

VETERANS IN HIGHER EDUCATION: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF VETERANS'
HIGHER EDUCATION EXPERIENCE

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BY

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ABSTRACT

DISSERTATION: Veterans in Higher Education: An Ethnographic Study of Veterans' Higher Education Experience

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This ethnographic study examined the higher education experience of six Global War on Terrorism combat Veterans, using two research questions: 1) How does a Global War on Terrorism (GWOT) Veteran student perceive his/her educational experiences at a four year university? 2) What are the educational, emotional, and psychological needs of the (GWOT) combat Veteran while pursuing higher education? The findings indicated that the Veterans interviewed experienced three major themes through their higher education process: 1) Transitions, all Veterans interviewed experienced a series of rapid transitions which forced them to shift their focus and daily routines from extremes of rigidity during military service to the non-directive life as student. 2) Alienation, all Veterans interviewed expressed a sense of isolation and alienation as they transitioned from military life to the life of a student. 3) Disability, all Veterans interviewed discussed stereotypes of disability to include PTSD, not necessarily their own, but of other Veterans they knew.

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this research to all the men and women of the United States Armed Services.
Their unselfish volunteer duties make the United States and the world a safer and better place.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	iii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	iv
DEDICATION	v
Table of Contents	1
CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION	4
<i>The Brotherhood</i>	4
Researcher Statement	5
Purpose Statement	7
Research Questions	7
Significance of the Study	7
Definitions	9
Summary of Chapter One	10
CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW	12
Veterans Education through History	12
Combat Veterans as Special Needs Demographic	19
Independent Groups and Organizations Championing the Cause	19
Veteran Identified Differences from the Mainstream Population	21
Programs to Address Veteran Needs	23

Other Research Studies Related to Returning Veterans to Higher Education	24
Summary for Chapter Two	27
CHAPTER 3 METHODOLOGY	29
Research Questions.....	29
Research Design.....	29
Research Site.....	30
Participants/Population	31
Role of the Researcher	32
Researcher as an Insider.....	33
Data Collection Method.....	35
Data Analysis	37
Research Assumptions	38
Research Limitations	38
Validity/Trustworthiness.....	40
Ethical Considerations	41
Summary of Chapter Three.....	41
Chapter 4 Results	42
Description of Participants.....	42
<i>The Participants</i>	43
Findings.....	45
Transitions.....	45
Social Contextual	50
Disability.....	57

Summary of Chapter 4..... 59

Chapter 5 Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations 61

 Significance of the Study 61

 Conclusions from this Study..... 69

 Discussion..... 71

 Recommendations for Institutions 75

 Recommendations for Future Research 85

 Final Thoughts 86

References..... 88

Appendix A: Informed Consent Form 95

Appendix B: Interview Guide..... 98

 Research Questions 98

 Interview Questions 98

Appendix C: Recruitment Letter..... 101

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The Brotherhood

*"I now know why men who have been to war yearn to reunite.
Not to tell stories or look at old pictures. Not to laugh or weep.
Comrades gather because they long to be with the men who once acted at their best;
men who suffered and sacrificed, who were stripped of their humanity.
I did not pick these men. They were delivered by fate and the military.
But I know them in a way I know no other men. I have never given anyone such trust.
They were willing to guard something more precious than my life.
They would have carried my reputation, the memory of me.
It was part of the bargain we all made, the reason we were so willing to die for one another.
As long as I have my memory, I will think of them all, every day.
I am sure that when I leave this world, my last thought will be of
my family and my comrades. . . Such good men."
- Author unknown*

Higher education is entering a new era of service to men and women who have served their country through the armed forces. There are an estimated 4.5 million Veterans from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan (United States Census, 2010) who through their service have earned a myriad of educational benefits. Many of these Veterans are unsure of what benefits they have earned. They do not know how to activate those benefits or even how to apply for admission and register for classes at a college or university. Many of these Veterans have no goal of completing a degree; many simply take classes because they have been told that education is important without a clear understanding of what that means. According to the Military Family Research Institute (MFRI) (2009), educational institutions have typically done a poor job in understanding the unique perspectives, needs and issues that are an inherent part of

Veteran lives. This is further supported by Ackerman, DiRamio, and Mitchell (2009) who state that student Veterans sometimes believe that higher education institutions are poorly prepared to understand them.

Researcher Statement

I first became interested in Veteran educational issues in 2010 while deployed to Afghanistan. During my service, I had the opportunity to teach college classes to deployed soldiers for Central Texas College. One of the first things that I noticed was that the vast majority of my students had little understanding of the educational process. Some of the noted areas of knowledge deficiency were:

- Little understanding of Veteran's educational benefits or how to utilize them to take college courses. I was constantly bombarded with questions about how the Veteran could pay for courses and how the process worked. I spent several hours each week facilitating the process through the local college liaison.
- Unclear expectations regarding transference of credits from community colleges to four-year institutions. Some of my students expressed an interest in continuing their education at a four-year institution and were surprised when we discussed how little actually transferred.
- Lack of an end goal for program completion. Many students were simply taking classes because they had been told that college classes were good and would help them achieve promotion. Most of the students were simply acting on their supervisor's advice that college credit awarded promotion points. The Veterans would sign up for classes that fit into their schedule and seemed interesting to them

with no real educational plan, other than they were going to “take classes to earn promotion points”.

- Lack of regular study plan to address educational assignments. This was predominant in the combat theatre, and it quickly became obvious that study time outside of the classroom took a back seat to mission requirements. I began to incorporate more classroom activities to reinforce the course objective and left little to outside assignments. The students responded well and were highly energized each evening as we discussed the lesson materials and conducted classroom activities that placed the class lectures into real life situations.

Within my doctoral program, I began to reflect back upon my own experiences within the higher education process. My own collegiate experience involved an A.A.S., a B.S. and an M.A. at three different educational institutions, over 20 years. Each of these programs had been funded by the military under several different programs. I recalled the many times that I had to seek help with education benefit related questions, course selection and general questions about the college educational process. I reflected upon the key roles played by faculty advisors, Veteran’s Affairs representatives and other significant mentors.

With this introspection, I decided to explore the field of literature relating to Veteran’s experiences within higher education. One of the first books that I came across was *When Johnny and Jane come marching home* (Caplan, 2011). This book focused on issues related to reintegration of combat Veterans within society and identified many problems encountered by Veterans, their families and society in general. Intrigued by the arguments set forth by Caplan, I found another book of note that addressed many of the same concerns but from a slightly different and more germane perspective of Veterans in higher education; *When Johnny and Jane*

come marching to campus (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011). These two books created a new genre of educational literature concerning combat Veterans and their specific needs and became pivotal in my examination of current practices of universities in regard to combat Veterans. Following this research interest, I examined six other dissertations and a wealth of journal articles all published within the last two years. These publications helped to establish the framework and context for my research questions.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative research study is to explore and understand the combat Veteran's perspective of the higher education process. I seek to understand key elements of support and degradation of the Veteran's ability to successfully complete a higher education program of study at a public university in the Midwest United States. Outcomes and recommendations of this study may be used to create and/or adapt university programs to positively influence educational outcomes for combat Veterans.

Research Questions

Two research questions will guide this study:

1. How does a Global War on Terrorism (GWOT) Veteran student perceive his/her educational experiences at a four-year university?
2. What are the educational, emotional, and psychological needs of the (GWOT) combat Veteran while pursuing higher education?

Significance of the Study

This study explores the complex needs of the combat Veteran and how universities can develop effective strategies for identifying potential issues and implement solutions to address the specialized needs of the combat Veteran. According to the Department of Veterans Affairs

approximately 31% of the 4.3 million combat Veterans of the Global War on Terrorism (GWOT) have received some type of injury from this service. Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) are the signature wounds of this conflict (Caplan, 2011). There are another 11% diagnosed with poly-trauma (multiple diagnoses). Many researchers and social workers feel that the reported numbers of Veterans with PTSD are vastly under reported due to concerns with stigma associated with being considered mentally deficient (Caplan, 2011).

Barring disability-related issues, Veterans still differ in a broad manner on several fronts. Veterans typically have travelled extensively and been exposed to a wide range of cultures. Veterans tend to value the cost of an education and seek to gain the most knowledge from a class, which can be seen in stark contrast to the traditional student who may attend class as a matter of convenience (Caplan, 2011; DiRamio et al., 2008).

The lack of cultural competence of faculty, staff, and other students is a common issue when talking with Veterans. Cultural competence is defined as a set of congruent behaviors, attitudes, and policies that come together in a system, agency, or among professionals and enables that system, agency, or those professionals to work effectively in cross-cultural situations (Cross et al., 1989). In layman terms, cultural competency is the ability to understand the frame of reference of a particular demographic, in this case, Veterans. There is a wealth of anecdotal evidence that suggests that Veterans and their unique needs are not well understood by educational institutions.

Veteran's benefits represent a large pool of educational money that is funded from Federal, State, and private sources. The average Veteran's educational support package under the Post 9/11 GI bill can exceed \$18,000 per academic year (United States Department of Veterans Affairs, 2012). This amount does not include book and housing stipends, consisting of

an additional \$1500 in book fees per year, and \$12,000 more in housing stipend most of which will likely trickle through the local economy (United States Department of Veterans Affairs, 2012a).

Definitions

Combat Veteran – For purposes of this study, any person who served overseas in a combat environment for 30 days or more or a service member who served less than 30 days received a Purple Heart or a Veterans Affairs service connected disability rating.

GWOT – Acronym for Global War on Terrorism, which encompasses military actions from September 11, 2001 through present day.

TBI – Acronym for Traumatic Brain Injury. “A TBI happens when something outside the body hits the head with significant force. This could happen when a head hits a windshield during a car accident. It could happen when a piece of shrapnel enters the brain. Or it could happen during an explosion of an improvised explosive device (IED.) Individuals who sustain a TBI may experience a variety of effects, such as an inability to concentrate, an alteration of the senses (hearing, vision, smell, taste, and touch), difficulty speaking, and emotional and behavioral changes. Whether the TBI is mild, moderate, or severe, persistent symptoms can have a profound impact on the injured survivor and those who serve as caregivers” (United States Department of Veterans Affairs, 2013a).

mTBI – Acronym for Mild Traumatic Brain Injury any injury related to concussive blast or traumatic injury of the head which may result in mild to moderate cognitive and memory impairment.

MOS – Acronym for Military Occupational Specialty, which defines what the job of the military personnel is.

Polytrauma – Term coined by the VA to “describe injuries to multiple body parts and organs occurring as a result of blast-related wounds seen in Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) and Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF)” (United States Department of Veterans Affairs, 2013a).

PTSD – Acronym for Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. Stress reactions that occur after a traumatic event such as combat. There are four types of PTSD: reliving the event; avoiding situations that remind the person of the event; negative changes in beliefs and feelings towards themselves; and hyper-arousal, where the person is continually on guard (United States Department of Veterans Affairs, 2013b).

SVO – Acronym for Student Veteran Organization. These organizations are formed at colleges and universities by Veteran students with the purpose of creating a sense of camaraderie and fostering a cooperative environment for Veterans who are studying at the school.

Veteran – A person who has honorably served a stint of active military duty generally considered to be one year in length or more or a National Guard or Reservist who has deployed into a combat zone and returned or who has retired from military service with an honorable discharge.

Veteran Friendly – A designation for a school that has emplaced policies and procedures that recognizes and supports Veteran students within the college or university. There currently are no defined contexts to the extent in which a school should provide support in order to earn the moniker “Veteran friendly”.

Summary of Chapter One

There has been a significant uptake in interest by universities, individuals, and organizations concerning the reintegration of Veterans from military service to civilian life.

Many areas of research have been proposed and many have been conducted, however most focus externally on the Veteran. I propose to examine the issues from the Veteran perspective, so that the Veteran can bring their issues and concerns to the forefront of the research and give insight and thought to the issues that they deem important.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Veterans Education through History

Veteran educational constructs are a relatively new idea that came in to existence following WWII. Prior to this time Veterans had no opportunity to earn educational money except as the result of permanent disability. The oldest educational plan in place specifically for Veterans was Vocational Rehabilitation (Voc. Rehab). Voc. Rehab was first addressed in legislation shortly before the end of WWI under the War Insurance Act Amendments of 1917, which according to the VA created the authority to establish courses for the rehabilitation and vocational training of Veterans with permanent disabilities the VA also estimates that 16 million Americans fought in WWI (United States Department of Veterans Affairs, 2012a). Of these Veterans an estimated 670,000 were wounded in the conflict. Due in no small part to the large number of WWI Veterans returning home, in 1918 the Federal Board for Vocational Education was established through the Vocational Rehabilitation Act of 1918 which allowed for any disabled and honorably discharged Veteran to receive vocational rehabilitation training (United States Department of Veterans Affairs, 2012a).

During WWII many of the injustices visited upon Veterans were recognized and subsequent legislation was passed. The most important piece of legislation passed was the Service Members Readjustment Act, which established the “GI Bill of Rights” (United States Department of Veterans Affairs, 2012b). Signed into law on June 22, 1944, this act provided three key benefits for Veterans:

- Provided four years of education or training including tuition, books, fees, and monthly subsistence allowance
- Federally guaranteed home and business loans
- Unemployment compensation for maximum of 52 weeks following minimum of 90 days of active service (United States Department of Veterans Affairs, 2012b).

Upon completion of the war on August 14, 1945, the mass exodus of troops home was accompanied by strikes within the coal and railroad industries, which nearly paralyzed American industry in the winter of 1945-46. Resultant rises in price affected nearly all aspects of American life. There were an estimated 2.7 million Americans who had served in WWII and according to the VA there were an estimated 671,000 Veterans who had been wounded (United States Census, 2010). This bleak economic picture coupled with the huge volume of returning Veterans had a huge impact upon the post-secondary educational institution as enrollment in college courses experienced a huge influx of Veterans. College enrollment in the United States went from 1.6 million in 1945 to 2.1 million, with 48.7% of these enrolled students being Veterans.

The Korean War also left its mark on landscape of educational referendums for Veterans. There were an estimates 2.7 million Veterans of this conflict with an additional 5.6 million military members who had served peacetime only (United States Census, 2010). In June of 1950, the Vocational Rehabilitation act of 1950 was passed which re-established vocational rehabilitation for Veterans of the Korean conflict. This act also for the first time extended these same benefits to peacetime Veterans. The Korean GI Bill also made other changes that were not so benevolent, as it reduced many financial benefits and imposed new restrictions. The GI Bill entitlement was reduced from 48 months to 36 and payment of benefits was also changed and

now the Veterans received subsistence checks, which were supposed to cover college-related expenses, yet they seldom did (United States Department of Veterans Affairs, 2012b).

The Vietnam War also brought about changes in the Veteran educational programs available. The U.S. Census Bureau estimates 7.6 million Veterans served in Vietnam, by far the largest number of combat troops ever deployed. New developments began to emerge as the number of returning disabled Veterans took a large increase. The Veterans Administration (VA) theorizes that advancements in medical treatment, triage, and transportation resulted in increased ability to treat injuries that in prior conflicts would have been mostly fatal. For the first time societal views began to include recognition of the difficulties of the Veteran reintegrating into civilian life after serving in combat zones (Caplan, 2011). Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) while recognized as early as WWI as “battle fatigue” or “shell shock” comes into its own and becomes a recognized ailment of combat. The VA also recognizes that Veterans “reported feeling isolated and alienated from their peers” (United States Department of Veterans Affairs, np).

