contact.	○	○	○	○	○
I had a detailed plan for life after discharge from the military. (7)	○	○	○	○	○

Please indicate your level of agreement with the following questions:

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
I budget and manage my finances without difficulty.	○	○	○	○	○
I have a healthy outlet for managing daily stressors.	○	○	○	○	○
I would consider my experience in readjusting to an academic setting as normal compared to my peers.	○	○	○	○	○
I feel veteran's needs are supported at my academic institution.	○	○	○	○	○
I feel confident in completing my academic requirements in order to graduate on time.	○	○	○	○	○
I feel exercise helps me manage stressful situations.	○	○	○	○	○

Please rate "how often" you experience the following situations:

	Never	Less than once a month	Once a month	2-3 times a month	Weekly	2-3 times a week	Daily
I fulfill daily roles within my family (i.e. parent, spouse and or community service roles).	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
I engage in activities that give me an identity separate from being a veteran.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
I achieve restful sleep on a consistent basis (6.5-8hrs).	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
I eat healthy meals.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
I bounce back from adversity.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
I have the energy to accomplish daily tasks.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
I experience financial issues.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○

Please rate "how often" you experience the following situations:

	Never	Less than once a month	Once a month	2-3 times a month	Weekly	2-3 times a week	Daily
I routinely communicate with peers or family members.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
I can sustain concentration on my academic studies.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
I have moments of feeling down or in the dumps.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
I experience stressful military-related memories.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
I get distressed with academic requirements.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
I seek out people or situations that provide positive support within the university.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
I engage in a routine of physical exercise.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
I utilize the campus Veteran Resource Center	○	○	○	○	○	○	○

The second phase to this research study will involve interviews with female veterans. Are you interesting in participating in the second phase?

○ I am not interested in participating in Phase II

○ I am interested

If you are interested, please provide contact information or contact the researcher directly at carrera@utk.edu, 865-974-7105. If you know of other female veteran students who might be interested in participating, please feel free to share my contact information with them as well.

○ Name _____

○ Phone number _____

○ Email address _____

When you enrolled at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, was it the first time you enrolled in an institution of higher education?

○ Yes

○ No

What is your year in school?

○ Freshman

○ Sophomore

○ Junior

○ Senior

○ Graduate/Professional

○ Other _____

What is your academic major?

_____

When did you join the military (mm/dd/yyyy)?

_____

How many years did you serve in the military?

_____

What year did you separate from the military?

_____

Please describe your deployment(s):

○ Number of deployments _____

○ Average length of deployments _____

○ Locations to which you were deployed _____

○ Comments _____

What was your branch of service (if more than one branch, select the branch in which you spent the most time)?

○ Air Force

○ Army

○ Coast Guard

○ Marine Corps

○ Navy

In which component(s) did you serve?

☐   Active Duty

☐   National Guard

☐   Reserves

Additional comments (optional):

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Appendix B

Female Veteran Student Interview Protocol

Military Service:

1. Tell me about your military service.

2. Describe your experience assimilating to military culture.

3. How did you negotiate your femaleness while serving in the military?

Transition

4. How have you been received on campus as both a veteran and a female veteran?

5. Describe the unique college transition challenges you face(d) because of your military service.

6. Can you give an example of a transitional experience that was influenced by your gender identity?

Resources:

7. What strategies were helpful to you in navigating this transition to college?

8. How do you think your military background influenced your use of transition strategies?

9. How has your perception of yourself and your gender identity changed now that you are no longer serving in the military?

Closing

10. In what ways do you think your transitional experiences are different from your male counterparts?

11. In what ways do you think they are the same?

12. Do you have any other stories you would like to share?

Consent Form: Female Veteran Student Interviews

University of Tennessee
Carrera Romanini, Principal Investigator
Dr. Dorian McCoy, Faculty Advisor

Female Veteran Students' Transition Experience from the Military to Higher Education

You are being asked to take part in a research study about how female veteran students experience the transition between the military and college. You have been asked to participate in this study because you indicated an interest through the online study titled "Veteran Student Transition" or a fellow veteran referred you to this opportunity. Please read this form carefully and ask any questions you have before agreeing to participate in the study.