Legislation enacted in response to this conflict was the Veterans’ Readjustment Benefits Act, which was passed in 1966. This act changed the way educational assistance was calculated and established that active service Veterans with more than 180 days of service were authorized one month of educational benefits for each month of active service. This was later adjusted to 1 ½ months of educational entitlement for every month of active duty service. The end of the Vietnam War, like so many other conflicts, coincided with an economic recession in the United States. This coupled with increased availability of educational funding proved a great boon to Veterans wishing to pursue college education. Approximately 76 percent of Veterans eligible utilized their educational benefits, a huge increase when compared to 50% for WWI and 43% for

Korean War Veterans (United States Department of Veterans Affairs, 2010). The Veterans' Readjustment Benefits Act served roughly five and a half million Veterans by 1980. During this era another interesting first was developed as the VA began to direct outreach efforts to inform Veterans of their benefits and how they could be used. These outreach efforts included the creation of VA assistance offices in Vietnam and a toll free telephone system to regional offices in 1967.

The Post-Vietnam Era brought many significant changes to educational entitlements. The largest significant change was the transition from a nationwide draft for military service to an all-volunteer force in 1976. This shift in policy regarding procurement of military members forced the United States to consider enticements for joining the military. This was reflected in the passage of The Vietnam Era Veterans' Educational Assistance Act of 1977 called VEAP (United States Department of Veterans Affairs, 2012b). This act provided for matching funds towards Veterans educational needs. The Veteran could contribute up to \$2,700 dollars and the government would match the Veteran contribution 2 to 1. This program was lackluster at first and saw low enrollment rates and failed to generate sufficient interest in joining of the military. Another significant program enacted during this era was the establishment of "Vet Centers" across the country. These centers were separate from other VA facilities. These centers established in the Veterans Healthcare Amendments Act of 1979 were first established to treat the unique needs of the Vietnam Veteran and offered a wide range counseling services and treatment of PTSD. In April 1991, the Vet Center eligibility was opened to Veterans of the Persian Gulf, Lebanon, Grenada, Panama, and Somalia (United States Department of Veterans Affairs, 2010).

The 1980's saw many significant changes to Veteran educational entitlement and programs. The transition to an all-volunteer force in 1976 had caused major shortfalls in procurement of United States Service men and women. In response to this shortfall, The Veterans' Educational Act of 1984 was passed which provided another matching funds program where the Veteran could have \$100 per month deducted from their pay for twelve months and then earn \$300 a month for 36 months after serving a three year stint of active duty. This act sponsored by G.V. "Sonny" Montgomery became known as the Montgomery GI Bill (United States Department of Veterans Affairs, 2012b). For the first time in history reservist could also qualify for this program under a different chapter by agreeing to serve in the reserves for six years. Another landmark legislative piece was the Emergency Veterans' Job Training Act of 1983 which was directed towards Vietnam and Korean Veterans. This act provided money to cover training costs of Veterans in industry and would cover up to 50% of a Veteran's salary up to \$10,000 over nine months or fifteen months in the case of disabled Veterans. This act was designed to entice employers to hire Veterans and improve the employability of Veterans (United States Department of Veterans Affairs, 2012b).

The Gulf War Era started with Operation Desert Storm in 1990 and stretches through present day. There are an estimated 4.5 million Veterans of this series of conflicts spanning 22 years. An interesting shift in the societal climate occurred during this period. The Vietnam Conflict left many American bitter and disillusioned with war and those who fought it. This changed greatly during the Gulf War with American society favoring the Veteran and their benefits. The American Soldier was named as the "Person of the Year" in 2003 by Time Magazine (Gibbs, 2003) heralding a new era of Veteran centric legislation. In March of 1991, Congress enacted the Persian Gulf Conflict Supplemental Authorization and Personnel Benefits

Act, which addressed eligibility for educational benefits for Veterans of this conflict, and it also re-established the Vet Center role in assisting Veterans with re-integration back into civilian life (United States Department of Veterans Affairs, 2012b). The Post 9-11 GI Bill also came onto the scene during this era and was officially passed into law on June 30, 2008. This act focused on providing comprehensive coverage of the cost of education for Veterans. The act allows for 100% of the college tuition, books, and fees to be covered at any public university, despite the fact that these costs vary from state to state and university to university. Entitled Veterans also receive a monthly housing allowance under this program for full-time enrollment in face-to-face classes. Later updates to this act created a prorated housing stipend for Veterans attending online or distance education courses. Entitlement to the program is based upon a sliding scale of time served on active duty with minimum entitlement earned after 90 consecutive days on active duty and full entitlement earned after 36 months of active duty after September 11, 2001. Enrollment in this program allows for 36 months of educational assistance not counting school breaks. Veterans who qualified for earlier versions of the Montgomery GI Bill could also transfer their entitlement and if the previous entitlement had been depleted the Veteran could qualify for an additional 12 months (United States Department of Veterans Affairs, 2012b).

Another never before seen provision in this act is the ability of the Veteran to transfer entitlement to their children or spouse. Initial implementation of this act was delayed until late 2010 and was plagued by problematic issues. The VA was woefully unprepared for the vast number of applications for entitlement and the VA staff initially not well versed in the intricacies of the new program. The VA has streamlined the process as of the date of this writing and the entire process can now be completed online, I personally have used this automated process and it is very efficient.

Green to Gold (United States Army, 2013) is yet another educational program available to Veterans and allows full time service members to attend college with the intent of completing a baccalaureate degree and simultaneously completing Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC). Upon completion of this program the Veteran will return to active service and complete a tour of duty.

State benefits for Veterans vary by state. These benefits vary greatly and in many cases can be combined with VA benefits to pursue extended plans of study, and in some case increased monthly income while attending school. An example of a Veteran friendly state is Illinois who offers the Illinois Veteran Grant for active duty Veterans who return to the State of Illinois following a stint of active duty. This grant pays for four years of tuition at any public college or university in Illinois and allows the Veteran to simultaneously or consecutively use their earned VA benefits (Illinois Student Assistance Commission, 2013).

The landscape of Veteran-earned educational benefits has a long history with many legislative updates that reflect societal perceptions of Veteran value/worth. This ever-changing kaleidoscope of programs and services are not well understood by the Veterans themselves and many times by the educational institutions, as well (MFRI, 2009). The need for qualified facilitators seems quite obvious, yet many educational institutions fail to recognize the vast array of entitlements available to the Veteran. As such, the institution may only assign extra duties as “Veterans Affairs” representative to one or two staff with little to no training on these educational program or how to successfully interact with the unique qualities that makes up the Veteran student (MFRI, 2009).

Combat Veterans as Special Needs Demographic

Like other marginalized groups (e. g., minorities), the literature supports Veterans to have their own separate demographic category within the context of higher education. MFRI (2009) stated:

Like members of other minority cultures, student service members and Veterans encounter misunderstanding and stereotypes about their motives and experiences. It is not surprising when student Veterans and Veterans look to their peers for understanding, support, and strength. Like other minority students, student service members and Veterans may feel that only peers with experience in military culture can understand their experiences. Just as perspectives of other minority students should be considered on their own terms and not judged according to the standards of the dominant culture. (p. 8)

A special demographic status for Veterans could be based on three factors. First, there already exists much legislative action to support the needs of this group. Second, there are independent groups who champion for a cause and work to garner public support and to advocate on behalf of a certain demographic. Third, there are clearly identified differences from the mainstream population, which would necessitate specialized needs, especially in a higher education context.

Independent Groups and Organizations Championing the Cause

Since the onset of the GWOT in 2001, there has been a proliferation of organizations supporting the specialized needs of Veterans of the United States. Chief and foremost of these organizations is the United States Department of Veterans Affairs, which has roots dating to colonial times where the first pensions for wartime serious disability and loss of life were allotted. There have been numerous changes to the United States Department of Veterans

Affairs since its humble beginnings, but each conflict has seen a resultant rise in scope of benefits and services for those who have served in the United States Armed Forces (United States Department of Veterans Affairs, 2012b).

There are a multitude of other Veteran service organizations committed to advocating for Veteran rights and equality. The Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) was founded in 1899 after the Spanish American War and was a grass roots movement of Soldiers who had served and were advocating for assistance for Veterans of The Spanish American War and The Philippines. The VFW has become one of the most powerful Veteran advocates in the United States. The VFW was instrumental in the initial creation of the VA and in drafting of the Montgomery GI Bill. THE VFW provides a broad range of services to assist Veterans to include Veteran advocacy, assistance with filing of VA claims and a social venue for Veterans and their families (Veterans of Foreign Wars, 2013). The American Legion first founded in 1919 by Theodore Roosevelt is the second oldest organizations supporting Veterans and also provides a similar array of services (American Legion, 2013). Disabled American Veterans (DAV) founded early in the 20th century also provides a wide range of services for Veterans (Disabled American Veterans, 2013). The American Veterans (AMVETS) is yet another Veteran service organization providing similar advocacy and social services with a history dating back to 1944 and WWII (AMVETS, 2013). In the last decade there have been numerous new organization created, all with the intent of championing the cause of Veterans. The Wounded Warrior Project is one of the newer organizations formed in 2003 as a grass roots organization to support military members who had been wounded in action is rapidly gaining membership and political clout (Wounded Warrior Project, 2013). This short list of Veteran support organizations is by no means comprehensive, as there are a plethora of others that exist. The commonality of these

organizations is that they fill two functions; one as an organization of support to assist and advocate for Veterans in their needs and as a social matrix which allows Veterans to commune with other Veterans of similar experience.

Veteran Identified Differences from the Mainstream Population

The literature shows differences between Veterans and non-Veterans. These differences can be loosely grouped into social contextual differences and medically related differences, which can be further divided between physical injuries and psychological injuries such as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

Social-contextual differences. Within the social contextual differences is an often repeated theme of feelings of alienation on campus by Veterans (DiRamio et al., 2008; MFRI, 2009; Rumann & Hamrick, 2011). Other frequently cited issues revolve around differences in maturity level of Veterans and their counterparts. Veterans bring an even broader perspective into the classroom as they have traveled extensively, been exposed to, and interacted with cultures different from the American perspective. The combat Veteran has been exposed to life and death scenarios as part of the everyday fact of life (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011). The combat Veteran also tends to be more realistic in their expectations and worldlier. This difference in experience and maturity many times leads to a difficulty in interacting with other students and forming new friendships (Bennet, 2000; DiRamio et al., 2008; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010).

Veterans also have a propensity to avoid asking for help, whether it is disability support services as the result of injury or simply not asking for further clarification of classroom materials during class. This avoidance of asking for help is well documented in the literature. Some link this reluctance to expose weakness or vulnerability to a military culture where

members are taught to be self-reliant and those who ask for help to be considered shirkers (DiRamio et al., 2008; Grasgreen, 2013; MFRI, 2009).

Medically related differences between Veterans and non-Veterans. With an estimated 40% of combat Veterans returning from overseas with some type of injury, and an estimated 20% returning with Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI), there will be a large portion of the Veteran students on campus who will suffer some type of injury or debilitating effect (United States Department of Veterans Affairs, 2012b). A large proportion of these injuries are “invisible wounds” in which a casual observer would not notice an actual impairment. This added effect further complicates the issue as many times Veterans suffer cognitive impairments affecting their ability to focus on class, remember course materials and slowed cognitive functions. (Caplan, 2011; Elliott, Gonzalez, & Larsen, 2011; Moon & Schma, 2011).

The addition of physical and mental disabilities coupled with entrance into college is sure to create additional barriers for Veterans who are still adjusting to transition from the structured military life to the laissez-faire life of a college student (DiRamio et al., 2008).

How the VA diagnoses PTSD. The DSM-5 criteria are (United States Department of Veterans Affairs, 2014): Criterion A states that a person must be exposed to a life threatening event or an event that threatens serious injury or sexual violence. Criterion B states that the person have intrusive symptoms of the event named in Criterion A. These symptoms may occur as dreams, memories, dissociative reactions, distress or prolonged stress after exposure, and marked physiologic reactivity after trauma related stimuli. Criterion C states that a person must persistently avoid distressing trauma-related stimuli. Criterion D states that the person must have negative alterations to mood and cognitions. Demonstrated by inability to recall key features of the event, persistent negative beliefs and expectations about one self, persistent negative trauma-

related emotion, diminished interest in doing significant activities, feeling alienated from others and persistent inability to experience positive emotions. Criterion E states that the person experience alterations in reactivity and arousal by aggressive or irritable behavior, reckless or self-destructive behavior, hyper-vigilance, exaggerated startle response, problems in concentration, and sleep disturbance. Criterion F states that a person must suffer these effects for more than one month. Criterion G states that the persons must suffer significant functional significance in that the symptoms disrupt the person's daily life. And Criterion G states that the issues cannot be related to medication or other illness.

Programs to Address Veteran Needs

Most institutions of higher education have a designated Veteran service officer who handles request for military educational assistance. These service officers are trained in application procedures and general benefits awarded. They also serve as a liaison between the student, educational benefit provider, and the bursar. The Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) (2012) and MFRI (2009) stated that more advanced institutions have a full time representative who only works with Veterans. However, a great many institutions only have a single designated person to whom Veteran issues are a secondary or tertiary duty.

Throughout the literature there are many recommendations for best practices involving higher education institution programs to address the unique need of Veterans:

- 1) Institutions of higher education first have to identify the Veterans on their campus. Without a mechanism in place to identify Veterans, many will go unnoticed and unaddressed due to their propensity for hiding their military background (Lokken, Pfeffer, McAuley, & Strong, 2011; O'Herrin, 2011).

2) Development of a comprehensive office to specifically address the needs of Veterans to include direct connections with institutional offices of the bursar, financial aid and admissions to assist Veterans with their unique issues (Lokken et al., 2009; MFRI, 2009; Rumann, Rivera, & Hernandez, 2011).

3) The establishment of a student Veteran Service Organization. This organization can serve as place for socialization with peers, Veteran advocacy and peer mentoring (CAEL, 2012; MFRI, 2009; Moon & Schma, 2011; Rumann et al., 2011; Summerlot, Green, & Parker, 2009).

4) An orientation course specifically for Veterans designed to help them adjust to the college experience (Moon & Schma, 2011; Rumann et al., 2011; Summerlot et al., 2009).

5) A campus wide effort to educate faculty, staff and other students about Veterans. This effort should focus on examining the value that Veterans bring to the classroom and common misconceptions about Veterans and their unique issues (DiRamio et al., 2008; Moon & Schma, 2011; Rumann et al., 2011).

Other Research Studies Related to Returning Veterans to Higher Education

Current Veteran research can be generally divided into two broad categories; Veteran reintegration and Veteran medical issues. There are many subdivisions within each of these and many that overlap from one area into another. My research falls within the reintegration category, but it could cross into the medical issue category. The major difference is that my research will allow the Veteran to discuss topics within higher education and Veterans that they feel are important.

Reintegration/Transitions. Veterans as a normal part of their life must complete several transitions throughout their tenure in military service (DiRamio 2008). They must first transition from civilian to military member. This transition is difficult in the extreme. The process of

basic training is designed to strip away all components of individuality and enmesh the military recruits as a machine where all members are equally important cogs of the machine. This is also the first time that many recruits have ever been away from home for more than a few days, this separation from all that they know and stripping of their own identity to become one with a group of 50 other recruits is often times more than the new recruit can stand. Military service is not for everyone. The other facets of basic training are to instill instant response to commands even in the face of imminent danger and to instill basic instinctual responses to outside stimuli. There is a great deal of yelling, shouting and physical effort involved all designed to create a warrior who is ready to close decisively with the enemy in close combat and win.

Graduates of basic training return as different people (Strickley, 2009). They have a new found sense of purpose and confidence in themselves that can be disconcerting to people who are not familiar with the military (MFRI, 2009). These changes are also reflected in their ability to work effectively as a team performing complex operations with little to no communication as they work. Separation then from this environment can pose another difficult transition for the Veteran as their existing support structure of command and other military personnel are no longer there which can lead to feelings of isolation and alienation.

Many former members of the military go to great lengths to remain in contact with their fellow service members after separation from the military (MFRI, 2009). Additionally it is common for recently separated Veterans to have difficulty in making friends with other people outside of the military, resulting the Veteran reaching out to organizations that are comprised of military minded individuals, such as Reserve Officer Training Corps or Student Veteran Organizations (CAEL, 2010; & MFRI, 2009).

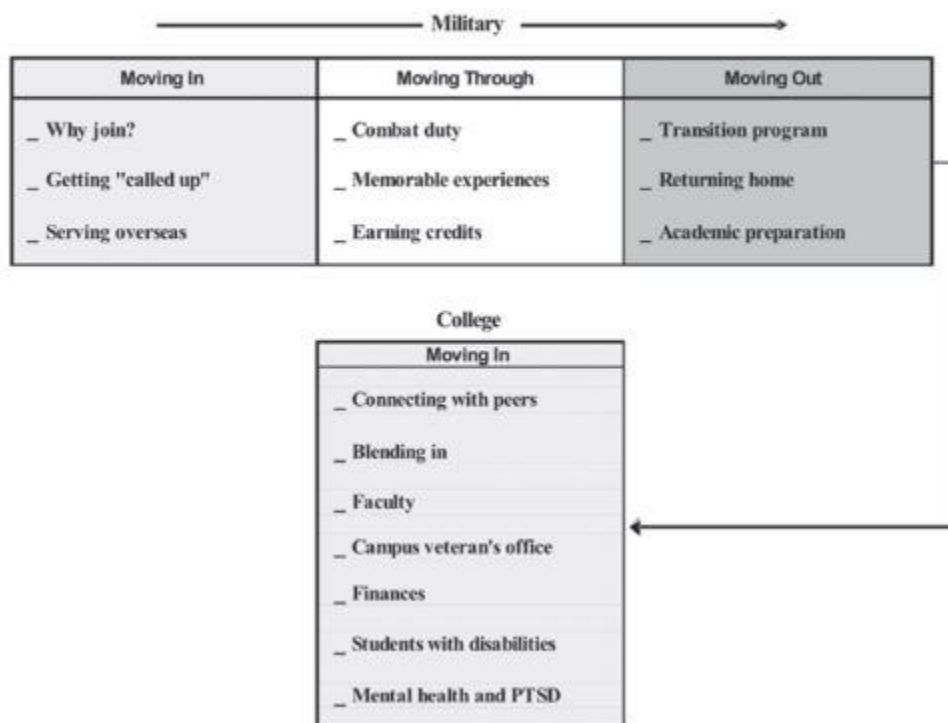
The rigors of combat can also create a sense of disconnectedness as the Veteran has experienced and witnessed acts so horrific that they are unable to relate these horrors to anyone who has not themselves witnessed similar incidents (Caplan, 2009). These disconnects in life experience can age a Veteran decades beyond their chronological age, creating a difficulty in relating to non-Veterans who simply have no frame of reference to begin understanding the experiences of the combat Veteran (Kreuter, 2009; MFRI, 2009; & Strickley, 2009).

These transitions can be even more difficult when the Veteran begins to transition from combat zone to college campus. Where the Veteran in a combat zone lives a highly scripted life where every moment is accounted for by the command element (Fain, 2012, & Strickley, 2009). Then to find themselves in the midst of a college campus where everything is self-directed can be a difficult transition for many Veterans. Additionally it is often reported that many colleges and universities do little to track Veterans on Campus and that while most institutions wish to do well by Veterans, they generally do not know how to help (MFRI, 2009).

DiRamio et al. (2008) adopted a modified version of Schlossberg, Lynch, and Chickering (1989) "Moving In, Moving Through, Moving Out" model to describe the process of transition for Veterans (See figure 1). An additional component is added after the Moving Out to include an additional Moving In component. The initial Moving In component of transition looks at reasons people join the military through the actual indoctrination of the military culture and subsequent service. The Moving Through component examines the common theme of military service through extensive relationship building, development of unique cultural experiences and memories and address the uniqueness of combat service. The Moving Out phase addresses the process of leaving the military lifestyle and making adjustments to a somewhat less structured environment of the civilian (Fain, 2012; & Strickley, 2009). Where the Veteran must now

reconsider their personal identity and how they share that identity. Additionally the Veteran must account for time lost in service, while previous acquaintances have continued on in school and life. Many Veterans must also take into account changes that have occurred within themselves whether it is injury/disability from PTSD, TBI or poly-trauma and deficiencies in school abilities through rusty study habits and insufficient preparation to make the adjustment from the highly structured military life to the self-directive life of a student. The final phase discussed is the Moving In stage as the Veteran begins the transition into college and seeks to develop relationships with peers, faculty, and self-changes.

Figure 1
Themes of Transition for Student-Veterans



Summary of Chapter Two

The Veteran has been at the center of legislative efforts from the beginning of the United States of America. This is not surprising when you look at the pivotal role that Veterans have

played in the formation of this country and the development of the United States as a world power. The societal worth or value of the Veteran can be seen directly in the legislative efforts that are created to level perceived inequality for the sacrifices made by the men and women of the United States Military. The second largest legislative push for Veteran specific legislation is happening now, as the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan wind down. The role of the United States Military is valuable and the majority of the people support its efforts and its Veterans. This recognition of the Veterans' sacrifices has been key to the development of funding for Veteran centric research and legislation.

Due to their service many Veterans, especially combat Veterans experience issues with reintegration back into civilian life. These issues revolve around fundamental changes that the Veteran undergoes and resultant changes in the self-identity of the Veteran and how they perceive themselves and how they believe others perceive them. Many of these perception issues focus on stereotypes related to Veterans.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

This research study utilized a qualitative research approach with a constructivist lens. The researcher conducted an ethnographic study of combat Veterans of the Global War on Terrorism (GWOT) within a higher education context. Data were collected through open ended and semi-structured interviews of self-identified combat Veterans of the Global War on Terrorism (GWOT). The informants discussed their perceptions of the higher education process and their personal stories of difficulty and success as they navigated the higher education process. The interviews focused specifically on Veteran needs and education institution responses to Veteran needs during the educational process.

Research Questions

In order to achieve the desired outcomes from this ethnographic research study, two research questions were used:

1. How does a Global War on Terrorism (GWOT) Veteran student perceive his/her educational experiences at a four-year university?
2. What are the educational, emotional and psychological needs of the (GWOT) combat Veteran while pursuing a higher education?

Research Design

Through this study, I sought to understand the higher educational process of combat Veterans from their perspective using qualitative research methods. Creswell (2009) described qualitative research as:

A means for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. The process of research involves emerging questions and procedures, data typically collected in the participant's setting, data analysis inductively building from particular to general themes and the researcher making interpretations of the meaning of the data. (p. 4)

Further, I sought to interact with the population as the Veteran students pursued their educational goals in a manner to construct meaning from these interactions to infer possible means of improvement. With this in mind, a constructivist lens was selected to pursue an ethnographic study of combat Veterans at the selected research site. Creswell (2009) stated the constructivist world-view allows for development of mutual understanding, multiple participant meanings and the generation of social and historical constructs. Merriam (2002) described ethnography as the study of people within the context of culture and how the knowledge and perspectives that people develop within their culture influence their worldview. This may be assessed through "language or the semiotics of culture" (p. 236).

Research Site

The institution selected for this study is public four-year institution with a student base of approximately 22,000 students and 400 Veteran students (formally identified) with 938 full time faculty members. The selection of this institution is geographically accessible, and familiar to me. I am also familiar with the support structures currently sponsored by the university, and have established ties with many of the Veterans enrolled at the institution. The university is also a self-professed "military friendly school," and as such will allow a constructivist depiction of what this means (Ball State University, 2013a).

The institution was first established in 1899 as a teacher training school, and over the last 113 years has become a doctoral granting four-year institution (Ball State University, 2013b). The university has one full-time staff person and two graduate assistants who deal exclusively with the needs of the resident military population of 400 Veterans, who have self-identified as part of the Veteran community (Ball State University, 2013a).

Participants/Population

The selected university houses approximately 21,000 students with a known population of 400 Veterans. The number of GWOT combat Veterans is not specifically known and is estimated to be around 150 students.

Purposive sampling will be used. Maxwell (2005) defines purposeful selection as “particular settings, persons and activities are selected deliberately in order to provide information that can’t be gotten as well from other choices” (p. 88). Participants will be purposefully selected through the Veteran’s Affairs office targeting Veterans who have been deployed in support of the Global War on Terrorism Sept 11, 2001 to present.

Interviewees were currently enrolled in classes at the specified institution at undergrad and graduate levels with one participant having recently (within one year) graduated from the specified institution with a bachelor’s degree. Both males and females were encouraged to participate. An email was sent from the Veteran’s Affairs office to all Veteran students at the selected institution explaining the research project and my background as the researcher. I concurrently contacted GWOT Veterans whom I personally know. I sought to interview from six to ten GWOT combat Veterans. I was able to interview six GWOT Veterans. Every effort was made to recruit service members from every branch of the armed forces; however I was only able to successfully set up interviews with participants who had served in the Army. This is not

wholly unexpected due to the United States Army being the largest branch of service.

Additionally I am well known at the research institution and the fact that I am a member of the United States Army may have positively affected other Army members in stepping forward to assist in this research. I believe that the predominance of Army personnel will not affect the outcome of this research as the research questions and interview questions were constructed to be unbiased towards branch of service. However I do feel that it is worth noting the absence of other perspectives outside of the Army. This poses the question of would the experiences of non-Army personnel be vastly different than that of the experiences related by the Army personnel? Current deployment trends have (citation needed) members of all branches of the Armed Forces serving together across Afghanistan and Iraq in joint force operations so that most members of the Armed Forces should have similar experiences. These experiences will vary significantly by the size and location of the area where deployed as well as the duration of the deployment.

Role of the Researcher

As a combat Veteran of the GWOT, I have experienced firsthand many of the issues addressed within chapter two. My own personal experience enables me to be an insider into the group with whom I am studying. I have completed an A.A.S, B.S. and an M.A. all through military educational assistance. I have utilized most of the educational programs awarded to Veterans and have been enrolled as a graduate and under-graduate student at public four year institutions. This blend of experiences lends itself well in being able to successfully interact with combat Veterans through a constructivist lens and to establish rapport to discover honest and sometimes uncomfortable answers to the questions that another researcher without these experiences would not even know to ask.

Researcher as an Insider

I conducted the research as an insider in that I am a member of the military culture at the selected institution. This insider status had some positive effects in that Bonner and Tolhurst (2002) identified that a researcher who is intimately familiar with the research sample population may better understand the culture and the socio-political environment and how things theoretically work and how they actually do work. As an insider, I had already developed a degree of trust with the sample population and was privy to information that might not have been disclosed to another researcher who was not an insider. Further Smyth and Holian (2002) an insider has already obtained a great deal of knowledge that would be time consuming for an outsider to acquire.

There are also potential drawbacks to insider status. Unluer (2012) stated that increased familiarity with the population being studied could lead the researcher to lose objectivity and to place their own values/response in place of the subject. Additionally role duality may become an issue as I as the researcher sought to balance my role, and additionally, the interviewee also had to balance duality of roles for me as an officer in the United States Army and as a researcher. In military life, the officer is a problem solver and is the person who is capable of determining the way to go. As a researcher, this is antithetical as I was there to pose questions and to record and interpret responses. This could have potentially led to issues as interviewee focus could shift to intervention rather than participation in the research.

As I conducted the research I reflected a great deal on the process and my role as an Insider Researcher. Most of the research and material available on Veterans is written from an outside perspective, specifically when the researcher is not a Veteran and is approaching the research from a perspective that is sympathetic to the Veteran but is not grounded personal

Veteran experiences. I believe that the outside researcher has many obstacles to overcome before they can get to the heart of the issues within the Veteran community. Below I will discuss three areas that I believe my role as an Insider Researcher was particularly helpful at getting to the heart of the topic:

1) As a combat Veteran with service connected disability directly related to my combat experience I had immediate credibility. This credibility I believe to be directly related to shared-experiences that are outside of the normal experience of most researchers. Brady, one of the participants, summed it up well, “you wear a combat patch, you gain a little respect because you have done something and been somewhere”.

2) The language spoken is full of acronyms and jargon that are confusing and nonsensical to the non-military person. This was acknowledged early on in the preliminary preparations; however it soon became apparent that my own level of experience and exposure to the military culture blinded me to many terms, abbreviations and slang commonly used within this culture. I hired a third party to transcribe the interviews for me. This person experienced many problems in the transcription as many of the terms were nonsensical and made the transcription difficult because the terms did not seem to apply within the context of the interview. I was forced to go back through each interview and supplement and fill in where the transcriber was unable to accurately capture the terminology. This was time consuming, however I believe that it was ultimately a benefit as I not only refreshed my memory of the interviews, but I also established the veracity of the transcribing.

3) On several occasions the interviewee was circumspect in discussing a topic that I felt was important to the research. My own familiarity with the culture allowed me to quickly recognize areas that the Veteran would gloss over and I would then ask more pointed questions

to get at the information I was looking for. I think that someone approaching the research from an outside perspective would have some difficulty in identifying the gaps and being able to adjust the interview to pursue these areas of interest.

Data Collection Method

Merriam (2002) described culture as, “the cornerstone of ethnography . . . Culture is the knowledge people have acquired that in turn structures their worldview and their behavior . . . culture as embodied in the signs, symbols and language or the semiotics of a culture (p. 236).

Additionally Merriam (2002) explained, “Immersion in the site as a participant observer is the primary method of data collection for ethnography. Interviews, formal and informal and the analysis of documents, records, and artifacts also constitute the data set along with a fieldworker’s diary” (p. 236).

To this end, I was already established as an insider to the Veteran culture that I wished to study and have been an active member and participant observer of this group of combat Veterans in higher education. I used both unstructured and semi-structured interviews in both a formalized setting and a less formalized setting.