What the study is about: The purpose of this mixed methodology research is to examine the transition of female veteran students from the military to college. To be eligible for this study, you must be female, a first-time enrollee, and pursuing a degree at the University of Tennessee.

What you will be asked to do: If you agree to participate in this study, I will conduct an interview with you. The interview will include questions about your military service, college experiences, transition from military to college, transition resources, and transition challenges. The interview will take approximately 60 to 75 minutes to complete. With your permission, I would also like to audio-record the interview. The recording will be used for record keeping (transcription) purposes only; only the investigator and the faculty advisory will have access to the audio recording.

Risks and benefits: The risk involved in this study is minimal. Some questions, regarding your military service, might be sensitive or elicit an emotional response. There are no benefits to you for participating in this study. The information learned in this research project could be beneficial to other service members and might inform higher education institutions about how to best help veteran students during their transition experience.

Compensation: You will not be compensated for participating in this study.

Your answers will be confidential. The records of this study will be kept private. If any report is made public, I will not include any identifying information. Research records will be kept in a password protected electronic file; only the researcher will have access to the records. The audio-record of the interview will be destroyed after it has been transcribed. To further protect participants, pseudonyms will be used.

Taking part is voluntary. Taking part in this study is completely voluntary. You may skip any questions that you do not want to answer. You are free to withdraw at any time. There is no penalty for skipping questions or withdrawing.

If you have questions: Questions can be asked at any time throughout the research process. If you have questions now, please ask them; if you think of questions later you may contact the researcher. She can be reached at carrera@utk.edu or 661-332-0570. If you have any questions or concerns regarding your rights as a subject in this study, you may contact the University of Tennessee's Institutional Review Board (IRB) at 865-974-7697 or access their website at http://irb.utk.edu/.

Statement of Consent: I have read this form, been given the chance to ask questions and have my questions answered. If I have more questions, I have been told who to contact. I understand that I am agreeing to be in this study. I can keep a copy of this consent information for future reference. If I do not want to be in this study, I do not need to do anything else.

Institutional Review Board Approval

February 12, 2020

Carrera Romanini,
UTIA - UTIA - Administration-Ag Experiment Station

Re: UTK IRB-19-05417-XP
Study Title: Female Veteran Students' Transition Experiences from the Military to Higher
Education: A Mixed Methods Study

Dear Carrera Romanini:

The UTK Institutional Review Board (IRB) reviewed your application for **revision** of your
previously approved project, referenced above.
The IRB determined that your application is eligible for **expedited** review under 45 CFR
46.110(b)(2). The following revisions were approved as complying with proper consideration of
the rights and welfare of human subjects and the regulatory requirements for the protection of
human subjects:

- Number of participants to be accrued changed to 308
- Updated Phase I survey duration to less than 10 minutes
- Revised Phase I participant recruitment methods
- Added drawing for 3 $20 Amazon gift cards
- Updated survey
- Updated recruitment material and consent form to include these changes
- Application version 1.3
- Consent Forms 02 011 2020 - Version 1.1
- Recruitment Email Text - Version 1.2
- Survey instrument - Version 1.1

Approval does not alter the expiration date of this project, which is 11/06/2020.

In the event that subjects are to be recruited using solicitation materials, such as brochures, posters, web-based advertisements, etc., these materials must receive prior approval of the IRB. Any revisions in the approved application must also be submitted to and approved by the IRB prior to implementation. In addition, you are responsible for reporting any unanticipated serious adverse events or other problems involving risks to subjects or others in the manner required by the local IRB policy.

Finally, **re-approval** of your project is required by the IRB in accord with the conditions specified above. You may not continue the research study beyond the time or other limits specified unless you obtain prior written approval of the IRB.

Sincerely,

Colleen P. Gilrane, Ph.D.
Chair

Vita

Carrera Romanini has worked in research administration for the past eight years. She currently is the administrative assistant for the dean of the University of Tennessee AgResearch. She holds a Master of Science in Agriculture and Extension Education from the University of Tennessee and a Bachelor of Science in Communication Studies from Northwestern University. She is a member of Gamma Sigma Delta, the Honor Society of Agriculture. In her leisure time, she likes to adventure with her husband, William, and their 3 year old son, Wesley.