An initial open interview of approximately thirty minutes was conducted as an icebreaker and to gain some background on both sides as an interviewer and interviewee. A second interview was then conducted with a 90-minute block using a semi-structured format with my interview guide. This format allowed time to first establish rapport with the interviewee and then allow ample time for the Veteran to tell their story from their perspective. The semi-structured portion of the interviews enabled me to redirect the Veteran’s discourse back to the two research questions posed.

I kept a researchers journal for the recording of my thoughts and insights as I progressed through the study from interviews to data analysis and incorporated these notes within the findings and discussion sections. The research journal became a valuable tool as I jotted down my thoughts and feeling as I conducted the interviews, and even more importantly as I used critical reflection to look back at the interview. I would then think about previous interviews and how the most current interview fit within the context of the previous interview. I would then have a more sculpted idea of emergent themes and was able to recognize possible ties during the interview and ask more carefully crafted questions to drill down further and gain more detail. One area this occurred in was in the transitions theme. Even though I had read a great deal of research on military transitions it had not been a key element that I was looking for until the second interview when I began to see the commonalities concerning a series of rapid transitions and the resultant changes that the participant had to undergo in order to be successful.

I also gathered demographic data concerning each Veteran to include degree program, year of school, and other related information. This demographic data may be useful for conducting a statistical analysis to better describe the sample population. Each session was audio recorded and transcribed after conducting the interview.

Transcription of the interviews were completed by a professional third party who only had access to the audio recorded session and was instructed to store the records on a password protected computer and or a locked drawer while they were completing transcription. Once transcribing was complete the transcription was emailed back to the interviewee for member checking to ensure accuracy and also allow the interviewee to add additional thoughts or statements. None of the interviewees provided any further feedback concerning the interview transcripts. This member checking is an important aspect towards intentionality and also

allowed for the possible submission of follow-on comments from the interviewee. No changes or additional comments were noticed or added by the interviewees.

Additionally any changes or additions would have been annotated within the researcher journal and notes for further analysis and comment. Guba and Lincoln (1985) suggested that there were both formal and informal ways of member checking and that this process is continuous. I used the process informally to allow for the participant to provide feedback concerning accuracy of the transcript and as a way to assess intentionality of the interviewee, in that the interviewee had the opportunity to review and to challenge my perceptions concerning the interview.

Data Analysis

Once the data were collected, transcribed, and returned to the informants for their opportunity to member check the responses, I interpreted and analyzed the data. The data from the transcripts were coded for significant themes of discussion.

Data analysis was performed using the strategy suggested by Glaser (1965) where the constant comparison process was utilized to ensure that trending data was reflected in the evolving themes. This constant comparative methodology entailed the development of themes within the interview and then after each interview looking back at previously held interviews in light of the data gathered from the last interview. After each interview I would read through the transcript and identify emergent themes as described by the interviewee. I would then go back through my research notes and my research journal to look at notation made during the interview and during the critical reflection time after the interview. I would cross-reference all three of these sources of data to identify possible trends of data groupings. Before the next interview I would review previously recorded data so that I might sooner recognize emerging topics and be

ready to ask more specific questions within the context of previously recorded data. One area I would have done differently was that I completed all but one interview within the span of one week, and as such I was unable to have the transcribing of the previous transcripts done for most of the interviews, so I was forced to rely on my field notes and research journal for most interviews. It would have been of benefit to space interviews out far enough so that transcribing and analysis could be done prior to the next interview.

Research Assumptions

In order to understand and prepare for data analysis, these were my research assumptions:

- 1) That the semi-structured interview conducted with the Veteran would bring forth honest answers concerning real needs and issues of the Veteran.
- 2) That the role of the researcher would not influence participants into making statements that are not representative of their particular case. I sought to remain objective to statements made and not introduce my own bias and beliefs into questions addressed to the interviewee.
- 3) That the data gathered was valid and trustworthy, though transferability of the data to all Veterans is not possible the data may be useful in developing recommendations for those who work with Veterans. In the event that there was conflict between Veteran statements and other information given, I sought to present the information as presented and endeavored to understand why conflicting information was given. This was addressed through researcher field notes, and my research diary.

Research Limitations

The findings of this study are limited by a) the truthfulness of the respondents, b) the researcher's ability to interpret the interviews c) the veterans who voluntarily submitted to

interviews. As specified in the Researcher as an Insider, I strove to maintain objectivity and examined my own preconceptions in the light of participant responses to ensure that I capture the participant's response without added inflection due to my own preconceptions. Additionally I was aware of role duality and specifically stated to the respondents that I was participating as a researcher with inside knowledge due to my experiences and that I was not participating in my role as an officer in the United States Army. Despite recruiting participants from all branches of service, I was only able to interview Army Veterans. Additionally all of these Army Veterans were enlisted. There were no commissioned officers or warrant officers that participated in this research. This is not surprising given that less than 10% of the military population is from the commissioned or warrant officer ranks. I do not feel as though the Army centric nature of respondents will have a negative effect, as in today's modern battlefield all branches of the service serve on the same bases and outposts while deployed, so that the general deployment experience should be generally the same. Obviously each individual is going to react to a deployment in different ways due to the size of the base they served on, the type of job that they performed and their length of stay. Additionally the person's background experience will also play a factor in how they interpret their deployment experience. I believe that the Veterans interviewed give a representative sample.

My own rank of Captain O-3 was thought to possibly create a barrier or cause issues with duality of role as researcher and also as an Army Leader. I do not believe that there were any issues with duality of role or with barriers to free communication from any of the participants. Each participant spoke freely about their experiences and none seemed to have any issue with stating exactly what they felt both positive and negatively about their college experiences and their military experiences.

Validity/Trustworthiness

Maxwell (2005) stated that a researcher does not need to attain ultimate truth for a study to be useful and believable. The inclusion of Veterans in a research design to tell their personal stories of educational triumphs and failures gave voice to a strong and emotional story with inherent value and validity for the reader and for the participants. I used member checks as a method to ensure accuracy of interview content as defined by Merriam (2002). I assessed intentionality (Guba, 1985) by allowing the interviewee to review the completed transcript the participant could address specific items from a contextual standpoint in that while they said this, they really meant something else. This process also allowed for the participant to add substantive pieces that come to mind after the interview is concluded. Lincoln and Guba's Evaluative Criteria (1985) addressed credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. I addressed credibility by the use of member checking and prolonged engagement. Lincoln and Guba (1985) specified prolonged engagement as the devotion of sufficient time to achieve the desired end. In that respect, I am and have been an active member of the demographic studied for several years and have numerous interaction within this population. Transferability is a sticky subject within qualitative research; however my research has gathered rich description that is consistent with that found within the literature.

Dependability also becomes problematic within qualitative research as thick rich description is used to describe a personal story that may or may not have implications for others. However, the data gathered is from those who are living the experience and as such it contains their own personal perspectives on their unique situation. This rich thick description of unique situations also goes to confirmability, as well as the reflective component of my interpretation of the collective and my presentation of my findings.

Denzin and Lincoln (2011) suggested that a constructivist approach is not concerned with the positivist criteria of internal and external validity, rather the focus is on authenticity and trustworthiness with a key focus on transactional knowledge, in that meaning is shaped through the interaction with the participant both by the researcher and the participant.

Ethical Considerations

The primary ethical concern of this study was the maintaining of anonymity of the participants. All data gathered was stored in a protected environment, locked within my desk, and on my password protected computer, with access only to the researcher and faculty advisor. Participants were assigned pseudonyms to protect their identity. All attempts were made to protect the confidentiality of the interviewees. A pseudonym was used instead of real names to protect their identities. The confidentiality of interviewees could possibly have been breached due to ethical considerations regarding the reporting of abuse to children or other special populations, however no such instances occurred.

Summary of Chapter Three

Thick rich descriptions were gathered from six GWOT combat Veterans through interviews designed to describe how they have moved through higher education. These interview descriptions were analyzed using a constant comparative analysis to develop themes of topics. This development of themes and topics was then compared to the literature for comparison and contrast.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

Description of Participants

Each participant was interviewed twice; the first interview was a short unscripted open interview used to develop rapport and establish connections, while the second interview was in-depth and semi-structured and was conducted using the Interview Guide. A total of six Army Veterans were interviewed for this study. Five were males and one was a female. Two participants were current undergraduate students one participant had recently graduated with an undergraduate degree. Two participants were currently enrolled in graduate course work one for a master's degree and the other for a doctoral degree. The final participant had recently graduated with a second master's degree and was considering returning for a doctorate degree. Each of the participants had served in the United States Army. Three participants had deployed as members of the Army National Guard and three participants had deployed as active Army Soldiers. All six participants were enlisted soldiers ranging in rank from Private First Class (PFC) through Sergeant First Class (SFC) E-7.

Table 1

The Participants

Pseudonym	Age	Active or Reserve	Sex	Iraq or Afghanistan	Degree Level	Wounded
Bill	29	Active Army	Male	Iraq X 2	Bachelor's	Yes
Brady	25	National Guard	Male	Afg. X 1	Bachelor	No
Jack	36	Active Army	Male	Iraq X 1	Master's	Yes
Jill	29	Active Army	Female	Iraq X 1	Doctorate	No
Jon	44	Active Army	Male	Iraq X 3 Afg. X 1	Master's Complete	Yes
Mark	26	National Guard	Male	Afg. X 1	Bachelor's Complete	No

Bill is a 29-year-old male who deployed to Iraq twice and served as a Combat Engineer where he did site preparation for defensive positions as well as site and convoy security and route clearance operations. Bill was wounded in action during his second deployment and spent a year at Walter Reed Military Hospital before being medically discharged from the US Army. He is currently pursuing a dual major in Aquatics and Architecture. Bill has almost exclusively used Vocational Rehabilitation (Chapter 31) to fund his education though he has also used federal financial aid.

Brady is a 25-year-old male who is currently enrolled as an undergraduate student. Brady deployed once in 2009-2010 to Afghanistan as a Specialist (SPC) E4. Brady served as an

infantryman and performed convoy and site security during his deployment. Brady is currently still serving in the Indiana Army National Guard. Brady is pursuing a bachelor's degree in Aquatics and has used the traditional National Guard GI Bill (Chapter 1606), The Reserve Educational Assistance Program (REAP, Chapter 1607), Federal Tuition Assistance and state specific financial aid.

Jack is a 36-year-old male who deployed to Iraq as a specialist (SPC) E4 and deployed to Iraq in 2003 where he served as a military policeman where he performed convoy and site security and was wounded in action during his deployment. Jack has completed a bachelor's degree in Sociology and is currently pursuing a master's program in Rehabilitation Counseling and has used Vocational Rehabilitation (Chapter 31), Post 9/11 GI Bill (Chapter 33), Active Duty GI Bill (Chapter 30), student loans, scholarships and grants to fund his education.

Jill is a 29-year-old female who deployed once to Iraq in 2003 and served as a 92G cook. She has finished a bachelor's degree, a master's degree in clinical Mental Health Counseling and is currently enrolled in a doctoral program in Clinical Psychology. Jill has used Active Duty GI Bill (Chapter 30), Post 9/11 GI Bill (Chapter 33), scholarships and student loans to pay for her education.

Jon is a 44-year-old male who was medically retired from the United States Army after being wounded in action in Afghanistan. Jon served four overseas deployments-- three to Iraq and one to Afghanistan. He served as an infantryman during all four deployments. Jon completed a bachelor's degree in Resource Management and completed a master's degree in Executive Development after being wounded in action and most recently graduated with a master's in Business Administration and is contemplating returning back to school; though as of the time of writing he had not decided if he will pursue another master's degree or a doctorate.

Jon has used Federal Tuition Assistance, Post 9/11 GI Bill and Vocational Rehabilitation (Chapter 31).

Mark is a 26-year-old male who recently graduated with a bachelor's degree and deployed once to Iraq in 2008. He deployed as a Private First Class E-3 and served as a combat engineer during his deployment and left service in the Indiana Army National Guard in 2013. He recently graduated with a bachelor degree Construction Management and is currently working in his field of study. Mark has used Federal Tuition Assistance, Federal Pell grants, Post 9/11 GI Bill (Chapter 33), state specific financial aid and student loans.

Findings

As I immersed myself in the data from the interviews conducted, I used research notes that I took during the interviews, reflective journals and the transcripts from the interviews, which were prepared by a third party. There were three major themes that became evident as I reviewed the data: Transitions, Social Context, and Disability. There are many subsets of data grouping that fall within each of these three areas, yet by careful consideration I could group all data within these three major themes. There also are some subset themes that have overlap from one category to another. In these instances, they are discussed independently from the context of the major theme.

Transitions

Each combat Veteran interviewed experienced a series of transitions. All experienced transition from civilian to Soldier through basic training and MOS training. All experienced transition from Soldier to combat and all experienced transition from combat Veteran to student. In most cases these transitions were rapid and with little warning for the Soldier. In some cases there were multiple transitions occurring simultaneously.

Jon provided an excellent example of multiple transitions with several occurring at the same time. Jon enlisted in the Army immediately after high school and spent the next 16 years in the Army where he was deployed a total of four times, three to Iraq and one to Afghanistan. During his tenure in the Army, Jon was able to work on his bachelor's degree up until his last deployment to Iraq where he was wounded in action by an IED. Jon then spent the next five years at Walter Reed Army Hospital undergoing 20+ surgeries. Jon lost most of his vision and is considered legally blind, though he does have some peripheral vision in one eye and uses CRT display screens and magnification devices to read. While at Walter Reed, Jon finished his last few classes for his bachelor's degree and subsequently finished a master's degree in Executive Development. Jon experienced multiple transitions simultaneously. He went from combat Soldier to wounded Veteran with significant impairment of vision, memory and learning style. He additionally continued his role as a student while simultaneously discovering new methods to learn. After his final discharge from Walter Reed and subsequent medical retirement from the Army, Jon transitioned to civilian status and began another master's degree, which he has just recently completed. These transitions evolved rapidly requiring many changes on Jon's part to meet the changing demands that these transitions presented.

The other stories of transition have many of the same elements present. Bill's experience was not far different than Jon's. Bill enlisted immediately after high school into the Army. Deployed twice to Iraq where he was wounded in Action on his second deployment. Bill transitioned from combat to Walter Reed Army Hospital where he spent the next year, recovering from his wounds, which included spinal injuries, steel plates and a mild TBI. While at Walter Reed, Bill took scuba lessons as a part of his therapy, which eventually led to one of his educational programs in Aquatics. Bill also experienced a rapid series of transitions enlisting

immediately out of high school and transitioning to a Soldier, transitioning from Soldier to combat Soldier and then transitioning to Walter Reed for treatment of his injuries, finally transitioning from combat Soldier back to civilian student. Again these last transitions were accompanied by new limitations of physical movement and slowed thought process due to TBI.

Jill also experienced a series of rapid transitions as she enlisted while still in high school under the delayed enlistment program. She underwent the transition from civilian to Soldier through basic training and her MOS training. She then deployed to Iraq where her husband who had deployed at the same time was wounded in action. Jill returned home after deployment and was discharged from the Army soon after and began going to college. Jill has since completed a bachelor's degree and a master's degree and is currently completing a doctorate degree.

Jack also experienced a series of rapid transitions, though Jack was the only participant who had not enlisted immediately after high school. He enlisted in the Army and was soon deployed to Iraq where he was wounded in action and returned home and discharged from the Army a short time later. Jack immediately enrolled at a community college where he completed an associate's degree and then took a few years off before coming to his current school where he has earned a bachelor's degree and is currently working towards a master's degree.

Brady's story is a little different in that he attended college for a year immediately after high school and soon learned that he would need additional educational benefits. He enlisted in the Army National Guard and was shipped to basic training just a few days after classes ended that fall. After completing basic training Brady only had a few short days before classes started for the next semester. Within a few weeks of starting classes, Brady received notification of a pending mobilization and ultimately dropped out of school for one and half years so that he could complete his train up for the mobilization and deploy. Brady then returned to college

within a few weeks of returning from deployment. Again we see a series of very rapid transitions, which impose drastic changes in everyday life that the Soldier/student must adapt to in order to be successful.

Mark also enlisted immediately after high school and soon deployed to Afghanistan. Soon after returning from deployment Mark enrolled in college classes because: “I didn’t really have a direction to go. I didn’t have . . . any real world translatable skills”. Mark’s transition from Soldier to student seemed to be the least hurried yet he still talked about the culture shock of this transition.

It was very direction based in the military . . . where from morning, noon to night you had a definite purpose and knew exactly what time to be where, what to do, what to be wearing, and where to go. Whereas transitioning back to a civilian, there’s not really much direction, it’s more kind of left up to the student Soldier.

Bill echoed this sentiment, “just doing everything on your own, you don’t live with someone who is going to make sure you are there”.

Mark also added additional insight on the school response to his need for direction and guidance, which will be further addressed in the discussion section regarding the term military friendly.

There wasn’t a whole lot of direction coming from the staff or employees of the school . . . I’m sure I wasn’t the first student Soldier to come back to try to get benefits, but it just seemed like there wasn’t much set up so therefore there wasn’t much direction they could give.

This was seconded by Bill: “academic advising should have someone more military oriented cause I know my freshman advisor barely knew anything about what was going on, she just put me in classes and that was pretty much the last I heard from her.”

Mark also added:

I guess it took me a minute to get some study habits down, because I wasn't really in that mindset right away, going from not really having to any academic studying to moving into doing just academic studying.

Mark also brought up the point that transitioning from the military to student requires a great deal of paperwork with applications and various financial aid forms that must be filled out on a time line that may not be in synched with that of the military, especially if the Soldier is deployed while trying to make application for school admission, financial aid etc. Mark summed it up as, “Time constraints . . . all of that stuff is not readily accessible to student soldiers . . . some just can't get the documents needed quickly enough to meet some of the timelines, especially coming out of a deployment”.

It became apparent to me that transitions involved redefining their own identity and how they interact with others. This process can be difficult simply for fear of the unknown, but when you add in complicating matters of indoctrinated culture and then rapidly moving to a culture of much different norms this can be a difficult transition. If we then add that the transitions is from an environment that every minute of the day is accounted for and deviations from the structured detail of daily life can result in death or serious bodily injury. Then we move to an environment that has no structure and no life and death decisions. This type of change can cause grave difficulties in personal identity, where before they were an important part of helping another

country and now they are simply another student who blends in with the other thousands of students.

Social Contextual

All participants interviewed had emergent themes that were centered on their social context as a returning student within higher education. Sub-themes that emerged within social context were: Alienation, Loneliness, Difficulty Making Friends, Focus, Stereotypes, Ties to Other Service Members and, Political Ideology.

Alienation. All of the combat Veterans interviewed described a sense of alienation on campus. Much of this was attributed to differences in life experiences and focus. Jack had a particularly relevant statement regarding this. “It’s kind of like you have lived two separate lives . . . at school sometimes people forget” that “you have these other experiences that people just don’t understand”. Jon said described alienation/isolation:

Your experiences are completely different. There’s seriousness and while I joke around more than most, I don’t have the same concerns. You’re older. Your experiences are different. What someone else sees as serious is not a concern of yours . . . There’s really no shared experience so there is, I think, a certain isolation. People are afraid to talk to you especially if there is a visible injury so it probably forced me to be more of an extrovert just to participate and to maybe ease other people’s discomfort.

Every participant interviewed described situations where they were asked inappropriate questions about their military experiences. For example, each of the men in the study reported that they were asked, “Did you kill anybody”? These inappropriate questions furthered isolation and “othering” from the traditional students. Not only do these questions impose upon areas that are not fit for discussion, but they serve to reinforce a negative stereotype of Veterans in general.

Additionally these questions may force Veterans to relive traumatic events that they would rather not think about let alone discuss. Intrusive memories are just one of the DSM-5 criteria for PTSD and every participant revealed some level of this.

Jill was the only one who did not directly report having been asked this question. This raises the question of stereotyping in regards to gender as Jill was the sole female participant in this research. Did Jill's gender create the assumption that as a female she could not have engaged the enemy? The changing nature of warfare has evolved so that military jobs in the past that have been considered non-combatant are now just as likely to see actual combat action as any other military job due to the nature of asymmetric warfare.

All participants reported the asking of insensitive questions regarding their military service. Jill who is married to another combat Veteran reported that many acquaintances asked inappropriate question about her husband who was wounded in action, and told a story about a class that she and her husband had been enrolled in together. She described a professor who likened combat to the game, World of Warcraft. She and her husband were incensed that an educated person could make such a presumption and worse yet make it in front of a classroom full of people. She and her husband attempted to dispel the myth being perpetuated by the professor, who then pushed her husband to tell if he had ever killed anyone. The professor kept pushing and pushing till her husband hit his breaking point and told the professor off and stormed out of the classroom. She related, "We drove together and I was sitting there and they all knew we were married. And after he left, I said I guess I'm going to go. Really awkward . . . It was just so unprofessional".

Loneliness. There was a sense of loneliness exhibited in varying degrees from each of the participants interviewed. Most noticeable was Bill. I had known Bill for some years prior to

the interview, and he had been a student in a few classes that I taught. I invited Bill to my house to conduct the interview. After the interview we simply sat in my library for well over an hour sharing space and time, but nothing was said as we each quietly reflected on our own thoughts. When Bill decided to leave it was with apparent difficulty. I could feel his desire to stay and hesitation to go back to the lonely existence he had described. Bill had been a young man full of vigor and life with a wife and child prior to his injuries while serving in Iraq. He had since divorced from his wife and his move to attend school left him without social support from his mother. He talked at length and poignantly about missing his dogs because he had nowhere to keep them, and how his mother kept them while he was at school. Bill painted a lonely life with little contact or support from others. Jack shared similar feelings of being alone: “I didn’t really relate to anyone. I felt like I was just really alone”. Jon also shared a sense of aloneness: “there’s really no shared experience. So there is I think a certain isolation. People are afraid to talk to you especially if there is a visible injury”. Jon was the only one of my participants who exhibited obvious signs of injury from his combat deployment.

University programs to meet Veteran Needs. All Veterans interviewed discussed the Student Veteran Organization (SVO) at their school. All thought the idea of having a SVO was good, but only Jill was an active participant taking a leadership role within the SVO. All others attended events sporadically and had little to do with the SVO. Bill talked about his interest and how it seemed a good idea; however, he was never able to merge his schedule with that of the SVO event. Likewise Brady also expressed an interest in the SVO, as well as the Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) on campus, but was soon disenchanted, as most participants in both programs were not combat Veterans. Bill also expressed an interest in ROTC, yet he also voiced issues with few combat Veterans within the program. Additionally Bill discussed how

his physical limitations prevented him from fully participating in the ROTC program due to weekly physical training sessions and the need to pass an Annual Physical Fitness Test (APFT). Jack said, “I like to believe that having a stronger veteran support system or things like that” would have helped. “I went to the functions and passed the word around . . .” “It’s really important to help veterans because . . . [we have] the same frame of reference.”

Brady said: “I think the biggest issue was dealing with the ROTC program—it’s not really structured for the combat veteran.”

Difficulty making friends. All participants related difficulty in making friends outside of the military culture. This was mostly attributable to differences in level of experience from the Veteran to the average college student. Bill had difficulty in making new friends due to differences in age and experience.

Jill, who was both a combat veteran and was married to a combat veteran said:

But the life experience you get when you’re not bumming through college, I didn’t get that so that was hard. The social piece was really hard. I had trouble relating to peers I was 20, which doesn’t seem like much, but two years was a huge difference as far as life experience goes I can tolerate them, but it’s really hard. I don’t get along with them. I don’t feel like I’m 29, I feel a lot older I don’t think I really have “friends” at school students for the most part I get along with, I can tolerate most of them. I do have a few closer friends, but they tend to be military related or very tolerant of other views I laugh with you, I joke with you, but we’re not on the same page. This is just school.

Jack also expressed this sentiment as he pondered whether to declare his military experience in class or not. Jack stated:

The one [question] I struggled with was do I tell people that I'm a veteran at all or do I tell them that I've seen combat? I've always believed that once you do that, it changes how they view you. You get pigeon-holed, like now I'm the voice of the military even when I'm not.

Focus. All of the participants interviewed described a high level of focus on degree completion. They expressed an internal drive that most compared with the average college student as a dichotomy, where Veterans were focused on school work and studies while the average college student was portrayed as immature with a focus on living in the moment rather than focusing on the future.

Matt described this in this way: "Civilian students they're just kind of complacent, I don't want to say lack of discipline, but really lack of discipline. There was just a new found direction that I had that didn't seem to be in other students". Bill described the perceived differences in life experience and overall focus.

I was taking freshman-oriented classes, they are all like 17 or 18 and here I was 24 at the time, going wow! How they are all talking about sneaking around and getting drunk and stuff. I am like that is your biggest concern in life?

This was echoed by Jack, "For me they were like kids, even though I was only a few years older. They were worried about going out and drinking and stuff. I just wanted to go to class and go home."

Mark said, "I try to see things from a little more realistic point of view, not to get so hot and heated over small things, put things into perspective a little better." Jon also expressed a similar sentiment about not sweating the trivial matters in life. Jon stated, "Everything is put into

an appropriate scale and scope due to your experience as a Veteran. If I'm not getting shot at the time, it's not a concern of mine".

Ties to other service members. Every one of the combat Veterans interviewed went to great lengths to stay in touch with other Veterans that they had served with. The most common method reported was the use of Facebook. All reported Facebook as the primary mechanism to keep in contact with other Veterans, with Jon being the only one who admitted using it but reporting it was not his main method. Jon is legally blind and has some very limited sight in one eye due to an Improvised Explosive Device (IED) blast during his deployment to Iraq. This limited vision limits his use of visual media. Jon reported that he used phone calls as his primary means to keep in touch with his Veteran friends.

Jack, Jill, and Mark also travel extensively to see old military acquaintances. With Jack and Jill reporting that if they travel to a conference or a training they will look up military friends in that general area to visit while they are out. Mark reports that he will "make it a point to once or twice a year I do try to have a face to face, whether it's a night out together or just for lunch." Mark also described his continued contact with personnel he served with as "a little bit more strained than when we were deployed together . . . It was definitely one of the more important things to make sure to keep that tie."

It is readily apparent that prior military friends are a cornerstone of the social context and community for all of the Veterans interviewed.

Stereotypes. All participants discussed what they felt was a negative stereotype of the combat Veteran. Jon felt that the negative stereotype that seemed to permeate the media and society was PTSD. He explained, "There's that perception of the veteran, disabled vet on top of

that, the PTSD thing. I think there's that fear so I think there's a natural avoidance of the subject."

Jill voiced her opinion on negative stereotypes perpetuated by the media:

Well, we all have PTSD ... The media, in general would have you believing that.

Whenever you have a mass shooting, they try to report that you were in the military 10 years ago ... Take the time to learn and understand ... We're not all ticking time bombs".

Jack echoed this in somewhat more detail:

I think the biggest thing is the stigma about it—not that they can't do it, but oh combat Veterans the first thing people think of now, because of the media is PTSD . . . People in our positions, we need to push back. PTSD isn't a death sentence . . . I was giving a speech to a class the other day and they asked me when you came back, did you just want to come out and take on the world? Hell no, I went home and hid in a bubble and I stayed there as long as I could until I realized that wasn't going to work. I can't live in a bubble forever, I'm 25. I gotta get out there and give back. It was hard to ask for help or to say hey I can't sleep for the last year. Something is wrong with that, but I didn't want to tell anyone.

Political ideology. This topic was frequently raised through the interviews as each Veteran interviewed discussed that they sometimes felt as though their own political views were far from the mainstream of the university campus. Brady eloquently summed it up: "While the average civilian has idealistic views about world affairs, it is my ass on the line attempting to enforce these views in a non-ideal world". The term "liberal" was used frequently and Brady even stated that a military democrat and a civilian democrat were two entirely different things.

Jack said,

We often talk about diversity and all these great things and I agree with them until you're on the other side . . . You can't have all this stuff about tolerance and all this stuff for my views only without at least being open to the other side's views. So it really drives me nuts . . . I go to class to learn. I don't really go to class to hear the politics . . . I really don't want professors or other students preaching to me about their political views . . . I feel like that is really an unfair piece of college that it is really a liberal leaning institution just in general . . . My wife and I have five schools that we can kind of form a sample from and it's kind of a norm . . .

Jill said:

Political stuff in college can be difficult. Historically, academia is more liberal . . . but is more overtly disrespectful for soldiers and what they do. . . There were very few left leaning students. You have to be tolerant of everything except if you disagree with one thing they say, they are right and you are wrong.

Jon said, "Political correctness on campus is so rampant, is so strong that it actually builds isolation into the process and isolates a lot of veterans. We're not asked to share."

Disability

Only one of the combat Veteran interviewed had obvious physical injuries that a person could see in passing. Jon's injuries were blatantly obvious as he walks with a cane and wears sunglasses to reduce the obvious signs of an IED blast that left his face in need of many surgeries to correct. Additionally Jon is missing the thumb of one hand.

The other interviewees had no obvious physical injuries. Bill has several scars in his neck region where a steel plate had been inserted, but the casual observer would never know. Jack was wounded in action, yet other than state he was wounded, he did not discuss his injuries.

Some of the participants talked openly about their injuries and disabilities that resulted from them. Some talked more openly about physical injuries but steered away from discussing PTSD. However one participant, Jill, talked very openly about PTSD, and the effects that it had upon her life. This willingness to discuss PTSD is likely linked to her career field where she is completing a doctorate in Counseling Psychology.

Hidden wounds. Only two of the Veterans interviewed openly disclosed that they suffered from PTSD. While it is not my role as the researcher to diagnose PTSD, I am cognizant of the Diagnostic Statistical Manual-5 (DSM-5) (United States Department of Veterans Affairs, 2014) that is used by the Veterans Administration to diagnose PTSD in Veterans. The DSM-5 lists eight criteria for diagnosis of PTSD and while it is not my role, nor am I qualified to diagnose PTSD, the words of the participants could be matched to many of these criteria. The DSM-5 was discussed in Chapter 2.

All of the participants had witnessed horrible events. Jack and Jill's units had each lost three personnel to enemy actions. Jack, Bill, and Jon had each been wounded in action. Mark lost a close personal friend to enemy action while deployed. Jill's husband was wounded in action. Jack's company lost three personnel while deployed. Bill and Jon talked about slowed mental processes.

Jill openly talked about being uncomfortable in a the classroom without having space around here and discussed an recent even where she was preparing to present and moved the front row of chairs farther back to give herself reactionary space. She remarked how another Veteran in the classroom had gently laughed as he noticed her clearing the space. She noted that he was in his normal place in the far back corner, where he could see everyone else in the class.

There are countless references to being uncomfortable around crowds of people. For example, Brady manipulated his school schedule to early mornings to avoid crowded classrooms.

Summary of Chapter Four.

The research indicates that the combat Veterans interviewed sensed some disparity in their own personal life experiences when compared to other students. All of the participants felt a sense of isolation and even alienation while on campus. The examples provided by the participants ranged from inappropriate questions, non-support of the War on Terror by faculty and a much different focus between Veterans and other students. This difference in focus seemed to mainly center on that the Veterans were all more interested in getting through classes and degree completion while other students were frequently cited as immature and more worried about partying and drinking than studies. All of the Veterans interviewed also discussed that they were older in chronological years than other students in their same classes due to time spent in the military.

Several participants discussed their political perceptions and how their view of the world in political terms was grounded in first hand observation and experience and that the views held by the Veterans was many times out of synch with the other members of their classes. One Veteran discussed how her husband, who was also a combat Veteran, had a shouting match with a professor on world views concerning the military. These disparate viewpoints also seemed to partition the Veterans from classmates who typically had little or no relevant experience in world affairs and faculty members who disdained alternate viewpoints from their own. These all contribute to problems transitioning into the role of a student through feeling of alienation, isolation. Additionally the Veterans interviewed had difficulty in establishing new bonds with people at the school as all reported difficulty in making new friends and that all sought to keep

close contact with those they had served with. Disability and negative stereotypes also played a large role in the Veteran ability to shift roles as the Veterans had to decide if they would hide their Veteran status from other students and faculty. Three of the six Veterans interviewed had been wounded in action and the other three disclosed many of the indicators used in the diagnosis of PTSD. All Veterans interviewed reported negative stereotypes of combat Veterans being perpetuated through the media and within the institution itself.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This ethnographic study sought to provide clarity about the experiences of combat Veterans returning to higher education. Through the lenses of six combat veterans and their experiences returning to the university, I can shed light on the following research questions.

1. How does a Global War on Terrorism (GWOT) Veteran student perceive his/her educational experiences at a four-year university?
2. What are the educational, emotional, and psychological needs of the (GWOT) combat Veteran while pursuing higher education?

I sought to answer these research questions by first identifying and then conducting interviews with self-identified GWOT combat Veterans. Data analysis was performed using the constant comparative method where each interview is examined from the context of previous interviews to assist in the identifying of trending themes. Additionally, this method allows the future interviews to be tweaked to gain a better understanding of concepts and themes identified in earlier interviews. This process was greatly enhanced through my positionality as an insider researcher, which allowed me instant familiarity with the military culture, language, perceptions and semiotics.

Significance of the Study

This study explored the complex needs of the combat Veteran and developed possible ideas for how universities can develop effective strategies for identifying potential issues and

implement solutions to address the specialized needs of the combat Veteran. The research indicated that these specialized needs and perceptions relate to three areas of the combat Veterans' life: 1) Transition from the military life style to the citizen student. 2) Alienation and isolation upon entering higher education where the experiences of other students, faculty and staff may be greatly divergent from that of the combat Veteran. 3) Disability and related stereotypes that seem to be rampant concerning combat Veterans.

Of the three major themes that surfaced through the research, transitions was the one theme that stood out as the key overarching theme in that the other themes interact with each other and have many areas of overlap. Yet the central theme is one of transition. The theme of isolation and alienation is directly derived from the process of moving from a tight knit highly structured culture of the military unit to a civilian model of living that as defined by the interviewees was mostly lacking in structure and guidance. Strickley (2009) discussed the difficulty in Veterans adjusting from a schedule that is highly regimented and set by a supervisor and the resultant change when they must transition to a self-directed schedule. Additionally Strickley (2009) discussed the change from having a senior non-commissioned officer who always watched out for the Veteran and how separation from this source of direction can cause issues and I believe also leads to the Veteran seeking to re-establish some type of military connection whether it is through the Student Veteran Organization or ROTC.

Likewise the theme of disability and negative stereotyping associated with disability can be directly ascribed to the transition that occurs as a Soldier returns from combat to deal with issues of PTSD and the perceived image of the combat Veteran as being a "ticking time bomb".

Transitions. This central theme of Transitions is well documented in the literature from DiRamio et al. (2008) adaptation of Schlossberg et al. (1989) "Moving In, Moving Through,

Moving Out” theory of transitions explained in Chapter 2, Figure One, which examine the changes in identity that Veterans must make as they move from one role to another. This can be even more of a problem for Reservists and National Guard personnel who must balance multiple roles from day to day. Ackerman et al. (2009) and Strickley (2009) both underline that additional difficulty in transitions that may be experienced by National Guard and Reserve personnel due to military schedules not matching up with college schedules and the possibility of being placed on active duty orders in the middle of an academic term.

Transitions were highly evident from the interviews conducted and became the central theme discussed. It was evidenced that each of the veterans made several transitions of identity as they navigated roles and the related esteem that came with that role. One participant likened this to when they were deployed their life had a higher purpose and they felt as though they were accomplishing good things and then when they were returned to citizen student status they felt adrift with a loss of purpose and esteem. However in counter opposition to this all of the Veterans interviewed described an intense focus on degree completion and that matters that others might find distressing were of little consequence. Jon explained it better than I when He stated “I’m not getting shot at, I can handle whatever happens”. This was a common theme from the interviews and is also well documented in the literature that Veterans are more focused on the important things in life and less concerned with matters of convenience (MFRI, 2009; Strickley, 2009). The part that I have not seen in the literature is the speed with which these role shifts can occur. In all of the interviews the Veterans underwent many transitions usually with little to no advance warning. It seems that while the Moving in, Moving Through, Moving Out theory presented by (DiRamio et al., 2008) identifies some important concepts about the shift in roles and identity, he missed the boat when it came to the time frame frequently associated with these

types of transitions. Others have identified the rapid transitions but no one has put the two together. Strickley (2009) discussed potential issues for reservists: “Reservists may be called up for active duty; this means their college careers could be interrupted on short notice ... These factors can have a disruptive effect on a student’s progress”. The Veterans interviewed also experienced more transitions than one would have expected with just a cursory read of the literature. Five of six of the Veterans interviewed enter military service immediately after or during high school. This is a critical element in my opinion as at this age and level of development they are not fully developed as adults and who they will become. This transition from grown child to Soldier can explain some of the reported issues that the Veterans felt older than their peers in chronological years and in life experiences. Strickley (2009) identified that Veterans generally are at a “different place in terms of their personal lives and maturity” (p. 15) due to their exposure to life or death situations and multiple cultures through their service. In fact their peers are attending school and moving through the educational process while the Veteran is attending basic training and learning basic combat skills and the necessity of following orders without question or someone could die. This harsh reality then is likely further refined as the Soldier deploys to a combat zone and lives every day with the constant threat of life and death at every decision and every action that the Soldier makes. This was voiced by nearly all of the participants in my study.

Isolation and alienation. When I first began my study I believed that isolation and alienation would be the fundamental issue encountered and described by my participants. This seemed to be borne out as I conducted my first interview with Bill. Bill positively radiated loneliness and isolation from the start of the interview and for an hour after the interview as he and I silently reminisced. I will talk more about this quiet reflection time and my revelations

concerning it in another section. The literature is rife with accounts of Veterans reporting feelings of isolation and alienation. In fact all of the Veterans I interviewed exhibited some type of isolation and alienation from other students and university personnel and all reported an attempt to connect with others of the same military mindset once they arrived on campus. Further the research shows that this sense of alienation and isolation is not just limited to the college experience and is not a new issue as Horowitz and Solomon (1975) stated:

That while the Veteran may adapt well to society upon his return from combat and pursue normal familial concerns, he was subject to the emergence of nightmares, intrusive images and emotional attacks related to their wartime experiences (p. 42).

Moon and Schma (2011) also noted that reintegration for combat Veterans was difficult and they also annotate how this integration may affect students:

Reintegration for combat Veterans proved extremely challenging. Not only did military experiences distance them from their much younger classmates, the effects of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI), and depression impacted concentration and memory skills in ways that even the students couldn't understand (p. 54).

There were several reported themes from the interviews that seemed to influence the isolation felt by the Veterans. All of the Veterans reported lack of a common frame of reference when interacting with other students and university personnel. This lack of common frame of reference seemed to lead to a variety of transgressions perpetuated by often time well-meaning students and faculty. A common reported issue was seating within the classrooms and how combat Veterans would often sit in a position that left all areas of the classroom within their view. Other Veterans get this, but many faculty and students don't understand that a learned

behavior of watching everything that goes on around you in a life or death situation every day for a year or more is not something that can be unlearned quickly or in many cases at all. My first professional position at a university I was supervised by a Vietnam Veteran and after 25 years he still could not help but scan everywhere he went and anyone he met. At the time I thought it an oddity but now I can see how learned behaviors of this nature are difficult to divest. Attempting to force someone to operate outside of their comfort zone will have little success and will certainly detract from their experience within the class. This was echoed by most of the Veterans I interviewed as the many stories unfolded of inflexible faculty members attempting to force a Veteran to do something they just weren't prepared to do. Additionally the asking of inappropriate questions about the Veteran's Military service is an often reported issue and was absolutely prevalent within my sample. This is consistent with the literature (MFRI, 2009; Strickley, 2009; & Bando et al. 2010).

It seemed apparent to me that the bulk of the isolation and alienation issues revolve around two factors: One, that the lack of common frame of reference seem to open vast and almost insurmountable gulf between Veterans and other students and university personnel. The second factor is a common lack of knowledge about what it is to be a Veteran. It seems that there are many stereotypes of Veterans with not many being flattering. I would remind the reader that less than 1% of the population has served in the military due to its all-volunteer structure and while some may think that Veterans joined the military because they had some perverse desire to inflict pain and suffering, the opposite is more to the point. All of the Veterans interviewed joined for a combination of two reasons-- one they needed a way to pay for college and they wished to serve their country in a life of service. The take away from this is that Veterans bring a unique perspective to the classroom in that they have done more in a few short

years than many people will do in their entire lives. Veterans have worked with diverse cultures and in less than ideal conditions towards common goals. This type of experience is difficult to replicate and the faculty and students who are able to recognize this experience and capitalize on it will likely learn as much from their Veteran counterparts as they did from the class in general. I would recommend that institutions develop top down recognition of Veterans on campus by holding Veteran specific ceremonies recognizing the sacrifices the Veterans have made and the unique perspectives and experiences that Veterans can bring. This top down mentality was a primary recommendation of ACE (2010), who stated “action must begin with a commitment and be translated into policies and procedures that are mandated by those in power” (p. 6). Additionally faculty and staff at a minimum should undergo training to assist them in understanding the unique needs and perspectives of the Veteran population so that the language and frame of reference issue is minimized and Veteran experiences maximized for the betterment of Veterans and other university personnel. This recommendation is widely made by (ACE, 2010; CAEL, 2009; MFRI, 2009: & Strickley, 2009). It is widely believed that training of staff, faculty and students would negate many of the negative stereotypes that exist and highlight the many positive attributes that Veterans bring to the classroom. Byman (2007) postulated that service overseas gave military members a unique firsthand insight into the questions that are at the heart of today’s classroom. Byman (2007) also brought out the point that the real life experiences in life and death situations brought classroom assignments to a much more personal level for students as they gained insight from a real world perspective offered by Veterans.

Disability and negative stereotyping. The literature is rife with statistics for physical disabilities and hidden wounds. There are a tremendous number of Veterans who are returning from combat with both physical and psychological injuries. The small sample interviewed

contained three of six who had been wounded in action and survived. Two, Jon and Bill were gravely wounded and thanks to modern battlefield interventions survived (MFRI 2009). All Veterans interviewed witnessed horrific incidents and all personally knew someone who had been killed or badly injured in the conflict. This is consistent with Strickley (2009) who identified that 86% of combat Veterans had been under fire and 79% had known someone who was injured or killed in action. The literature is full of reports of Veterans failing to seek care for physical injuries and a great resistance of Veterans to seek mental health counseling. My representative sample was no different. American Council on Education (ACE) (2010) found that in many cases Veterans do not associate themselves as disabled, whether due to a disabling condition later in life or the common misconception about disability support services. This brings up an interesting concept that I had missed until the writing of this chapter. There appears to be a language barrier between disability service and Veterans. The terminology of disabled is rather vague and many Veterans return from combat and receive no disability rating and as such they may feel that there is nothing that the Disability Support Office can do to assist them. This falls in line with the fact that many veterans do not seek treatment for the so called signature wounds of PTSD and TBI ACE (2010) due to lack of knowledge about these conditions and how minor symptoms may qualify the Veterans for services. ACE (2010) further identified that there was a lack of understanding about what the disability support office does and who may utilize these services. This brings out an important concept and one that is suggested by MFRI (2009) that the name of the Disability Support Office be renamed to something without the negative connotations of the term “disability”. Along with this recommendation I would recommend the inclusion of an initial counseling session with all new Veterans with the Disability Support Office as a meet and greet and to explain how the office can help Veterans with a myriad of

needs and services from note taking, tutoring sessions, and a host of accommodation recommendations that can set the new Veteran student on a path to success right from the outset. However, for this top work the institution must institute a method of identifying and tracking Veterans as they enter the institution and throughout their program. It would also be beneficial to track these Veterans even after leaving the institutions to utilize their familiarity and success to develop a mentorship program to help follow on Veterans navigate the twists and turns of the higher education landscape.

Conclusions from this Study

Transitions. All participants of this study described a series of transitions that affected not only their identity, but also their assumptions about how things worked. DiRamio et al. (2008) stated, “The dramatic events of wartime service are by their nature both life changing and personality changing to some degree” (p. 81). This was mostly attributed by the participants to the transition from the highly structured environment of the military to the less structured self-directed life as a civilian. Additionally all of the participants with the exception of Jon discussed having issues in identifying who the go to person was within the university structure, this is consistent with Fain (2012) who identified that Veterans are used to working with a highly structured hierarchy with clearly defined rank structures; unlike the college environment where rank is not worn and there are little or no visual cues as to who is in charge. Jon was the sole participant who stated he had no problems identifying who he needed to contact for assistance. When asked why his viewpoint seemed different from the literature and from the experiences of the other participants he replied that he had been very proactive to ensure that he had no issues. He gave examples of calling from Walter Reed hospital to talk with the VA Rep at the school and having very detailed discussions about what he might need and who was best positioned to

assist upon his arrival. Jon reached out to all of the gatekeepers in advance to ensure a successful transition.

All participants stressed the importance of having a Veteran specific transition assistance program staffed by a representative intimately familiar with the Veteran culture and Veteran specific financial assistance programs. This is consistent with MFRI (2009) and CAEL (2012) who both stress the importance of having someone who has a shared life experience from the military.

Each of the participants described a sense of alienation and distance between themselves and those of their peers in college and faculty. This was mostly ascribed to differences in life experiences and an increased focus on degree completion reported by all Participants. This alienation and aloneness and is also consistent with increased focus on school and important matters (DiRamio et al., 2008; MFRI, 2009; & Rumann et al., 2011).

Disability and negative stereotyping. Additionally all participants discussed at length common stereotypical assumptions about Veterans. This is well documented in the literature. MFRI (2009) “Veterans encounter misunderstanding and stereotypes about their motives and experience” (p. 8).

All participants talked to some degree about disability and changes within themselves. PTSD and traumatic injuries were markedly present within the sample population and discussing how these changes impacted the Veteran’s daily lives was revealing.

All of the Veterans interviewed related asking of inappropriate questions concerning their combat time. This is consistent with the literature (Ackerman et al., 2009; Caplan 2010

MFRI 2009; & DiRamio et Al., 2010). Who acknowledged that many well-meaning people ask questions about wartime service that the Veteran feels are inappropriate. The most

commonly cited question relates to if the Veteran has ever killed anyone? These types of question serve to accentuate the isolation and alienation issues cited by my participants and from those cited in the literature. It appears that in most cases these questions are asked by well-meaning people who are simply seeking to understand the Veteran. However, occasionally these questions become a tactic of power that has been used by faculty and others to ridicule the Veteran and depose their ideas that may not be in synch with the faculty member's. These types of attacks should be considered the equal of sexual harassment's "hostile work environment". We would not tolerate a faculty member asking inappropriate questions about someone being raped, yet sometimes questions are asked about military service that has some of the same negative feelings to the Veteran. Education and policy change is the only way that these issues will end. We must do a better job of educating others about military service and the value that Veterans bring to the campus and the classroom.

Discussion

Ruh, Spicer, and Vaughan (2009) identified that every student Veteran is different and as such course work should be planned and designed with different learning styles in mind. This is echoed by ACE (2010) who warned against administrations taking recommendations from Veterans from other institutions as each institution is different and what may work at one institution may not work at another. Jill echoed this sentiment when asked what advice she might have for institutions wishing to understand Veteran issues. I agree in basic assumptions that there is no one size fits all solution to Veteran integration issues at universities; however I do believe that if one were to examine the commonalities found, then progressive policies and programs could be developed and implemented with the assistance of Veterans and the Veteran program managers at the home institution.

There are many similarities discussed throughout the research when discussing Veteran reintegration issues. Each of the Veterans interviewed discussed changes within themselves, their perceptions of themselves, and how others perceived them. All participants were upbeat when discussing these changes, though it was easy to see that these changes came at great personal cost. Each of these warriors told a different story of their life as they perceived it. There were many similarities regarding their difficulty in making the transition from the military to college.

Transitions. It became abundantly clear that transitions and the resultant changes in identity and roles was the main theme. This was a surprise to me as I initially felt that isolation and alienation would become the main theme, however after much musing and critical thinking I was able to link alienation and isolation as a subset of the transition equation. The literature discussed how transitions moved expectations for self and others from clearly defined to unknowns in many cases. The testimonial from the interviewees echoed this. However I did find something I felt was relevant that seemed to be missing in other literature. In DiRamio et al. (2008) adaptation of the Moving in, Moving Through, Moving Out theory, he used military service as the start point of the transition. While this is in fact a good starting point I do not believe that it tells the whole tale. If we look at the stories described by my participants they all enlisted at a young age; some enlisted while still in high school and all of them had within a year of graduating high school. I think this transition is critical and may need to be further researched! There is a lot of anecdotal evidence that points to the fact that at 18-19 years old we simply don't have the maturity needed to be self-directed. However when enlisted in the military at such a young age what does this do to the development of this person as an adult? While most 18-19 year olds look for a job and contemplate what they might do for a career in the upcoming

years the military person is undergoing indoctrination, where as a part of this indoctrination they lose a good portion of their self-identity and gain a team centric outlook that will be carried with them throughout their tenure in the armed services. How does this affect them as they begin to transition back to a self-identity with self-directed obligations that the Veteran may not even understand?

Alienation and isolation. They all described a sense of alienation and aloneness, especially Bill. I will always remember the events after we had finished his interview as we each sat quietly reminiscing of places far away and retrospective of all that had come before. We each sat quietly with nothing said. Nothing needed to be said as we quietly basked in the camaraderie that only two combat Veterans can know. Of all the interviews I conducted this one hour of silence spoke to me more than all of the other interviews. I connected with a man who was hurt and alone who strove every day to put one foot in front of the other until he was done. His silence spoke volumes about the gulf of loneliness that threatened to engulf him. What more can I say other than this is the reason that this research is important. No one else could have made that connection. I have only to wonder what stories might have unfolded if I were able to make the same connection with each of the other participants?

This alienation and isolation is problematic in a more than one way. It serves as a barrier between the Veteran, their family, other students, faculty, and staff who are well intentioned and wish to provide support and assistance yet may not know where they can provide this assistance and support. It also disrupts the communication barrier and makes it much more difficult for the Veteran to ask for help. I have personally experienced this in my own life as I have difficulties talking about some subjects of concern with my family and caregivers. It is my natural response to become defensive about some topics that I keep very close to my chest. I saw this with the

interviewees as well. All of the participants were eager to talk about other Veterans and the issues they perceived, however they become much more close-mouthed when discussing their own internal battles. In order to bridge the chasm between Veterans' needs and universities' responses we must first cross this barrier of isolation and alienation. I think that programs designed to showcase how Veterans improve the campus, classroom and world will go a long way toward earning the trust of Veterans and opening lines of communication where honest non-judgmental conversations can occur with the express intent of improving the atmosphere and making for a truly Veteran friendly campus.

Disability and negative stereotyping. The statistics are alarming and when interviewing participants I had to ask how far off are the statistics? Out of six people interviewed three had been wounded in action and all described things that can be matched with the DSM 5 for PTSD. Two of my Veterans had TBI injuries and talked at length about slowed processing and coping mechanisms they had developed to become successful. It became apparent to me that the military, the Department of Veterans Affairs and colleges are not doing enough to identify potential wounded warriors. I believe that we must strive to identify Veterans on campus and educate the Veteran as well as faculty and staff about the wide range of accommodations that can be made and how easy it is to request an accommodation. We must also work towards destigmatizing these services. We would never question the need for a parking place for a person who uses a wheelchair, yet we might question a request for extended time on tests due to slowed cognitive processing due to PTSD. In my own past as a faculty I have dealt with similar issues and was circumspect about a request like this. Now after I have experienced first-hand how PTSD and TBI have affected how I learn and how I process information it suddenly becomes clear. I have begun to reach out to other Veterans and various audiences to conduct speaking

engagements to talk about the invisible wounds and how they can affect Veterans and others who are afflicted with PTSD and TBI. This must become a mainstream concept that every faculty member is familiar with and where Veterans are not afraid to ask for accommodations that will help them succeed.

Recommendations for Institutions

It seemed apparent through the interviews that each of the participants sought to make connections at the institution that were in line with their military culture. All of them sought out the Student Veteran Organization and many talked about an initial interest in the ROTC program at their home institution. There was also much discussion about gatekeepers as all of the participants identified people who assisted them and also all but Jon acknowledged at least some difficulty in obtaining some important part of their educational access.

The one most important recommendation that I would make to institutions of higher learning is to instill a sense of value within the institution concerning Veterans. While many institutions claim to be Veteran friendly, this moniker really has no defined meaning, and institutions use it loosely to promote that are indeed Veteran friendly. There are several aspects that I feel are needed to meet this criterion of Veteran friendly. First and foremost the institution must develop a line of support for Veterans on campus. This support must come from the President's office and be pushed down to the lowest levels. By giving vocal active support from the highest levels there is no grey area for non-conformist to hide within.

Specific measurable policies must be created and emplaced to provide a system of support for Veterans while they are on campus and even more importantly while they are off campus serving our country. These policies should cover a wide range of issues for Veterans: 1) Credit for military experience. The military spends a vast amount of time money and resources

training service members to be resilient, resourceful and subject matter experts in their particular field. Each of these service members are trained in the latest technology, in many cases by the manufacturer of this technology. It is not uncommon for the military service member to have technical knowledge that has not yet made its way to the civilian market. Veterans should be allowed to gain college credit for their training. The process is exceptionally easy as the military has transitioned in the last two years to the Joint Services Transcript which gives credit recommendations for every military school the service member has attended and also gives credit recommendations for duty positions held by the service member. This document is accredited by the American Council on Education (United States Department of Defense, 2014).

2) Policies must be implemented to allow Veterans to transition from student status to military and back to student. The reserve forces of the United States make up over half approximately 61% of the United States military (United States Department of Defense, 2012). This demographic is important in the fact that over half of the Veterans are members of the National Guard and Reserves. These personnel must balance multiple roles as a civilian, as a student and as a military service member. This can create conflicts on multiple levels but at the school, these conflicts should be easily assuaged by policy. Military schedules are not always in synch with the college calendar. This is in part by the nature of the mobilization process, which can take as little as 30 days and even for non-mobilization training. Training schedules may fall on Fridays and the service member may have to attend a multi week school. Annual training periods in the past were primarily limited to the summer months but with increased usage due to the Global War on Terrorism, most training assets are booked for the majority of the year. This leaves the Reserve forces with little choice but to modify their training schedules to meet the availability of resources for maintaining training standards for their units.

As a Company Commander I have personally witnessed this when my entire fiscal year training plan had to be scrapped and reformatted to fit the availability of training resources. These issues with changing training schedules can induce conflict with the Reservist's classes. This was reported by three out of four of my participants as they discussed how they handled these issues. I personally experienced an issue with this at the institution. I was identified for a mobilization and was placed on orders for training and mission support about three quarters of the way through a semester. I approached my professors concerning the issues and my inability to meet the demands of my coursework over the next several months. Two professors were very accommodating and were willing to allow me to take an incomplete while the third professor was inflexible and insisted that I withdraw from the university. Ultimately I withdrew as the university had no policy in place and with limited time and resources I needed to close out the issue and focus on preparation for deployment. A policy supporting military members facing a mobilization would have saved a great deal of angst and wasted effort on my part as I was later forced to retake all of the classes that I had withdrawn from.

Additionally, the institution should implement a policy of identifying and tracking military service members and Veterans. This point was addressed by my participants but also through contacts made with the school's VA Certifying Official. The school only tracks Veterans through their financial aid. Even at first glance this seems to be mercenary as the focus is on money. A revised enrollment process as identified by CAEL (2102) that asks Veteran specific questions would allow for the identification of Veterans and military service members and allow the tracking and correspondence with these students. Routine correspondence between the school and the Veteran seemed to be an important ingredient, as this maintained ties with the school and facilitated the return to the classroom.

Another key ingredient to successfully supporting Veterans is the hiring of a Veteran as the primary point of contact for Veteran issues and support at the institution. CAEL (2012) and MFRI (2009) both endorse this policy. By hiring a Veteran in this position the institution gains immediate credibility from Veterans as they are able to connect with someone who is intimately familiar with Veteran culture, language and norms. This would also seem to be indicative of the findings of my research where the Veterans sought out others of similar military experience and sought peer mentors to assist them in transitioning to the student role. 3) The allocation of assets and money to support Veteran programs. These assets would come in the form of space allocations for Veteran programs and staff to support them. Many institutions are devoting increasingly large space allocations to build “Veterans Centers” where Veterans can meet, study congregate and seek assistance for their Veteran specific issues. Western Illinois University (2014) is a great example with their dedicated Veteran’s complex and services. Lastly the institution should allocate resources for the creation and operation of a Veteran Student Organization as a means for Veterans to voice their concerns to the university community, a means to socialize, garner support, and mentorship within the Veteran community itself.

The Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) (2012) published several best practices to meet the need of Veterans. The Veterans interviewed in this study had insights that were very similar to the proposed best practices. All participants identified gatekeepers, all sought out peers and others to assist in transition and all but Jon discussed problems and issues within the current system for assisting Veterans at their institution. CAEL’s (2012) overarching recommendation was top-down support for Veterans. This top-down support eliminates barriers and creates efficiencies of establishing programs that may benefit Veterans. This top down tenet professes that the president and or Board of Trustees of the university should have a high resolve

to honor and support the Veterans within the university community. By adopting this top down support CAEL (2012) proposes that barriers will be removed and inefficiencies streamlined as employees at all levels understand the priority given to Veteran centric policies.

Outreach and information and transition support. CAEL (2012) also developed recommendations for outreach and information with a major tenet of establishing a single point of contact on campus where Veterans could go with all of their issues. Additionally this point of contact was recommended to be a Veteran or someone with substantial interest and stake in Veteran affairs (CAEL, 2012). This point was echoed by all Veterans interviewed who indicated dissatisfaction with dealing with people who did not understand the culture they were dealing with. Bill stated it best “Vets should help Vets”. Jon, Jill and Jack also indicated the need for Veterans to assist other Veterans and each of these three participants were actively engaged in doing just that. Jack and Jill both were working within the Veterans Affairs system and Jon regularly speaks at events to raise awareness of the common problems encountered by Veterans. Brady also indicated the need for Veterans in the university systems to help Veterans address Veteran issues. Transition support was voiced by all of the Veterans interviewed.

MFRI (2009) suggested the development of a course designed for military personnel only that would prepare new enrollees for the rigors of college life. One aspect of transition support would be the development of transition courses designed to assist Veteran in adapting to new demands that college will require. Mark, Brady and Bill each talked about changing from the military mindset to the student mindset and difficulties that they had in relearning how to study and prepare for the academic world. This is consistent with DiRamio et al. (2008) who reported that preparation for college was deficient for many of the Veteran students. Moon and Schma (2011) discussed two programs created by Western Michigan University to assist Veterans in

transitioning into academia. The one course serves as a two credit class specifically designed to assist the Veteran with transition from military life to college. The other class is a mediation course that was designed to be presented by a counseling faculty member and focus on stress reduction through the transition.

Recognition of Veterans as a special interest group. CAEL (2012) and MFRI (2009) recommended the recognition of Veterans as a special interest group with special needs. CAEL (2012) also recommended the formation of student organizations as a means for Veterans to socialize and to form a voice for action on Veteran interests. All of the Veterans interviewed had examined ways to establish ties with the military on campus. The Student Veteran Organization (SVO) was the organization that all of my participants had participated in to some extent. Jill had assumed a leadership role while Jon and Jack attended somewhat regularly. Bill liked the concept, but found it difficult to make meetings and events. Brady initially attended but failed to find the connection he was looking for. Mark initially was interested in the SVO but like Brady he soon turned to other means to create close linkages. Mark was the only one who turned to a fraternity to develop close ties with other students. This was also discussed in DiRamio et al. (2008) who described a participant who was unable to find the close personal ties that he had experienced in the military. This participant embraced fraternity life with favorable outcomes. Mark additionally seemed quite happy to immerse himself within the Greek life as he sought to establish strong bonds similar to the bonds established while he was deployed.

Veteran friendly. During the interviews the topic of military friendly schools came up multiple times. While there is no universally accepted definition of this term, the Veterans I interviewed stated some of the things that they considered important were for a university or college to use this descriptor. The literature lists many best practices for universities and

colleges who wished to be considered military friendly. CAEL (2012) and Military Family Research Institute (2009) have compiled a list of best practices for colleges and universities that wish to be considered military friendly. These recommendations are discussed in chapter two. Each of the Veterans was asked about the term “Veteran Friendly” and each had some difficulty in nailing down the actual definition of this moniker. However they all identified some things in common: 1) The VA certifying official should be a Veteran and be a subject matter expert in the field of Veteran educational benefits. This was echoed by all six participants as they identified that they used a myriad of educational incentive programs to obtain their education. Between the six participants almost every single military educational benefit was used with the exception of Green to Gold. Several of the participants discussed suggested university policies regarding these benefits. It was not uncommon for military educational benefits to be paid late by the various organizations providing these benefits and several of the Veterans interviewed discussed how they would have to pay out of pocket to keep from being withdrawn from classes while waiting on their educational benefits to be appropriately credited to their accounts. As the guidance counselor for the Indiana National Guard, this is a frequent theme for me when working with schools and service members. Some schools have become very proactive in addressing this issue. Last year the National Guard experienced a funding shortfall of the state supported grant program for National Guard members. This shortfall created a huge ripple effect as the program that was implemented to make up for the state supported fund did not cover many fees that the state program did. This resulted in over one hundred National Guard members having to pay more than \$1000 in fees at IUPUI. The School, IUPUI, immediately sought funding from within to cover this gap in funding so that the National Guard members would not have to self-fund the difference between the two programs.

Recommendations and Advice for Veterans

The literature identifies that many Veterans fail to seek timely assistance with school and medical needs (DiRamio et al., 2008; Grasgreen, 2013; MFRI, 2009). The rationale behind this reluctance to seek assistance is not well understood. It is generally thought that the stigma of asking for help within the military culture is large. Jon discussed this reluctance of Veterans to seek assistance in a succinct way that highlights the negative stereotype associated with PTSD. Jon stated that while a Soldier would not hesitate to seek treatment for a leg broken while on patrol, this same Soldier would rather hide the fact that he has issues with PTSD than seek help, because in the military culture it is considered weak to have feelings of regret or horror at the job we are forced to perform. I have myself witnessed the reluctance of Veterans to seek assistance for their injuries both physical and mental. Within the confines of this research study it became apparent that while three were injured in combat and described symptoms that were consistent with PTSD they really didn't want to talk about their own issue with PTSD. They all talked freely about others with PTSD and in the case of Jack, Jon and Jill they were actively lobbying and educating others about the issues with PTSD and hidden wounds. However only Jill really opened up about her issues with PTSD and the effect it had on her life. Speaking from my own perspective as the insider-researcher, the stigma of mental health counseling is still very much alive within the military culture. There have been drastic improvements as the military moves to reduce stigma associated with mental health counseling. In the last four years I have seen a concerted effort on the part of commanders and leadership at all levels to openly discuss the invisible wounds of war. I have had Brigade and Battalion Commanders talk about their own need for counseling to help them overcome sleep disturbance, hyper-vigilance and intrusive thoughts. The military has taken other positive steps to de-stigmatize mental health counseling.

In years not too distant security clearances could be suspended or revoked if a service member reported seeking mental health counseling. This is no longer so and this is a positive step from the military but it is not enough. I have talked with numerous mental health professionals in my search for normal. Of the twenty plus I have seen only one had served in the military and he had had not deployed to a combat zone. How can you hope to help a person adjust to a new sense of normalcy if your frame of experience has nothing remotely close to that of the person you are seeking to help? How can you help someone whose best friend was blown to pieces right next to them and after the fact they had to clean up the bloody aftermath so that the vehicle could be used again. Jack related from his own experience that he seldom talked about his combat time and he asked me how can I explain to someone what it is like to shoot a man in a kill or be killed situation and then have to stand guard on that same body for the rest of the day and night as it quickly began decomposing in the desert heat. How can you relate to an experience like this if you have nothing closely related? I believe that we need to push for military members to join ranks with mental health counseling to form peer support and encourage the mental health field for former military members, much like the concept of Troops to Teachers program (United States Department of Defense, 2014b) which seeks to target military personnel into educational careers.

This was further borne out through the interviews as all of the participants discussed negative stereotypes and how this negatively affected Veterans that they knew from seeking assistance.

Bill was the one participant who it seemed like he could use the most help for his slowed cognitive processes as a result of a TBI and physical limitations. Yet he refused to seek assistance from the disability support office and he stated that he believed that these services

were a “crutch”. This is consistent with the literature which finds the military culture does not lend itself well to asking for help. Many soldiers believe that it is a sign of weakness and or they fear the stigma (DiRamio et al., 2008; Grasgreen, 2013; MFRI, 2009). Jack and Jon also noted this reluctance for Veterans to seek help. Jack stated that “we must push back” against the negative stereotypes of the combat Veteran. Jack identifies a great solution. In many cases the Veteran does not wish to be seen as the voice of the Veteran. Kreuter (2012) discussed this and also pointed out in counterpart that sometimes the Veteran will tend to dominate the discussion as they may be passionate and personally motivated by the subject. However, whether we want to be the voice of the Veteran or not, we are! I believe that we as a demographic need to be more proactive in voicing our opinions and disclosing our Veteran status. We need to hold people accountable for their views when they are not in agreement with what we have experienced in real life. This is the hardest part, we must be a proactive lobbying force for own heritage as Veterans and for recognition of the services we have provided to this country and the world. Time Magazine (2003) had it right in 2003 when they awarded the person of the year to the United States Soldier. We must hold each other accountable for our actions and we must fight back against the common perceptions perpetuated by the media. When the media talks about a shooter with PTSD we must present the fact that millions of Veterans have honorably served and like every demographic there will always be a small percentage that reflects badly upon the vast majority. As Jill said “one sample doesn’t speak for every Veteran, they’re all different”. Jack also had an excellent quote on Veterans policing Veterans:

I’m really big on helping Veterans and trying to get them to realize that when they’re getting help, they’re also helping other Veterans, and also not to take advantage of help because if you screw it up you’re screwing other Veterans ... It’s really important for

Veterans to help Veterans, because if not you're letting outsiders help us, which is fine we need that, but they don't have the same frame of reference.

Recommendations for Future Research

The small sample population from only one university and the nature of ethnographic research do not lend themselves well to inferring findings to a larger population. However the many consistencies found within the stories told by these combat Veterans are generally well aligned with other mainstream research as presented in the literature review. These stories provide a window into the perspective of these combat Veterans who were willing to share their experiences. These experiences can give rare insight into some of the issues experienced by these Veteran students and may assist faculty, staff and administrators in recognizing, adapting and creating programs, policies and procedures that could possibly positively impact Veteran students of the university. More research is needed to fully understand the needs of the combat Veteran on a university campus. The chronic aspects of disability through traumatic injury, traumatic brain injury and PTSD must be further addressed to understand the sometimes dramatic effects these conditions have on day to day living of Veterans. While these conditions were discussed in some detail, it was not the central theme of this research. This topic did seem to cover a large area of the interviews and is deserving of more detailed specific research into the aspects of disability and how it shapes their lives from the moment of injury to returning to civilian status. The coping mechanisms that must be developed to function were not addressed in this research, however they are of vital interest in assisting other Veterans return to a more normal way of life post injury.

Additional research across multiple universities/colleges could shed light on a more universal experience of combat Veterans in higher education. This is in tune with

recommendations made by my participants and consistent with the literature. ACE (2010) warns administrators about taking Veteran recommendations from another institution at face value without looking internally at what may work specifically at that institution.

Additional research focused on the familial concerns of the combat Veteran would also be beneficial as these familial support structures and the role they play is not well understood. It was also pointed out that the one female participant had never been asked if she ever killed anyone. I postulated that this may be due to a gender stereotype that women are not capable of being combat arms personnel. Recent trends and changes in the military force structure have moved to eliminate restrictions on females in combat arms MOS. Further research into gender and the military and gender in the military student Veteran are needed. Current mainstream gender research in the military has been generally tied to military sexual trauma as of the time of this writing.

Final Thoughts

Each of these Veterans has made great personal sacrifices that they must pay every day. Not one complained or evidenced a desire for things to be otherwise. They all bear their scars in silent good grace as they seek to squeeze as much as they can from the benefits they have earned. Everyone was determined to finish, no barrier could stand in their way as they sought to complete an education that has been bought and paid for with blood and tears of the Veterans and their family members. We owe much to these silent warriors as they have paid a far greater toll than most will ever know. They pay this toll willingly, it is indeed a volunteer military, but what does that have to say about the heroic deeds accomplished by these volunteers in the sake of democracy and the American way of life. We must strive to better understand the issues

faced, the unmet needs and the singular desire to commiserate with others who have experienced the rite of passage to be called “Veteran”.

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APPENDIX A:
INFORMED CONSENT FORM

**VETERANS IN HIGHER EDUCATION: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF VETERANS’
HIGHER EDUCATION EXPERIENCE**

I would like to invite you to participate in a qualitative study of Veterans’ Higher Education Experiences. The purpose of this qualitative research study is to explore and understand the combat Veteran of Global War on Terrorism's perspectives of higher education experiences. I seek to understand key elements of support and degradation of the Veterans’ ability to successfully complete a higher education program of study at a four year public university. This research project is being conducted as my dissertation and will help others understand the unique perspectives of the GWOT combat Veteran in a higher education setting. You are invited to participate in this study because you are 18 years and older, a Veteran of Global War on Terrorism, and currently pursuing a college undergraduate degree.

I hope you will be interested in participating in this study and sharing your experiences and perceptions during your time as a student at Ball State University. Your experiences are important and may guide the development of my dissertation proposal.

This study will be conducted between March 1, 2014 and May 1, 2014. If you agree to join the study you will be asked to participate in two one-on-one interviews. Each interview will take approximately one and one half hour (1 ½). So I may better understand your perspectives concerning your higher education experience, I will have a set of questions to guide our conversation, which I would be happy to email to you prior to an interview and/or bring a paper copy to the interview session. The choice of a location and time of the interview will be at your discretion, as I want you to be comfortable while conducting the interview. With your permission I would like to audio record each interview by using a digital recording device. The recording will be transcribed, but your name or other identifying information will **not** be

included on the transcript. The recorders with the recorded interviews will be kept in a locked file in my office. In addition, I will take field notes throughout the study to capture my perspectives as the researcher. In writing my field notes I will use a pseudonym to maintain your confidentiality and avoid using any other actual names that you mention. Hand-written field notes will also be kept in a locked drawer in my office. All electronic documents generated during this study, i.e., interview recordings audio files, transcriptions, field notes will be stored on my (the researcher's) password protected computer.

Your participation is voluntary. You may stop participating in this study at any time or choose not to answer any question, without penalty.

Any information you provide will be kept confidential. Only the researcher (Steve Dalcher) and the doctoral committee chair (Dr. Michelle Glowacki-Dudka) will have access to the interviews' recordings and transcriptions. Your information will be compiled together with the responses from the other participants; no individual information will be identifiable. The findings of this study will be used in the researcher's dissertation research and may be used for publications and presentations.

It is possible that you may experience discomfort discussing some of the question areas while participating in this study, you do not have to answer a question if you do not wish to. I hope that you may consider this opportunity to share your insights about student GWOT combat Veteran experiences at Ball State University. Although you will not benefit directly from participating in the study, your views are highly appreciated and valued and will contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of student combat Veteran experiences at Ball State University. Should you feel that counseling is needed during or after the interviews I will assist with making referrals to an appropriate counseling center at the Veteran's Affairs Department or to Ball State University Counseling Center for BSU Students. The number for the Veterans Affairs is 888-878-6889 and BSU Counseling Services is 765-285-1736.

If you do not understand any portion of what you are being asked to do, or the contents of this form, I am available to provide a complete explanation. Your questions are welcome at any time. Please do not hesitate to ask your questions and/or mention your concerns. In addition, for questions about your rights as a research subject, please contact Director, Office of Research Integrity, Ball State University, Muncie, IN 47306, (765) 285-5070, irb@bsu.edu.

Your signature indicates that you voluntarily agree to participate in this study, that the study has been explained to you, that you have been given the time to read the document, and that your questions have been answered satisfactorily.

Participant's Name (printed) _____

(Participant's Signature)

(Date)

I certify that the participant has been given adequate time to read and learn about the study and all of his or her questions have been answered. It is my opinion that the participant understands the purpose, risks, and benefits, and the procedures that will be followed in this study, and has agreed voluntarily to participate.

(Signature of Person Obtaining
Informed Consent)

(Date)

Researcher Contact Information

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APPENDIX B:
INTERVIEW GUIDE

Research Questions

1. How does a Veteran student perceive his/her educational experiences at a four year university?
2. What are the educational, emotional and psychological needs of the Global War on Terrorism (GWOT) combat Veteran while pursuing a higher education?

Interview Questions

- Will you tell me about your military history?
 - How many years?
 - How many combat tours?
 - What was your job?
 - Talk about some of the units you were with?
- Can you describe your educational history to now?
 - What is major?
 - Prior degrees or programs of study?
 - How many years?
 - How did you pay for education?
 - What types of educational benefits have you used?
- Can you tell me about your transition from soldier to student?

- Did you feel different from other students? Can you tell me more about that?
- What may have been helpful to you throughout this process? Could you share some examples?
- Have there been things that made the process more difficult? Could you share some examples?
- Do you believe that you are different from other students who have not been to war?
 - Can you elaborate?
- Have you used additional programs or resources at the university to help you through your education?
- Tell me what a day in your life as a student is like?
 - What are some of the things that frustrate you at school? Can you recall and share specific instances?
 - What are some of the things that make you feel good about school? Can you recall and share specific instances?
- Describe your relationship with faculty, staff and other students.
 - Who do you spend time with?
 - Do you keep in touch with people you served with?
 - Describe these relationships
 - Can you give examples?
- If you could go back in time and change one thing in your educational process what would it be? Why?
 - Can you describe what possible consequences of this change might have been?
 - Describe the importance of this to you

- What words of advice do you have for me as a researcher who wants to understand how combat Veterans perceive their higher education experience?
- What words of advice do you have for others who want (need) to understand how combat Veterans perceive their higher education experiences?

APPENDIX C:
RECRUITMENT LETTER

March, 1, 2014

Beck Hannaford
Ball State University
Veteran's Services

Dear Beck,

I am conducting a study to examine the higher education experiences of Global War on terror (GWOT) combat Veterans. This study is being conducted as my dissertation topic. Participation of GWOT combat Veterans will help develop and refine understanding of higher education through the eyes of GWOT combat Veterans. Would you send an email on my behalf to Veterans using service from your office soliciting potential participants in my study? I would like to interview GWOT combat Veterans concerning their experiences and perspectives as they have pursued a college education. I will conduct interviews to gather my data and will take all steps to maintain confidentiality of the interviewee. Interested people may contact me at spdalcher@bsu.edu or by my cell phone 352-208-7677. I have attached a copy of my research proposal for your perusal.

Sincerely,

Steven Dalcher